

Amnesty says Iran killed two dozen children in November crackdown

Author:

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PARIS: Human rights group Amnesty International on Wednesday accused the Iranian security forces of killing 23 children, mostly with live ammunition, during a November crackdown on anti-government protests.

Protests broke out across Iran from November 15 after the announcement of a surprise petrol price rise. The authorities responded with a crackdown that Amnesty has already said left 304 people dead, a figure vehemently disputed by Tehran.

Amnesty said in its new report it had evidence that at least 23 children were killed, with 22 of them killed by the security forces "unlawfully firing live ammunition at unarmed protesters and bystanders."

The children killed included 22 boys, aged between 12 and 17, and a girl reportedly aged between eight and 12.

"There must be independent and impartial investigations into these killings, and those suspected of ordering and carrying them out must be prosecuted in fair trials," said Philip Luther, Amnesty's research and advocacy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

Twelve of the 23 deaths – recorded in 13 cities in six provinces across the country – took place on 16 November, a further eight on 17 November, and three on 18 November, according to Amnesty.

"The fact that the vast majority of the children's deaths took place over just two days is further evidence that Iranian security forces went on a killing spree to quash dissent at any cost," said Luther.

Amnesty International said it had written to Iran's Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli with the names of the 23 children recorded as killed but had received no response.

It said relatives of some of the children killed described being subjected to harassment and intimidation, including surveillance and interrogations by intelligence and security officials.

It said this corresponded with a broad pattern of families of those killed in protests being intimidated by the state to prevent them talking openly about the deaths.

"Families of children killed during the protests are facing a ruthless campaign of harassment to intimidate them from speaking out," said Luther, denouncing a "state cover-up."

Its report was based on evidence from videos and photographs, as well as death and burial certificates, accounts from eyewitnesses and victims' relatives as well as information gathered from human rights activists and journalists.

In one child's case, there were conflicting reports on the cause of death, with one source referring to fatal head injuries sustained by beatings by security forces and another referring to the firing of metal pellets at the victim's face from a close distance, it said.



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[Concerts, sports events in UAE canceled, put off as virus spreads](#)

Wed, 2020-03-04 00:45

DUBAI, TEHRAN: Major concerts and events in the UAE, an air transit center as well as a tourism and business hub, have been canceled or postponed as the coronavirus spreads in the Gulf.

There have been at least 1,641 cases of the virus in the Gulf region, mostly in Iran where 66 people have died. Cases have also been reported in other Middle East nations.

The March 5-6 electronic music Ultra festival at Abu Dhabi's 25,000-capacity Du arena and the March 21 K-pop concert Music Bank at Dubai's 17,000-capacity Coca-Cola Arena have been canceled.

Organizers of Ultra, where electronic group Major Lazer and DJ Afrojack were

to perform, cited travel restrictions imposed by some countries and airlines due to the rapidly spreading virus. South Korea's national broadcaster KBS and crowdfunding platform Makestar, organizers of the K-pop concert, said Music Bank was canceled because of the spread of the epidemic in South Korea and elsewhere.

FLIGHTS CANCELED

- American Airlines has extended the suspension of China and Hong Kong flights through April 24.
- Air France said on Feb. 6 it would suspend flights to and from mainland China for much of March.
- Air India has suspended flights to Shanghai, Hong Kong.
- Air Seoul has suspended China flights from Jan. 28.
- Air Mauritius has suspended all flights to China and Hong Kong.
- British Airways has suspended extended its flight suspension until April 17.
- Delta Airlines flights have been suspended from Feb. 2-April 30.
- Egyptair suspended flights on Feb. 1, but on Feb. 20 said it would resume some flights to China.
- El Al Israel Airlines has extended its suspension of flights to Hong Kong and Beijing until May 2.
- Iberia Airlines has extended its suspension of flights from Madrid to Shanghai, its only route, from Feb. 29 until the end of April.
- Kenya Airways has suspended flights from Jan. 31 until further notice.
- KLM said on March. 2 it would extend its ban on flights to Chengdu, Hangzhou and Xiamen in China to May 3.
- Lion Air has suspended flights for all of February.
- LOT has extended flight suspensions until March 28.
- Lufthansa has extended China flight cancellations until April 24.
- Oman Air suspended flights on Feb. 2 until further notice.
- Qatar Airways has suspended services from Feb. 1.
- Saudia, Saudi Arabia's state airline, suspended flights on Feb. 2.
- Scoot, Singapore Airlines' low-cost carrier, suspended services from Feb. 8 until further notice.
- United Airlines suspended its service to Hong Kong from Feb. 8-April 23.
- Vietjet and Vietnam Airlines suspended flights to the mainland.



