

UN demands humanitarian corridors for Syria refugees

Author:

Wed, 2020-02-19 01:04

BEIRUT, ANKARA: Syrian regime troops on Tuesday pressed an offensive on the country's last major opposition enclave where the mass displacement of civilians is sparking fears of a humanitarian catastrophe.

Around 900,000 people have been forced from their homes and shelters in less than three months, leaving huge numbers to sleep rough in the thick of winter.

The UN said that half a million among them were children, some of whom have died of exposure in snow-covered camps.

"Over the past four days alone, some 43,000 newly displaced people have fled western Aleppo where fighting has been particularly fierce," UN spokesman David Swanson said.

Since the start of February, the displacement figure was a staggering 300,000, he said.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called for the creation of humanitarian corridors, expressing horror at the regime offensive.

"No shelter is now safe. And as the government offensive continues and people are forced into smaller and smaller pockets, I fear even more people will be killed," Michelle Bachelet said.

Bachelet was "horrificed" by the unfolding humanitarian crisis, a statement said. "How can anyone justify carrying out such indiscriminate and inhumane attacks?" Bachelet said.

Tuesday's violence left at least two civilians dead. A member of regime-backer Iran's Revolutionary Guards was killed in Aleppo province in a rocket strike.

According to Save The Children, seven children – including a baby only seven months old – have died from freezing temperatures and bad living conditions in the camps.

"We're worried that the death toll will increase given the absolutely inhumane living conditions that women and children are finding themselves in," the charity's Syria director Sonia Khush said.

Meanwhile, Turkey will deploy more troops to Idlib and retaliate against attacks by regime forces there, even as Ankara continues to discuss the situation with Moscow, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said.



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Turkey tells Russia: Syria regime attacks on Idlib must stop
Car bomb kills two in Turkish-controlled Syrian town

[All fuel vessels evacuated urgently from Tripoli port after LNA strike](#)

Tue, 2020-02-18 22:38

TRIPOLI: Eastern Libyan forces said they attacked the sea port of Libya's capital on Tuesday to target a weapons depot, signalling a new escalation in the battle for control of Tripoli.

The Libya National Army (LNA) faction, which is based in the east of the country and commanded by Khalifa Haftar, did not elaborate about the arms depot it cited in a statement.

The LNA had earlier said that it had targeted a Turkish ship which had been delivering arms to the government based in the capital, located in Libya's northwest.

Tripoli port is a major gateway for food, fuel, wheat and other imports for

the capital area, engulfed in war since the LNA began a campaign in April 2019 to take the city, where the UN-backed government is backed by Turkey.

All ships including fuel tankers were moved out of the port after Tuesday's attack, two port officials said. Tripoli-based forces said the LNA had fired four missiles.

Since January, Turkey has sent several ships carrying arms and heavy trucks to Tripoli and Misrata, another western port, diplomats say.

The LNA is allied to a parallel government in eastern Libya supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan and Russian mercenaries. Eastern ports and airports are out of range of the Tripoli forces.

Oil-rich Libya has been riven by factional warfare and disorder since rebels toppled Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

Tuesday's attack on the port unfolded as officers from the Tripoli forces and the LNA held a second round of indirect talks in Geneva to establish a permanent ceasefire. Both sides refused again to sit in the same room, UN Libya envoy Ghassan Salame said, though he said he was hopeful of making progress.

"So while the situation on the ground remains a situation where the truce is very fragile..., nobody has so far reneged on the principle of accepting the truce and the political process is trying to find a way to move forward," he told reporters.

Salame also said a ceasefire was not a precondition for advancing on other matters such as how to better distribute state revenues generated by oil.

"It (talks) are going pretty well on the economic side, but it is harder on the military side," he said.

He added that he had received conditions from tribesmen allied to eastern forces to lift a blockade of eastern oil export ports, but said these were quite general and would have to be fleshed out in more UN-led talks in Geneva next week.



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EU begins air, sea patrols off Libyan coast
Libya's internationally recognized government suspends ceasefire talks after port attack

[Mayor's 'joy' as Turkish court acquits businessman, 8 others over Gezi Park protests](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-18 22:10

ISTANBUL: Jailed Turkish businessman Osman Kavala and eight other defendants were on Tuesday acquitted over their alleged roles in organizing the 2013

Gezi Park protests in Istanbul.

