

Security firms say suspicious object on oil tanker off Iraq

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 19:33

DUBAI: Sailors involved in transferring fuel oil from an Iraqi tanker in the Gulf to another vessel owned by a shipping company traded in the US discovered a "suspicious object" they fear could be a mine, authorities said Thursday.

The discovery comes amid heightened tensions between Iran and the US in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration.

Already, America has conducted B-52 bomber flyovers and sent a nuclear submarine into the Arabian Gulf over what Trump officials describe as the possibility of an Iranian attack on the one-year anniversary of the US drones strike in Baghdad that killed a top Iranian general.

Two private security firms said sailors feared they found a limpet mine on the MT Pola, a Liberian-flagged tanker that was receiving assistance Thursday in the Gulf off Basra. A limpet mine is a type of naval mine that attaches to the side of a ship, usually by a diver-member of special forces. It later explodes, and can significantly damage a vessel.

The two firms, Ambrey Intelligence and Dryad Global, say investigations are ongoing.

The United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, an organization under Britain's royal navy, said on its website that an "unknown object" had been attached to a ship's hull in the vicinity of Iraq's Khor Al-Zubair Port, without providing further information.

The US Navy's 5th Fleet, which patrols the Mideast, was monitoring the incident, said spokeswoman Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich. Iraqi officials did not immediately comment on the incident.

The Pola, along with another tanker, serves as floating fuel oil storage of Iraq's State Organization of Marketing of Oil, said Sudharsan Sarathy, a senior oil analyst at the data-analysis firm Refinitiv. Smaller vessels carry the fuel oil to the ship, which then conducts ship-to-ship transfers in the Arabian Gulf to clients.

Sarathy said the Pola was conducting a ship-to-ship transfer with the MT Nordic Freedom, a Bermuda-flagged tanker. Dryad Global posted a satellite photo that it said showed the Pola and the Nordic Freedom.

The owners of the Nordic Freedom, the company Nordic American Tankers, could not be immediately reached. Stock in the firm traded slightly down early Thursday on the New York Stock Exchange at just under \$3 a share.

In 2019, the US blamed Iran for a series of limpet mine attacks on oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Arabian Gulf through which 20% of all the world's oil passes. Iran denies being involved. The location of the tankers involved in Thursday's incident sits just offshore from the border of Iraq and Iran near the mouth of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in the Shatt Al-Arab. Iran has been closely allied to Iraq since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, while also arming and aiding militia groups in the country.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Twitter earlier Thursday criticized Trump for wasting “billions to fly B52s & send armadas to OUR region.”

“Intelligence from Iraq indicate plot to FABRICATE pretext for war,” Zarif wrote, without elaborating. “Iran doesn’t seek war but will OPENLY & DIRECTLY defend its people, security & vital interests.”

Separately in Iraq, an improvised explosive device detonated near a convoy belonging to an Iraqi company providing logistical support to US coalition forces Thursday, police officials said.

The attack in the Yusifiyah district south of the capital, Baghdad, caused minor damage and briefly halted the convoy before it continued on its way, the two officials said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to journalists.

The attack was the latest in a series of recent attacks targeting trucks transporting logistical support to coalition bases in Iraq. No casualties have been reported in the attacks.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

[Oil](#)

[Gulf](#)

[US](#)

Iraqi PM says country is at a crossroadsIran to resume gas flows to Iraq after agreement on unpaid bills: Iraq ministry

Egypt summons Ethiopian diplomat over dam comments

Thu, 2020-12-31 17:56

CAIRO: Egypt's foreign ministry said it has summoned Ethiopia's top diplomat in Cairo over comments by an Addis Ababa official regarding a controversial dam on the Nile.

The Egyptian ministry "summoned the Ethiopian Charge d'Affaires in Cairo to explain comments by the spokesperson for the Ethiopian Ministry for Foreign Affairs regarding domestic Egyptian affairs," it said late Wednesday.

The statement did not cite specific comments but followed a statement by the Ethiopian official on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), Africa's biggest hydroelectric project, which has raised fears for vital water supplies downstream in Egypt and Sudan.

