

US urges Tehran to release American prisoners amid virus crisis

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WASHINGTON: The United States on Tuesday called for Iran to release all American prisoners held in the country as the coronavirus outbreak reportedly spreads through its prisons.

"The United States will hold the Iranian regime directly responsible for any American deaths. Our response will be decisive," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement.

"Reports that COVID-19 has spread to Iranian prisons are deeply troubling and demand nothing less than the full and immediate release of all American citizens.

"Their detention amid increasingly deteriorating conditions defies basic human decency."

Iran's response to the deadly coronavirus outbreak, including temporarily releasing 70,000 prisoners, was "too little, too late," a UN rights expert said Tuesday.

Javid Rehman, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in Iran, said Tehran was trying to "fudge" its handling of the outbreak, one of the deadliest outside China, where the disease originated.

"The situation on coronavirus is highly disturbing within Iran," Rehman told reporters at the UN in Geneva.

Iran on Tuesday reported 54 new deaths in the past 24 hours, the highest single-day toll since the start of the outbreak there. That brought the numbers killed in the country to 291 out of 8,042 infected.

The Iranian judiciary's Mizan Online official news agency cited Asghar Jahangir, the head of Iran's prisons organization, as saying that "about 70,000 prisoners" had been released in a bid to combat the outbreak.

Iran said in December it was ready for more prisoner swaps with the United States after it secured the return of scientist Massoud Soleimani in exchange for Xiyue Wang, a Chinese-born American held in the Islamic republic.

Decades-old tensions between Tehran and Washington have escalated steeply since 2018, when US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from a landmark 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed sanctions on Iran.



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UK minister diagnosed with coronavirus, met with PM Johnson
Total number of coronavirus cases in Saudi Arabia reaches 21

[Lebanon virus death a 'turning point,' warns health chief](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-11 01:38

BEIRUT: Lebanon announced its first death from coronavirus on Tuesday, with the country's health minister warning the fatality marked a "turning point in dealing with the situation."

The victim, Jean Khoury, 57, from Obeidat in Byblos, died in a Beirut hospital. He had returned to Lebanon from Egypt on Feb. 21, however confirmation of his infection was delayed because the World Health Organization had failed to declare Egypt a risk country.

"Khoury's infection was confirmed five days after he came back from Egypt. He stayed in a Byblos hospital before being transferred to Rafik Hariri University Hospital (RHUH) in Beirut, which was equipped to receive coronavirus-infected patients. His condition remained stable until Monday,"

said the Lebanese Minister of Health Hamad Hassan.

"This loss constitutes a turning point in dealing with the situation. Special measures will be adopted in the burial of coronavirus victims. We are required to be realistic in light of these developments," Hassan added.

RHUH continues to receive dozens of suspected cases for testing each day.

According to the hospital's reports, about 10 percent are admitted to quarantine while the rest are told to self-isolate at home for two weeks, the incubation period of the virus.

Three patients are still in a critical condition in the isolation unit, while the total number of confirmed cases rose to 52 on Tuesday, 11 more than the previous day, the hospital said.

Five of those work at a Byblos hospital and two others at a Beirut hospital, which the ministry believes is a significant development in terms of the spread of the virus.

Four university hospitals joined RHUH in carrying out coronavirus testing to speed up delivery of results in suspected cases.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **The victim, Jean Khoury, 57, from Obeidat in Byblos, died in a Beirut hospital.**

- **He had returned to Lebanon from Egypt, but confirmation of his infection was delayed because the WHO had failed to declare Egypt a risk country.**

"Two hundred tests are being conducted every day. This exceeds the capacity of RHUH's laboratory," said Suleiman Haroun, head of the Private Hospitals' Owners Syndicate.

Meanwhile, the Bank of Beirut sent 20 staff home to self-quarantine as "a preventive measure" until test results are issued.

The employees had joined a social event with a person who was found to be infected the following day.