Dubai's flagship international art fair "Art Dubai," which was scheduled to

be held from March 25-28, has also been postponed, organizers said. The UAE, which has reported 21 cases of coronavirus, regularly hosts major conferences, concerts and sporting events, a significant draw-card for foreign visitors.

The UAE central bank will reassess its forecast for economic growth in 2020 due to the coronavirus outbreak, an official said on Tuesday. A women's forum and yoga festival in Abu Dhabi and a carnival in Dubai for the Hindu holi festival, all in March, have also been canceled or rescheduled.

American rapper and producer Russ said his March 27 concert in Dubai will now take place in November because of the virus.

"I know, wild lol (laugh out loud) but outta my control," he said on Twitter. Dubai has postponed its March boat show until November and Abu Dhabi postponed the ITU World Triathlon event this month, after earlier canceling a cycling event in which two riders were diagnosed with the virus.

Meanwhile, the Middle East's largest airline, Emirates, said it had to reduce or ground flights due to the new virus. Because of the slowdown, the government-owned carrier has asked its employees to take paid and even unpaid leave for up to a month at a time. Emirates' operates out of Dubai, the world's busiest for international travel.

HIGHLIGHT

Experts worry Iran's percentage of deaths to infections, now around 3.3%, is much higher than other countries, suggesting the number of infections in Iran may be far greater than current figures show.

Qatar has canceled a defense exhibition and Bahrain has postponed two oil and gas conferences that had been scheduled to take place this month.

The March 16-18 Doha International Maritime Defense Exhibition and Conference (Dimdex) was scheduled to take place at the city's exhibition center DECC.

Doha has recorded a new case of coronavirus, a Qatari national who was among a group evacuated from Iran on Feb. 27. This brings the number of infections in Qatar to eight.

Iran's supreme leader has put the country on war footing against the coronavirus, known as COVID-19, by ordering its armed forces to assist health officials in combating the outbreak – the deadliest outside of China – that authorities say has killed 77 people.

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Iran stands alone in how the virus has affected its government, even compared to hard-hit China, the epicenter of the outbreak.

The death of Expediency Council member Mohammad Mirmohammadi on Monday makes him the highest-ranking official within Iran's leadership to be killed by the virus. State media referred to him as a confidant of Khamenei.

The virus earlier killed Hadi Khosroshahi, Iran's former ambassador to the Vatican, as well as a recently elected member of parliament.

Those sick include Vice President Masoumeh Ebtekar, better known as "Sister

Mary,” the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the US Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis, state media reported. Also sick is Iraj Harirchi, the head of an Iranian government task force on the coronavirus who tried to downplay the virus before falling ill. On Tuesday, lawmaker Abdolreza Mesri told Iranian state television’s Young Journalists Club program that 23 members of parliament had the coronavirus. He urged all lawmakers to avoid the public.

“These people have a close relationship with the people and they carry different viruses from different parts of the country, which may create a new virus, so we recommend the lawmakers to cut off their relationship with the public for now,” Mesri said.

An activist group also said that Wikipedia’s Farsi-language website appeared to be disrupted in Iran after a close confidant to the supreme leader died of the new coronavirus.



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Huge Arab voter turnout 'thwarts Netanyahu's bid to stay in power'

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-04 00:25

AMMAN: A massive Arab vote in Israel's parliamentary election appeared on Tuesday to have thwarted attempts by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to stay in power and avoid prosecution for fraud and corruption.

Arab voter turnout hit an unprecedented 66 percent, compared with less than 60 percent at the last election in September, and the Arab Joint List is expected to increase its number of parliamentary seats from 13 to 15.

With almost all votes counted on Tuesday, Netanyahu's right-wing bloc was heading for 59 seats – two short of the 61 required for a majority in the Knesset. Opposition leader Benny Gantz refused to concede defeat, and said the election could result in another deadlock.

"The results of the Joint List are great, and we are hoping it will spoil Netanyahu's chances of forming a government," Nazareth lawyer Boutros Mansour told Arab News. "But regardless, it is a great victory for Palestinian citizens of Israel."

Netanyahu is due in court on March 17 on charges of fraud, corruption and abuse of power.

He requires a majority in the Knesset to pass legislation granting him immunity, which now looks increasingly unlikely.

Netanyahu's Likud party will struggle to cobble together a working coalition, Wadi Abunassar, director of the International Center for Consultation, told Arab News. "Despite doing well, Netanyahu has an uphill battle," he said.

"His limited options include trying to chisel two or three members from the other bloc to join him."

Netanyahu is thought to be wooing Moshe Ya'alon, a member of Gantz's opposition Blue and White Party and a former defense minister under Netanyahu; and Orly Levy-Abekasis, a former member of Avigdor Lieberman's far-right Yisrael Beiteinu who now represents her own independent Geshar party in the Labor/Meretz coalition.