"They know the GERD won't harm them, it's a diversion from internal problems," Dina Mufti, the Ethiopian ministry's spokesman and a former ambassador to Egypt, said Tuesday.

Mufti contended that without this "distraction", Egypt and Sudan would "have to deal with many local issues waiting to explode, especially up there (in Egypt)."

The three countries have been in talks since 2011 but have failed to reach a deal on filling the dam. The negotiations have been stalled since August.

The Nile, the world's longest river at 6,000 kilometres (3,700 miles), is a lifeline supplying both water and electricity to 10 countries.

Ethiopia views the dam as essential for its growing power needs, and insists that the flow of water downstream will not be affected.

But Egypt, a country of more than 100 million people who depend on the Nile for 97 percent of their water needs, opposes unilateral moves by Ethiopia.

Along with Sudan, it has called for a legally binding political solution to the dispute.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Egypt](#)

[Ethiopia](#)

Egypt's cabinet allows GASC to co-found shareholding shipping company
Top
Egypt officials visit Libya capital for first time in years

[Syria's regime auctions off land of the displaced](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-12-31 00:22

BEIRUT: Many Syrians forced from their homes by their country's brutal, decade-old war are now shocked to discover that their family farms have been taken over by regime loyalists and cronies.

Rights groups and legal experts say local authorities in parts of northwest Syria recaptured by regime forces have staged auctions to effectively "confiscate" fertile land and punish opponents.

One refugee, 30-year-old Salman, said he always knew it would be difficult to return to the family plot in Idlib province he abandoned during an offensive a year ago by the Syrian regime forces.

But whatever hopes he still had to return one day were all but crushed when he learned the rights to cultivate the land had been sold off to a complete

stranger.

"What right does someone have to come and take it?" the refugee, who asked to use a pseudonym, told AFP by phone from Greece where he illegally moved a few months ago.

Salman said he used to plant lentils, barley and black cumin on the 37 acres of land he owns with his brothers, earning up to \$12,000 each harvest. He discovered through a post on social media that the rights to the land were being auctioned off.

"We were shocked," he told AFP. "This land was left to us by our ancestors and we want to pass it down to our children."

Several other Syrians displaced from southern Idlib and adjacent Hama and Aleppo provinces told AFP that they too have had their plots expropriated. Some learned about it through social media advertisements run by the regime-affiliated Farmers' Union in Idlib or through acquaintances still living nearby.

In October, the Farmers' Union said that it was auctioning off the right to use and cultivate plots owned by Syrians "who don't reside in government-controlled areas." Victims found they were being blamed for their misfortune. The union said the original deed-holders were "indebted" to Syria's Agricultural Cooperative Bank (ACB), which offers loans to farmers – including those who are now finding it impossible to settle dues from outside government-controlled territory.

The land owners who spoke to AFP all denied having outstanding payments.

"It's just an excuse," Salman said.

Other auctions are being organized by regime-linked local security committees, without any mention of outstanding debts, said opposition watchdog group The Day After and war monitor the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Assad's Russian-backed forces have over the past three years pushed deeper into Syria's last major opposition bastion in the northwest.

Their latest offensive in early 2020 forced nearly a million people out of their homes, according to the UN. Only 235,000 have returned since a cease-fire took hold in March.

Grappling with a deep economic crisis compounded by Western sanctions, Damascus is looking to make use of fertile land to boost agricultural production.

Rights groups, including Amnesty International, have condemned the land expropriations in former rebel strongholds.

"The land auctions exploit displacement for economic benefit," said Diana Semaan, Amnesty's Syria researcher.

Authorities, she said, are "seizing lands illegally and in violation of international law."

In November, an Aleppo security committee said it was taking bids for plots in reconquered villages, according to documents obtained by The Day After activist group and the Observatory.

Amir, a displaced 38-year-old from Aleppo, said he was informed less than two months ago by his former neighbor that authorities were taking offers for his 20 acres of land there.

Amir asked the neighbor to bid on his behalf, but he declined.

"Someone who has relatives with intelligence services in the area" won the bid, said Amir, a father of five who now makes less than \$2 a day picking

olives in Idlib.