Andrea Tenenti, official spokesperson of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, said that "all necessary preventive measures" have been taken to protect the 11,000 military and civilian peacekeepers against the virus.

"One of our soldiers stationed in the village of Maarakeh showed some symptoms after returning from Egypt.

"When our medical unit discovered this, we contacted the Lebanese authorities and quarantined all those who had been in contact with the soldier," Tenenti said.

"Even when the tests came back negative, we imposed strict medical rules and measures on all our military and civilian personnel to prevent or reduce the spread of the virus."

Lebanon's ministries stepped up efforts to combat the spread of the virus, with the Ministry of Culture on Tuesday announcing that all museums will be closed.

Beirut closed all its public parks after children began playing there following the closure of schools.

Universities, cafes, cinemas and theaters have also been closed while people

have been urged to stay at home and take preventive measures in the workplace.



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EU 'must stop stringing Turkey along on migrant agreement' US in talks with NATO allies to give Turkey military aid

[US in talks with NATO allies to give Turkey military aid](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-11 01:21

PARIS: The US is discussing with its NATO allies what they can offer Turkey in terms of military assistance in Idlib and discussing measures that may be taken if Russia and the Syrian regime break a cease-fire, officials said on Tuesday.

"We are looking at what NATO can do," James Jeffrey, the US' special envoy for Syria, said in a conference call from Brussels where he was holding talks with allies. "Everything is on table."

Jeffrey, who was speaking alongside the US ambassador to Turkey, David

Satterfield, ruled out the use of ground troops should the cease-fire be broken and repeated that Ankara needed to clarify its stance on purchase of the Russian S-400 Air Defense System.

In a separate development, a Turkish prosecutor said a US Consulate employee should be acquitted on charges of espionage and trying to overthrow the government, but should face jail on a lesser charge of belonging to a terrorist organization.

HIGHLIGHT

James Jeffrey, the US' special envoy for Syria, ruled out the use of ground troops should the cease-fire be broken and repeated that Ankara needed to clarify its stance on purchase of the S400 Air Defense System.

The prosecutor told an Istanbul court that the evidence did not back up the original charges against Metin Topuz, who has been in jail for nearly 2-1/2 years while facing trial.

Topuz's trial has been one of many sources of strain between NATO allies Turkey and the US, who have also been at odds in recent years over policy differences in Syria and Turkey's purchase of Russian missile defense systems.

Topuz is accused of links to officials who led a 2013 corruption investigation and were later found to be members of a network blamed for a failed 2016 military coup.

The investigation implicated officials in the government of then-prime minister, now President Tayyip Erdogan.

The prosecutor said the frequent contact Topuz had with members of Fethullah Gulen's network taking part in the investigation showed he was a member of the group, which is considered a terrorist organization by Ankara.



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EU 'must stop stringing Turkey along on migrant agreement' US in process of bringing air defense systems into Iraq: general

[EU 'must stop stringing Turkey along on migrant agreement'](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-11 01:17

ANKARA: The EU should stop “stringing Turkey along” over helping out with the millions of migrants on its territory, the country’s foreign minister said on Tuesday, a day after the two sides agreed to review a four-year-old deal aimed at stemming refugee flows to Europe.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said the EU must take “sincere” steps to help Turkey manage the flow of migrants, including finding ways to ensure Syrian refugees can return home.

The minister spoke a day after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held a meeting with top EU officials in Brussels. The two sides agreed to review their 2016

deal on migrants.

The meeting was called after thousands of migrants massed on Turkey's border with Greece, following the Turkish government's decision to open its borders to migrants wanting to cross into Europe. Greece has deployed riot police and border guards to prevent the crossings, sparking clashes between migrants and Greek security forces.

Erdogan has demanded that Europe shoulder more of the burden of caring for Syrian refugees on Turkish territory – thought to number more than 3.5 million. Turkey is accusing the EU of not meeting its obligations under the 2016 agreement, including failing to pay money promised to Turkey to stem the flow of migrants to Europe.