Levy-Abekasis has ambitions to be a minister and could be persuaded to flip but Ya'alon will not, said

Boutros Mansour, who has been closely following the Israeli political scene for decades. "There is a lot of hatred now against Netanyahu and it is highly

unlikely for this to work,” he said.



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Netanyahu ahead in Israeli election, but still lacking governing majority
Netanyahu pledges 'immediate' annexation steps if re-elected

[Houthi court sentences 35 Yemeni Lawmakers to death](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-03-04 00:18

AL-MUKALLA: A court controlled by Iran-backed Houthis on Tuesday sentenced 35 pro-government parliamentarians to death and confiscated their properties, a local lawyer who attended the trial said.

Abdul Basit Ghazi said on Facebook that the Specialized Criminal Court in Sanaa handed down the verdicts on members of the Yemeni Parliament charged with treason for supporting the internationally recognized government and military operations by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Convicted lawmakers included Sultan Al-Barakani, the parliamentary leader and his deputy Abdul Aziz Jubari; Ameen Al-Okaimi, governor of Jawf; Ali Amrani, Yemen's envoy to Jordan, and several former ministers, tribal leaders and

businessmen.

In February, Al-Barakani complained to Martin Griffiths, the UN envoy to Yemen, that Houthis had confiscated the property of 35 Yemeni MPs who supported the internationally recognized government.

Houthi extremists have stepped up their legal attacks on lawmakers since early last year when MPs met in Seiyun in Yemen's Hadramout province for the first session of the Parliament since the beginning of the war.

Dozens of legislators in Houthi-controlled areas, including the current Parliament's head, have switched sides and joined the internationally recognized government since December 2017 when militants killed former President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

Pro-government lawmakers who fled Sanaa say Houthis barred their peers from leaving the capital and forced them to attend the rebel-controlled Parliament. Houthi-controlled courts previously sentenced President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, his deputy Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmer and the Prime Minister Maeen Saeed and other ministers to death for treason.

After the trial, armed Houthi fighters stormed the properties of the sentenced men and ordered local banks to freeze their accounts.

Political analysts say that Houthis are targeting opponents to justify confiscating properties and intimidate those who might consider fleeing areas under rebel control.

"They seek to accelerate looting properties of lawmakers, including houses and other properties in their areas. They also want to terrorize politicians and other lawmakers in Sanaa who plan to sneak out to government-controlled areas or outside the country," Saleh Al-Baydhani told Arab News.

On the battlefields, fighting continues between government troops and Houthis in the province of Jawf and Nehim district, near Houthi-controlled Sanaa. Government officials say that militants executed several opponents shortly after seizing control of Hazem on Sunday.

Yahya Qoma, director of the Ministry of Information's office in Jawf, said that Houthi militants killed several people on Tuesday and stormed opponents' houses in Hazem. Houthis have made major gains in the northern province of Jawf after seizing control of Hazem, the capital of Jawf and Ghyal district. The conflict began in late 2014 when Houthis seized control of Sanaa and placed Hadi under house arrest. The rebels extended their operations across Yemen, triggering a civil war that has killed tens of thousands of people, according to the UN.



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[The Middle East grapples with a knowledge and skills gap](#)

Tue, 2020-03-03 23:39

DUBAI: At a time of intense debate worldwide about the social impact of automation and global integration, many companies are facing a problem of a very different kind. The gap between the skills of available workers and those demanded by the market is hitting their bottom line.

The “knowledge and skills gap” is a growing challenge in almost every part of the world. For business communities and recruitment companies in the Middle East, it is a sad fact of life.

Research has shown that technological progress is the largest contributor to the skills gap in most industrial sectors. Studies also show that the root of the mismatch between available expertise and in-demand jobs lies in education

systems that have not kept pace with the times.

A recent report by Korn Ferry, the US management consulting firm, predicts that the demand for skilled workers will outstrip supply, resulting in a global talent shortage of more than 85.2 million people by 2030.

The skills gap could get a lot worse before it gets better, if at all. A report by the International Labor Organization (ILO) says that the global youth unemployment rate has risen between 1991 (9.3 percent) and 2018 (12.8 percent). In the Middle East, the rate has stood stubbornly at 26.1 percent – double that of the global average.



According to Nancy W. Gleason, director of the Hilary Ballon Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at NYU Abu Dhabi, “there is a gap between academia and the job market” in the Arab region.

“The fourth industrial revolution is pushing a skill shift in the workplace that higher education has not entirely responded to yet,” she told Arab News.

Consequently, “disruptive technologies such as additive manufacturing, artificial intelligence and blockchain” continue to collectively change what is needed in the workplace, resulting in an incompatibility between the skills demanded and those supplied.

Gleason says that while hard skills remain in high demand across the Arab region and the world, soft skills such as “reasoning, problem-solving, and ideation” are growing in importance in the workplace.

