

Top Iraqi cleric slams attacks on protesters

Author:

Fri, 2020-02-07 23:13

KARBALA, BAGHDAD: Iraq's top Shiite cleric on Friday condemned recent deadly attacks on anti-government demonstrators, chastising security forces for not doing more to prevent violence in protest squares across the country.

Eight demonstrators were killed this week in attacks on protest camps by supporters of populist cleric Moqtada Sadr, including in Najaf – home to Iraq's Shiite religious leadership.

In his weekly sermon delivered by a representative, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani condemned the bloodshed as “painful and unfortunate” and said state security forces are “indispensable” to keeping the country from “falling into the abyss of chaos.”

“There is no justification for them to stop fulfilling their duties in this regard, or for anyone to stop them from doing so,” Sistani said.

“They must bear responsibility for maintaining security and stability, protecting peaceful protesters and their gathering places, revealing the identities of aggressors and infiltrators, and protecting the interests of citizens from the attacks of saboteurs.”

Sistani's sermon appeared to have buoyed the demonstrators in Baghdad's Tahrir Square. “I was watching, afraid that he would be too general and it would allow for more suppression of the protests,” said one activist who gave his name only as Ali.

“But he was able to deliver a message: He accepts only the official security forces, no ‘blue caps’ or anyone else.”

In Diwaniyah further south, demonstrator Mohammad Al-Bulani said the sermon showed Sistani's support for the protest movement. “He is the only one that has stood with our demands and defended us,” he said.

Nearly 550 Iraqis have been killed in protest-related violence since demonstrations erupted in the capital and southern cities in October, the Iraqi Human Rights Commission said.

Iraq's Health Ministry confirmed the first protester shot dead on Oct. 1 but clammed up thereafter. The commission has since repeatedly complained that authorities declined its requests for information on deaths, injuries and arrests.

The commission, which is government-funded but operates independently, became the only source for death tolls until it too faced pressure last year to stop reporting.

It has resumed its public reporting and on Friday shared its latest statistics with the media, showing that 543 people have been killed since October, including 276 in Baghdad alone.

Seventeen members of the security forces are among the dead nationwide. The remaining are all protesters or activists, including 22 who were assassinated.

Up to 30,000 more have been wounded during the rallies, according to medical sources.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Iraq](#)

Iran Guards to disclose new information about US base attack in Iraq
Iraq protesters defiant as they bury 7 killed in overnight clash

[UN, EU condemn Idlib bombings](#)

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1581100202560084000

Fri, 2020-02-07 21:28

LONDON: Military operations in northwest Syria have caused "unacceptable" human suffering and "massive waves of civilian displacement and major loss of civilian life," the UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen told the Security Council on Thursday.

Hundreds of civilians have died and over half a million people have been displaced from their homes as fighting has intensified between Damascus and armed groups in the last rebel stronghold of Idlib in recent months.

Airstrikes and ground operations in Idlib by Russian-backed Syrian regime forces, Turkish forces and various militant groups have all contributed to creating a nightmare scenario, Pedersen said, with over half a million people displaced by violence in just two months.

The UN's Central Emergency Response Fund announced that it was releasing an additional \$30 million in aid to help ease the crisis.

Pedersen said he could see no military solution to the situation on the ground, and if UN resolution 2245 – calling for a "nationwide ceasefire" – is not implemented, the region will descend into a "bloody and protracted last stand on the Turkish border, with grave consequences for civilians."

The UN's Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Sir Mark Lowcock also addressed the Security Council, describing the situation in Idlib as a "humanitarian catastrophe."

Sir Mark, who is also the UN's emergency relief coordinator, said civilians are in urgent need of assistance with so many being forced to flee in the depths of winter, and hundreds of millions of dollars are needed to provide basic things such as tents, plastic sheets, fuel, stoves and warm clothes. "We have seen chaotic pictures in town after town as vehicles line up in every direction trying to flee. People who have just moved cannot find adequate shelter," he added.

"Tens of thousands are crammed into schools, mosques and unfinished buildings. Many others are in tents in the mud, exposed to wind, rain and freezing weather. What we have been warning you about is happening."