Following the talks in Brussels late on Monday, European Council President Charles Michel said teams headed by Cavusoglu and the EU's foreign policy chief, Josep Borell, would work "in the next days to clarify the implementation of the deal between Turkey and the EU to be certain that we are on the same page."

"We are ready for a constructive study ... We expect sincerity from the EU. The era of stringing Turkey along is over," Cavusoglu said.

Cavusoglu said the sides would work toward "updating" the Turkey-EU deal in line with recent developments, including the situation in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, where a Syrian regime offensive has driven thousands of Syrians toward the border with Turkey.

The 2016 agreement is not "about the EU giving money to Turkey to keep the refugees," Cavusoglu said. "It comprises several issues from visa-free travel to ensuring the voluntary return of refugees."

The minister said the sides would try to draft a "road map" in time for a EU summit on March 26.

"If we reach an agreement by March 26 when there will be an EU leaders' summit, this issue will come on to the agenda of this meeting," Cavusoglu said. "We are ready for constructive work," he added.

"If we are to come up with a roadmap with the EU, we expect them to be sincere," Cavusoglu said. "It is not only about keeping migrants in return for more money," he added.

Cavusoglu confirmed that Turkey had requested Patriot missile defenses from NATO. The issue has been complicated by Turkey's controversial decision to buy Russian S-400 missile defences.

Erdogan, meanwhile, told a group of journalists on his return to Turkey that he is set to meet with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Istanbul on March 17, state-run Anadolu Agency reported. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson may also attend.

SPEEDREAD

Erdogan said EU leaders acknowledged that Turkey had fulfilled its obligations under the 2016 agreement and the EU had 'moved slowly' to meet its responsibilities.

Erdogan also said that during his talks in Brussels, EU leaders acknowledged that Turkey had fulfilled its obligations under the 2016 agreement and the EU

had “moved slowly” to meet its responsibilities.

“We could begin a new process with the EU,” Anadolu quoted Erdogan as saying. Under the 2016 agreement, the EU offered Turkey up to 6 billion euros (\$6.7 billion) in aid for the Syrian refugees it hosts, fast-tracked EU membership and other incentives to stop Europe-bound migrants. The number arriving in Greece from Turkey dropped dramatically after the deal took effect.

The EU insists it is disbursing the funds. It has also accusing Erdogan of “blackmail” for waving migrants through to Europe late last month after dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed in fighting in northern Syria. Private Turkish broadcaster NTV aired footage on Tuesday of Greek soldiers reinforcing a barbed wire fence along a stretch of a river that marks the land border between Turkey and Greece.

Many migrants who attempted to cross the border have reported mistreatment by Greek authorities. Greece has denied the accusations.

Erdogan alleged that several migrants have died and vowed to make Greece account for actions he said amount to “murder.”



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Yemeni activist who endured and challenged Houthi repression
Erdogan: US softening stance on Turkish acquisition of Patriot defense systems

Yemeni activist who endured and challenged Houthi repression

Wed, 2020-03-11 01:08

AL-MUKALLA: Shortly before slipping out of Sanaa early this year, Ibetisam Abualdonia, parked her daughter's car outside her home and moved to another house. "The aim was to assure Houthi eyes I was inside the house," Ibetisam said in an exclusive interview with Arab News.

Ibetisam, 48, was among a few Yemeni activists who had stayed inside the city for years where they paid a heavy price for challenging Houthi repression and demanding salaries.

Several days before fleeing Sanaa, as many as 14 Houthi men stormed her house where they beat and verbally abused her. The Houthis sought to punish Ibetisam for being filmed strongly criticizing their leader and the movement and demanding salaries.

"They got angry when I criticized Abdul Malik Al-Houthi. They think he is a holy man," she said, referring to Houthi movement leader. Before raiding her house, Ibetisam said the Houthis harassed her online to stop her activism.