FASTFACTS

- Economic returns from different skills and education levels are changing rapidly.
- Opportunities are now concentrated in relatively high-skill, high-wage jobs and low-skill, low-wage jobs.
- Automation and AI is replacing workers and may also limit job creation in growing sectors.
- Middle classes have been hollowed out by the disappearance of routine occupations.
- Income gaps between the generations have widened significantly in many countries.
- Increase in temporary contracts has decreased job stability, particularly for the young.

She said that non-technical skills are “habits of mind” – the tools needed to enable employees to adjust to new forms of work and to overcome any complications that could arise with the job.

“Firms are starting to hire based on an individual’s ability to learn,” Gleason told Arab News.

A startup called Qureos is aiming to bridge the gulf between the academic world and the corporate workplace in the Arab region by helping young men and women to develop “job-relevant skills.”

The startup provides students with a platform that allows them to build an “experiential portfolio” and engage in projects with mentorship from industry experts.

According to Mehrad Yaghmai, chief operating officer of Qureos, research of the market revealed a rise in the requirement for “data science and analytical skills,” a consistent demand for software-development skills in engineering, and a focus on machine learning in most industries.

“Beyond technical skills, there is a need for critical thinking, data-computer literacy and the skill to adapt and learn on the job,” he said.

Qureos, which currently has 2,000 registered students, hopes to do its bit for the region by partnering with 50 companies by the summer of 2020.

The talent gap blighting the job prospects of university graduates in the Middle East was underscored by the findings of the World Economic Forum’s latest Global Competitiveness Report.

One executive opinion survey question asked: “In your country, to what extent do university graduates possess the skills needed by businesses?” The answers ranged between 1-7, with 7 indicating “to a great extent.”

As automation outmodes pattern-based hard skills, the ability to adapt and learn new things will be a valued skill in and of itself.

Nancy W. Gleason, Director of the Hilary Ballon Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at NYU Abu Dhabi



Among countries in the Middle East, the UAE and Qatar reported 5.3, followed by Lebanon at 5.2, Saudi Arabia at 5.1 and Oman at 4.8.

The Global Competitiveness Report rankings, which measures the overall national competitiveness of 141 economies, placed the UAE (25) ahead of Qatar (29), Saudi Arabia (36), Bahrain (45) and Kuwait (46.)

“The global context of these numbers is important to consider,” said Gleason, adding that education is only one piece of the puzzle.

“As automation outmodes pattern-based hard skills, the ability to adapt and learn new things will be a valued skill in and of itself.”

She says educational institutions need to go beyond transferring content knowledge and help students to articulate cognitive skills.

Work is “task-based and fluid” and “learning in the classroom should be too, regardless of what content you choose to focus on in your education.”

For their part, higher education institutions need to do more to develop “future-ready graduates,” Gleason told Arab News, adding that they need to “emphasize the competencies that are demonstrated though pre-professional and technical educational degrees.”

According to Gleason, graduates can apply what they learned to other contexts

through a mix of interdisciplinary education, implementation of internship schemes and experimental learning.

"It is when the content knowledge is applied that real learning happens," she told Arab News.

"Many education institutions across the MENA region are acting to create opportunities in this space."

Mohammad Ayish, head of the department of mass communication at the American University of Sharjah (AUS), does not mince words when discussing "the gap between academia and the market."

It is a "huge one," he told Arab News, adding that universities have underestimated the reality of a fast-changing job market.

"Their program learning outcomes have little relevance for emerging market needs," he said.

"When their graduates start hunting for jobs, they find themselves too detached from the competencies required in the workplace."

That said, changes in university curricula are being made in response to demands by higher-education regulators, according to Ayish.

The majority of universities in the Middle East are "highly keen" on equipping students with the appropriate knowledge for meeting shifting market demands, he said.

However, some institutions continue to follow traditional approaches, Ayish said, although with accelerating transitions in the market, they will have no choice but to adapt.

In an era when technology reigns supreme, he said, universities should "promote values of entrepreneurship and innovation and bolster enduring ties with market players to ensure their students find relevance in the workplace."

Ayish's argument, however, begs the question of whether higher education institutions are capable of addressing the "knowledge and skills gap" challenge on their own.

According to NYU's Gleason, coordination among government, industry and education establishments is essential for "impactful development of employees of all ages."

For instance, computer science and mathematics are among the fields that struggle to attract specialists who possess the needed skills in combination with "emotional intelligence and creativity."

At the same time, she says, new areas of employment such as space-related industries are hard pressed to find employees with computation thinking skills and digital literacy.

Gleason says that educational institutions should focus on assembling a faculty capable of understanding the market's major shifts and implementing non-traditional methods of teaching.



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Education conference calls for deep learning in Saudi schools
Over 5,000 Saudis benefit from new career education platform