The EU also called for an end to bombings in Syria, as well as the opening of a humanitarian corridor from Idlib to allow civilians to flee, as regime forces continue to advance on the rebel stronghold.

"Bombings and other attacks on civilians in northwest Syria must stop," said the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Josep Borrell.

In a statement released jointly with European Emergency Response Coordinator Janez Lenarčič, Borrell said the EU stands ready to provide assistance to internally displaced Syrians facing "extraordinary human suffering."

The statement also demanded "unimpeded" humanitarian access, respect for "humanitarian law" and the protection of Idlib's civilian population.

The Syrian conflict is thought to have claimed the lives of almost 400,000 people since its outbreak, sparked by a civil uprising against President Bashar Assad in 2011.

More than half the civilian population is said to have fled the country as a result of the war, with many residing in neighboring Arab states and Turkey. On Wednesday, regime forces backed by Russian warplanes entered the town of Saraqib, 15 km east of the city of Idlib.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Idlib](#)

[EU](#)

[UN](#)

[Syria](#)

Russians headed to Turkey for talks on Syrian offensive in Idlib
British Daesh militants to be put on trial in Syria

[British Daesh militants to be put on trial in Syria](#)

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1581093564869648100

Fri, 2020-02-07 19:38

LONDON: British Daesh militants could face trial in Syria under plans announced by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is holding thousands of prisoners in the country's northeast.

The SDF's political arm, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, announced on Thursday that it would begin putting the militants on trial in Syria in March, The Independent reported.

The announcement followed a meeting between the SDF's foreign relations committee and Finland's Foreign Ministry.

"We explained our intention to set up a special court for Isis (Daesh) to the Finnish government and asked for help from the legal and technical aspects, and that this trial be transparent and public," the administration said in a statement.

The SDF has been calling for foreign governments to repatriate their citizens who joined Daesh so they can face trial in their own countries.

However, the UK and other European countries have refused to bring them home, citing security risks.

"Unfortunately many states have not responded to our appeals. For example, we have handed over less than 10 percent of Isis-linked children to their countries so far," the statement said.

"There is the urgent need for a solution to this issue in our region, and to pressure states to receive their nationals."

More than 1,000 foreign militants have been held in detention by the SDF since the territorial defeat of Daesh last year.

Around 40 of these fighters are British – 10 men and 30 women who are being held separately along with their children.

The SDF is a Kurdish-led armed group that had been a key member of the international coalition fighting Daesh.

Meanwhile, a British woman who ran away to join Daesh as a teenager lost a legal challenge on Friday aimed at restoring her citizenship, which was revoked on national security grounds.

Shamima Begum, one of three London schoolgirls who traveled to Syria in 2015, resurfaced at a refugee camp in the country last year and told reporters she wanted to come home.

But her apparent lack of remorse has triggered criticism in Britain, and the family has expressed its own shock at her lack of repentance.

Former Home Secretary Sajid Javid revoked her citizenship, but she challenged the decision before the Special Immigration Appeals Commission.

She argued that she is not the citizen of another country, and that Javid's decision left her stateless.

But the tribunal ruled in Javid's favor on Friday. Judge Doron Blum said the decision did not breach the Home Office's "extraterritorial human rights policy by exposing Ms Begum to a real risk of death or inhuman or degrading treatment."

The tribunal ruled that she was "a citizen of Bangladesh by descent," and therefore not rendered stateless.

Her attorney, Daniel Furner, said the decision was baffling and would be appealed.

Begum's family has long argued that she has never had a Bangladeshi passport and that she is from the UK.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[UK](#)

[Daesh](#)

[Syria](#)

[SDF](#)

Daesh spokesman killed in fresh north Syria raid: SDF official
Kurdish-led SDF says worked with US on successful anti-Daesh operation

[Palestinian leaders hit back at Kushner claims Palestine to blame for West Bank violence](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1581089344789347700

Fri, 2020-02-07 15:01

JERUSALEM: Palestinian and US leaders blamed each other for a surge of

violence, as mourners gathered in the occupied West Bank for the funeral of a Palestinian police officer shot dead during unrest, and Israel tightened security ahead of Friday Muslim prayers.