According to judge Anwar Mejni, a member of a UN committee tasked with overseeing the drafting of a new Syria constitution, the land auctions are “a kind of punishment.”

“The auctions may not transfer ownership of the land, but they violate the rights” of original owners to access and cultivate them.

Another issue, said Mejni, is that “there is no legal framework” governing the auctions.

Even if the ACB indeed organized them to settle debts, he said, this “should be done under the supervision of the judiciary.”

Another farmer, Abu Adel, abandoned his village in Hama back in 2012 as battles raged nearby but continued to visit his plot until regime forces seized his area last year.

The 54-year-old hired people to tend to it while he is away, but in July an “affiliate” of a local security committee won rights to use it in an auction. They “are all part of the same clique,” Abu Adel said. “It’s a facade.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Idlib](#)

No overlooking Syria’s suffering amid global coronavirus concerns Turkey quits more observation posts in Syria’s Idlib

Abuses against Kurdish women in Afrin under Turkish Parliament radar

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-30 22:00

JEDDAH: Tulay Hatimogullari, a lawmaker from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, filed a parliamentary inquiry on Tuesday, destined to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, over the allegations that hundreds of Kurdish women and girls have been kidnapped in northern Syria by Turkish-backed militias and taken to Libya to be sold as sex slaves.

The shocking claims recently made headlines with the Afrin Report news network, which revealed the testimonies of survivors from the northwestern Syrian city of Afrin about hospitals full of the corpses of kidnapped women and girls who were being accused of supporting terrorism.

Hatimogullari asked Cavusoglu whether the claims that Kurdish women from Afrin were being kidnapped via Turkey were true.

"Are you investigating the claims that girls and women from Afrin were sent to Libya as slaves? Is your ministry aware of the sexual assaults in the camps and prisons in Afrin? Will you take the steps necessary to deal with these violations of rights? Will you conduct coordinated activities with international organizations in this regard?" she inquired.

Hatimogullari, who became the first lawmaker to bring the case to the Turkish domestic agenda, emphasized Turkey's judicial responsibility and complicity regarding these allegations that concern the criminal acts of Turkey-backed rebels.

While some women witnessed torture in the northern Syrian camps, other women held as prisoners were allegedly abused and raped by the mercenaries.

As the Kurdish women's cries for help mostly fall on deaf ears, their situation recalled that of the thousands of Yazidi women from Sinjar in Iraqi Kurdistan who were abducted, raped, murdered and enslaved by Daesh six years ago.

The details about the allegations are regularly documented under the Missing Afrin Women Project that is tracking the kidnappings and disappearances of Kurdish women and girls in Afrin since 2018. The project features an interactive map displaying the name of the individual, the date and location of the incident, the armed group responsible and whether the relevant individual has been reported released.

On the basis of testimonials, hundreds of Kurdish girls were kidnapped and taken to Turkey through military crossing points at the Syrian-Turkish border to be sold as sex slaves to Qatari traders and sent back to Libya.

Turkey and Qatar opened this month a hospital for women and children in

Afrin.

Since last year, human rights groups have been expressing concerns over the increasing abuses against civilians in Afrin.

In total, more than 1,000 women and girls are believed to be missing only in Afrin following Turkey's two-month-long Operation Olive Branch two years ago that ousted the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from the region.

The operation was criticized by the international community as an attempt at demographic change and forced displacement.

Ankara considers the Kurdish YPG as part of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been engaged in a more than three-decade-long war against the Turkish state. The PKK is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the US and the EU.

In February 2019, the UN's Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria released an assessment report about the human rights situation in Afrin.

"The commission finds there are reasonable grounds to believe that armed group members in Afrin committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and pillage," the report said.

"Numerous cases involving arbitrary arrests and detentions by armed group members also included credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment, often targeting individuals of Kurdish origin, including activists openly critical of armed groups and those perceived to be so," the UN report added.

In November 2020, the US Department of State Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve released a report covering the period between July and September 2020.