In a surprise move, the Istanbul 30th Heavy Penal Court ordered the prison release of philanthropist and human rights activist Kavala after 840 days behind bars.

Kavala and a number of co-defendants had been facing life sentences on charges of plotting to overthrow the government through violence and force, with the other defendants accused of helping them.

An estimated 3.6 million people took part in the Gezi Park protest events between May 28 and Sept. 25. More than 5,500 individuals were arrested and 189 held in custody, while four civilians and two police officers died in the unrest.

Tweeting after the verdict, Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem Imamoglu, said: "The acquittal of all the defendants in the Gezi Park trial is a true source of joy, and restores trust in the Turkish judicial system. I salute all those who stand to defend our city's history, culture and nature."

The verdict comes at a time of growing tensions between Turkey and Russia in Syria and follows calls from the EU and the Council of Europe for Ankara to release Kavala and all other politically prosecuted activists. As a result, Turkey has suddenly found itself pushing for Western assistance through "symbolic steps."

In December last year, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) demanded the immediate release of Kavala and ruled that Turkey had violated his rights.

However, Selahattin Demirtas, the former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and countless other political prisoners still remain in pre-trial detention.

The case of a further seven defendants, who are abroad and were being tried in absentia, was separated but arrest warrants for them were suspended.

Envoys, diplomatic representatives and consul generals of several European countries attended Tuesday's court hearing.

The day before the trial, Ahmet Davutoglu, the former Turkish prime minister under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) who recently formed the rival Future Party, was also withdrawn as a plaintiff from all criminal cases involving offenses against him, including the Gezi Park case.

Louis Fishman, a Turkey expert from Brooklyn College, said: "This is fantastic news and highlights from the start that it was nothing more than a politically motivated trial.

"Turkey has a long record of sham trials over the decades and fortunately this one ended without a conviction. However, lives have been ruined and an innocent man, Osman Kavala, was forced to sit in prison for 840 days awaiting his freedom, despite the fact he proved no danger to society," he told Arab News.

Fishman noted that the case had left a stain on Turkey and its judicial system and did nothing to detract from its continued unjust imprisonment of others.

On Feb. 19, more than two years after they were first detained, a court will give its verdict on 11 human rights activists, including former senior members of Amnesty Turkey. They were accused of “aiding armed terrorist organizations” and “being members of an armed terrorist organization” after attending a meeting on “digital security and protection of human rights defenders” in the Princes’ Islands of Istanbul.

Andrew Gardner, Turkey strategy and research expert at Amnesty International, said they had been awaiting a verdict at the final hearing for some time. “But we are under no illusion. Many of our colleagues, human rights defenders, political prisoners are facing unfair trials or are going through unfair trials and facing unfair verdicts,” he told Arab News.

“The release would be however a change in the political dynamic because it was a politically motivated trial and at the same time an attack against civil society and a crackdown on civil freedoms. The solidarity shown within Turkey from a wide range of society was incredibly important in this process,” he added.



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Turkey escalates crackdown on dissent six years after Gezi protests
Turkish court accepts indictment against 16 over Gezi protests -lawyer

Israel plans new east Jerusalem settlement

Author:

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Tue, 2020-02-18 17:15

JERUSALEM: Israel has developed plans to build 9,000 settler homes in annexed east Jerusalem, the first such project in the city in more than 20 years, watchdog Peace Now said Tuesday.

Details of the plan emerged a day after Israel's transport ministry approved a controversial proposal to extend a train line from Tel Aviv into Jerusalem's flashpoint Old City.

Peace Now said the housing ministry had a week ago submitted plans to Jerusalem's Municipality to build the settlement units on the site of the former Atarot airport, between two Palestinian neighborhoods.

It said final approval of the project could take years.

But if built, it would drive "a wedge in the heart of the Palestinian urban continuity between Ramallah and East Jerusalem, thus preventing the establishment of a viable Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem."

It would be the first new settlement in east Jerusalem since a previous government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu built the Har Homa settlement near Bethlehem in 1997, Peace Now said.

More than 600,000 Jewish settlers live in the occupied West Bank and annexed east Jerusalem, in communities considered illegal under international law.

Peace now said the Atarot plan "also includes the demolition of dozens of Palestinian residential units that were built in the area without permits throughout the years."

Palestinians regularly build without the required permissions because they are unable to obtain them from Israeli authorities.