"They subjected me to different methods of psychological pressure such as sending death threats through text messages and attacking me on social media," she said.

After Houthi reprisal attacks, she thought that the Houthis had put her on their radar and would keep abusing her if she continued criticizing them. At the same time, the widowed mother of three had to keep demanding Houthis to pay her husband's pension in order to survive. "They have not paid the pension for the last three years. We survive on my daughter's salary."

She and her children fled Sanaa under the cover of darkness. "We hired a car that drove us to Aden."

To escape Houthi checkpoints, she covered her body in a black abaya and told the children to say they were taking their sick mother to Aden. The Houthis allowed them to move unchecked.

When she arrived in Aden, she kept a low profile and moved from one hotel to another fearing hidden Houthi eyes. "I did not tell anyone that I fled Sanaa. I kept moving hotels."

After hearing about her ordeal, officials at the internationally recognized government helped her travel to Cairo and then to Riyadh, where she recounted to Arab News her harsh days under Houthi rule.

After hearing about her disappearance, Houthis began harassing her relatives. "They blew up my uncle's car and burnt another car of a relative of mine. They phoned my mother, sister and other members of family, vowing to punish me," she said.

Ibetisam said life inside Houthi-controlled Yemen has exacerbated since late 2016, when the Houthis stopping paying public sector salaries in response to a government decision to relocate the headquarters of the central bank from Sanaa to Aden.

The relocation was aimed at stopping rebels from plundering the bank's

reserves from hard currencies. But instead of paying all government employees in their territories, Houthis used salaries as a leverage to force people into joining the battlefields. Many extremely poor families bowed to the pressure and dispatched children to fight along with the Houthis. One of Ibetisam's relatives was forced to provide a child for the fighting.

Like thousands of poor fighters, the Houthis gave Ibetisam's relative 30,000 Yemeni riyals (SR176) every month for fighting their opponents.

Confirming media reports about Houthi mishandling of humanitarian aid, Ibetisam said that Houthis give out aid to loyalists or those families who agreed to send children to take part in fighting.

"Those who do not have combatant relatives have no choice but to beg to survive. People cannot speak out because if they criticize Houthi misbehavior, they will beat or abduct them," Ibetisam said, adding that people in Sanaa struggle to get basic services such as cooking gas, electricity or water.

Despite Houthi repression, several Yemeni women have remained in Sanaa, where they criticize Houthi political and economic policies. The number of protesters has dwindled since late 2017, when Houthis killed former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, prompting hundreds of his followers into fleeing to government controlled areas or seeking exile. Ibetisam predicted that female activists who challenge Houthis from Sanaa would share her fate sooner or later.

Some of the minor female activists have been abducted for speaking out. "They will be either killed or forcibly disappeared. Before leaving Sanaa, I found out that they forcibly disappeared 10 women," she said.

Since taking power in late 2014, the Houthi movement has established local police regiments known as Zaynabiat to handle protests by women. In Yemen, women usually have cultural impunity from attacks.

The Zaynabiat are infamous for suppressing rare protests in the capital and other provinces in northern Yemen. The biggest anti-Houthi protest was in October 2017, when dozens of women went out to protest against hunger and poverty inside Houthi-controlled areas.

As women were getting together in Sanaa, armed Zaynabiat in black abayas beat and detained the protesters. Ibetisam said the Houthi policewomen have no offices and are under the command of Houthi observers.

In addition to suppressing dissidents, the Zaynabiat's other roles include espionage and recruiting female members. "They exercise physical violence and kidnapping," she said.

As a Yemeni activist who was harassed by Houthis and witnessed the signing of several peace agreements between the militia and the internationally recognized government since late 2014, Ibetisam said that only military pressure would end the conflict. "I am inclined toward the military option. Houthism is a radical movement. It is not a political group that you can get concessions from," she concluded.



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Al-Qaeda suffers heavy losses in Yemen conflicts
Yemeni army vows imminent offensive on Houthis