The report indicated that the US Department of State is "deeply concerned by reports that Turkish supported opposition groups engaged in 'gross violations of human rights and violations of the law of armed conflict' in northeast Syria," including murder, torture, rape and kidnapping, among others.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Turkey](#)

[Kurds](#)

[Afrin](#)

Turkish government's shaky strategy against Kurds goes on
Syrian Kurds free hundreds of Daesh militants as part of amnesty

[Lebanon set for muted NYE celebrations amid economic, health crises](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-12-30 21:40

BEIRUT: Lebanon has begun the countdown to what are expected to be muted New Year's Eve celebrations.

Despite some hotels and nightclubs reporting healthy bookings for parties and events, the country's dire economic situation and a surge in coronavirus disease (COVID-19) cases is likely to result in most citizens seeing in 2021 at home.

Shops and catering stores have been relatively busy with people buying items to mark New Year's Eve and pre-ordering home deliveries of food.

Hotels hosting parties said bookings had exceeded expectations, but restaurant owners' syndicate head, Pierre Al-Achkar, pointed out that 167 hotels damaged by the Beirut port explosion still required repairs and were unable to open.

In the run-up to New Year's Eve, tourist police and internal security forces permanently closed six nightclubs, bars, and restaurants and issued fines to 64 others for violating general mobilization rules and failing to comply with health and public safety measures.

Breaches included employees not wearing face masks or respecting social distancing, allowing premises to become overcrowded, and offering hookah.

The country's Internal Security Forces on Wednesday announced that strict security measures would be in place on New Year's Eve, "to maintain the security and safety of citizens, and to ensure the protection of tourist, commercial and economic facilities and places of worship, in addition to securing traffic in order to reduce congestion."

Citizens have also been ordered not to celebrate by shooting guns into the air, and dancing in bars and restaurants has already been banned.

Lebanon has recently witnessed a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases, with new daily recorded numbers hitting highs in excess of 2,800.

"The closure of nightclubs and restaurants that do not comply with the required procedures is necessary because hospitals are no longer able to admit new patients and the Christmas experience was not good," said Dr. Sharaf Abu Sharaf, head of the Lebanese Order of Physicians.

The spike in virus cases has led many Lebanese to choose to stay at home or organize private parties in rented halls, with invitees having to take a polymerase chain reaction test two days before attending events.

Due to the collapse of the Lebanese lira against the dollar, many are also struggling to make ends meet and pay toward the cost of New Year's Eve food, drink, and entertainment.

Tony Bejjani, owner of a restaurant and bar in Beirut, said: "Customer traffic declined during the holidays and I will not receive customers on New Year's Eve due to COVID-19 fears and because the cost will exceed profits.

"The quality of customers varies according to their financial capabilities. Many bars around me have closed their doors, but I want to continue with a small profit so that I do not become unemployed. But I do not have much confidence in the new year," he added.

Meanwhile, authorities have highlighted a recent rise in the number of armed robberies taking place throughout Lebanon, particularly in the Bekaa region, and there have also been reports of looting, most notably in the city of Zahle.

Lebanese Forces deputy, Cesar Al-Maalouf, said: "What is happening in Zahle

is unacceptable. Because of the state's failure to ensure the security and safety of the city, our young people are its guards.

"This is the final warning for what is left of this dilapidated system. We are no longer to be blamed for resorting to self-security," he added.

MP Michel Daher said: "The security lapse that Zahle and its districts are witnessing is no longer acceptable and we call for an increase in the number of security forces and strict measures so that people do not have to resort to self-security, the last scene that foretells the fall of the state."

Lebanon's head of General Security, Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, on Wednesday met with Maronite Patriarch Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi. After the meeting, he said: "Security is well kept and under control. It is true that it is influenced by politics, but we as organs, on top of us the Lebanese Army, are working to control the security completely.

"But certainly, the stressful and difficult social situation must be reflected on security in terms of looting and security lapses, but I do not see that it will reach the stage of chaos."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

[new year's eve](#)

[Lebanon crisis](#)

Lebanon reserving nearly 2 million coronavirus vaccines
Lebanon lockdown possible if COVID-19 cases increase