Jordan, the custodian of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, blasted the proposed rail extension as "a flagrant violation of international law."

A Middle East peace plan unveiled last month by US President Donald Trump gave a green light for Israel to declare sovereignty over all of Jerusalem as well as settlements and other territory in the West Bank.

The Trump proposal has been rejected by the Palestinians, who demand east Jerusalem as the capital of their state.



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Israel approves more than 1,900 new settler homes: NGO
Israel approves more than 2,300 settler homes: NGO

[Fatah and Hamas blame each other for reconciliation failure](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-02-18 01:20

GAZA CITY: Fatah and Hamas have blamed each other for their lack of reconciliation following the release of US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

The Trump peace plan, supported by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, calls for the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state that excludes Jewish settlements built in occupied territory and is under near-total Israeli security control. It also proposes US recognition of Israeli settlements on occupied West Bank land and of Jerusalem as Israel's indivisible capital, along with Israeli annexation of the Jordan valley. It has been trashed by the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic

Cooperation as well as the Palestinian Authority.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas called on all factions to unite and develop a common strategy to counter the peace deal and there were hopes he would send a PLO team to Gaza to reconcile with his political rivals at Hamas, ending 13 years of internal division. But the meeting has yet to materialize, with each side accusing the other of obstruction and exclusion. Hamas seized control of the Gaza Strip by force from the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in 2007, with the takeover leaving Palestinians divided between two governments. Hamas controls Gaza and the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority governs autonomous areas of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. The two sides remain bitter enemies.

The PLO's Saeb Erekat, who is executive committee secretary, said the organization's factions were ready to go to the Gaza Strip. "It is Hamas that is delaying the visit, by refusing to invite the factions to hold a meeting that includes all the factions in Gaza," he told Arab News. "We do not see any reason for Hamas to delay issuing invitations to the Palestinian factions to respond to what was agreed upon in holding a factional meeting in Gaza, until a reconciliation agreement is reached and ending the division."

Azzam Al-Ahmad, a member of the Fatah central committee, said the group was not waiting for the approval of any party to go. It was waiting for an official date from Hamas in order to hold the factional meeting in Gaza. In 2017 Hamas and Fatah signed a reconciliation agreement after Hamas agreed to hand over administrative control of Gaza, including the key Rafah border crossing.

The deal was brokered by Egypt and helped bridge the gulf between the two Palestinian parties – the Western-backed Fatah and Hamas, which is viewed as a terrorist organization by several countries including the US.

HIGHLIGHT

Mahmoud Abbas called on all factions to unite and develop a common strategy to counter the peace deal and there were hopes he would send a PLO team to Gaza to reconcile with his political rivals at Hamas, ending 13 years of internal division. But the meeting has yet to materialize.

Hamas leader Ismail Radwan said there was no need for hiding or "evasion" as the group's stance was clear about representation and delegations. "It (Hamas) has repeatedly welcomed the visit of the delegation to achieve reconciliation, the brothers in Islamic Jihad and the popular and democratic fronts approved that," he told Arab News. Fatah, he said, opposed the inclusion of "resistance forces."

"The problem lies in the political thought of Abbas and his team, who do not believe in real partnership on the ground, and they like to exclude the resistance factions that have presented hundreds of martyrs," he added. Sources said Fatah wanted to exclude three factions – the Liberation Movement, the Mujahideen Movement and the Popular Resistance Committees – whereas Hamas wanted them to participate because of their loyalty.

A Fatah delegation visited Gaza last week without meeting Hamas. Radwan said there was no meeting because the delegation insisted on holding a “bilateral meeting” with Hamas only.

“We welcomed the arrival of the delegation of the Palestinian Authority in the hope that it would be a prelude to a meeting at the level of general secretaries or a scheduled national meeting, but unfortunately Fatah started with obstacles, the first of which was the refusal of the national and factional presence at this meeting,” he said.

Ibrahim Abrash, a political science professor at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, said there was no reconciliation agreement in sight. “What happened after the announcement of the deal of the century is an emotional state without real intentions on both sides of the division,” he told Arab News. Mutual accusations and the justifications for the visit’s failure were “trivial,” he added.



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Hamas allows rival Fatah to mark anniversary in Gaza rally
Israeli army: Hamas hackers tried to ‘seduce’ soldiers