Tensions were high a day after two Palestinians were killed and 16 Israelis injured amid Palestinian anger at US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, unveiled last week with Israel's prime minister at his side.

There were sporadic clashes on Friday between Palestinian protesters and Israeli security forces near Azzun, where the funeral was held for the police officer killed in Jenin the previous day.

Palestinian authorities said he was killed by Israeli gunfire. Israeli officials did not comment, and Israeli media reported that he was shot by troops by mistake.

Palestinians also clashed with Israeli troops in Jericho and burned tires in the West Bank village of Bil'in, and Palestinian medics said one protester had been critically wounded near Tulkarm.

"The Palestinian people will not allow the 'Deal of the Century' to pass," said Mohammed Barakeh, waving a Palestinian flag in Bil'in.

"They are fighting for their national character and the independence of their country," added Barakeh, a former Israeli lawmaker and member of Israel's 21% Arab minority, many of whom identify with their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza.

President Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority has rejected Trump's peace plan, which would give Israel most of what it has sought during decades of conflict, including the disputed holy city of Jerusalem and nearly all the occupied land on which it has built settlements.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat said Washington was to blame for the unrest since the plan was unveiled.

"Those who introduce plans for annexation and the legalizing of occupation and settlements are really responsible for deepening violence and counter-violence," he said. Abbas would go to the UN Security Council with "a genuine peace plan," Erekat said.

Trump's senior adviser Jared Kushner, the principal architect of the US plan, has repeatedly denounced the Palestinian leadership, a break from decades of diplomacy when Washington strove to appear as a neutral broker. On Thursday he blamed Abbas for the violence.

"I think he does have responsibility," Kushner said after briefing United Nations Security Council ambassadors. "He calls for days of rage in response, and he said that before he even saw the plan."

Israeli police said security chiefs had met late on Thursday and decided to increase security "across the country, with emphasis on Jerusalem."

A police statement singled out the risk of trouble during Friday prayers at the Jerusalem holy site known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary.

Palestinians have long boycotted relations with the Trump administration, which they view as biased against them. Washington says its plan offers a path toward a Palestinian state, and blames the Palestinian leadership for rejecting it over unrealistic demands.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Middle East](#)

[Palestine](#)

[West Bank](#)

[US](#)

[Israel](#)

[Middle East peace plan](#)

[Jared Kushner](#)

United Kingdom slammed for 'contradictory' response to Trump peace plan
Proposed UN resolution would reject US Mideast peace plan

Russians headed to Turkey for talks on Syrian offensive in Idlib

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1581069323268045400

Fri, 2020-02-07 09:00

ISTANBUL: A Russian delegation will arrive in Turkey on Saturday for talks aiming to stop the Syrian government's "aggression" and halt a humanitarian catastrophe in Syria's northwest Idlib region, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Friday.

Cavusoglu repeated Turkey would do whatever is necessary to stop a humanitarian tragedy in Idlib, where on Thursday Russian-led Syrian forces entered the strategic town of Saraqeb in a push to capture the country's last rebel stronghold.

Meanwhile, a Turkish security source said the country has no plans to withdraw troops from observation posts in Syria's northwest Idlib region even though three of the posts are in areas now controlled by the Syrian government.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to drive back Syrian troops in Idlib unless they withdrew by the end of the month, after eight Turkish soldiers were killed on Monday by Syrian government shelling near the town of Saraqeb.

The source said there were "no problems" with Turkish military personnel in Saraqeb and added each of the observation posts in Idlib were equipped to defend themselves.

The source said joint patrols by Turkish and Russian troops in a swathe of northern Syria along Turkey's border to the east had been postponed due to weather conditions, not over the attacks in Idlib.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Idlib](#)

[Turkey](#)

Saraqib is new hotspot in Turkey and Syria's fight for Idlib
Escalation in Syria's Idlib strains Russian-Turkish ties