

'I thought I would be there forever,' says Canadian freed from Syria

Author:

AFP

ID:

1565353498856186500

Fri, 2019-08-09 12:19

BEIRUT: Canadian Kristian Lee Baxter, 44, who was detained for nine months in Syria, was released after Lebanese officials stepped in to ensure his freedom.

Baxter appeared at the General Security Headquarters in Beirut with the Canadian Ambassador to Lebanon Emmanuelle Lamoureux and the director-general of the Lebanese General Security Directorate, Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim. Baxter appeared to be slender and highly emotional.

"The Syrian state has cooperated with us by releasing a former American hostage (journalist Austin Tice, who was held in Syria from 2012) and today a Canadian citizen," said Ibrahim.

He added: "Baxter was detained in Syria last year for violating their laws, and I renew my thanks to the Syrian state for cooperation and shortening his detention."

Ibrahim said his mediation with Syria was based on "the request of Canada, which asked Lebanon to intervene to release him. I informed President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Thursday about the results of the process."

Ibrahim said the successful release is "in Lebanon's interest because it brings us back to the world map."

Commenting on Lebanese journalist Samir Kassab and Archbishops John Ibrahim and Paul Yazji, who have been missing in Syria for years, Ibrahim said: "The issue is being followed up, but we have no information that we can announce at the moment."

Ibrahim was asked about the sentence issued against Lebanese businessman Qassem Tajeddine, 63, in the US. "Things have become clear with the court ruling," he said, adding that he had visited Tajeddine while he was on an official visit to the US and that "he was in difficult health conditions. I hope he has improved."

On Thursday, a US court sentenced Tajeddine to five years in prison and a \$50 million (SR185m) fine for circumventing sanctions imposed on him as a "significant financial contributor to Hezbollah," according to the US Justice Department.

Lamoureux expressed her country's gratitude to Ibrahim and the role he played

in bringing Baxter to his family. "Today is a glorious day for Canadians," she said.

The envoy declined to give any details of the negotiations or to comment on the case "because of Canada's privacy laws."

Baxter tried to speak to journalists, but he was lost for words: "I thought I would be there forever. I didn't know if anyone knew if I was alive."

He thanked the Canadian Embassy and the Lebanese authorities for their assistance in his release.

He looked very emotional and burst into tears. The Canadian ambassador also became emotional before she ended the press conference.

Baxter, who is from British Columbia, had gone to Syria "in search of adventure in a war-torn country," according to the Canadian Press.

His mother, Andrea Leclair, said at the time that her son was a "world traveler, adventurer, history lover and uses a metal detector as a hobby, but he didn't realize it was not allowed across the border.

"He told me he was meeting nice people and that he was offered food, tea and coffee everywhere he went. He was having a great time before he went missing," she said.

Leclair added that she lost contact with her son on Dec. 1. He had arrived in Syria on Nov. 26 and was contacting her daily, but after she received the last message from him she discovered that "there was no Canadian Embassy operating in Syria."

The Canadian government has warned its citizens not to travel to Syria since the war started in 2011. Canada severed diplomatic relations with the country in 2012 and closed its embassy.



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Canadian police find body of Saudi father who fell at Niagara Falls
Two bodies found in Canada, believed to be teen murder suspects

[Lebanon demolishes more Syrian refugee shelters](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1565381001018405500

Fri, 2019-08-09 17:57

RIHANIYA, Lebanon: A coalition of international NGOs on Friday said the Lebanese army raided Syrian refugee settlements, destroying a number of tents, urging authorities to stop the demolitions.

The Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum (LHIF), which comprises 51 international NGOs, said troops raided more than 30 settlements in the northern Akkar region on Thursday and at least five more on Friday.

On Thursday they “partially demolished over 350 refugees’ homes in four tented settlement in Akkar, in northern Lebanon, using sledgehammers,” a statement said.

"Tents were demolished on the grounds that the structures were not compliant with a recent order from Lebanon's Higher Defense Council that all non-temporary structures be dismantled or face demolition."

It came after similar demolitions earlier this year in the border village of Aarsal.

Authorities had set a June 9 deadline for refugees living in shelters built with material other than timber and plastic sheeting in Aarsal to destroy them.

They later extended the deadline to July 1, after which the army moved in to demolish shelters which did not comply with regulations.

Lebanon, a country of some four million people, hosts an estimated 1.5 to two million refugees who have fled the conflict that erupted in neighboring Syria in 2011.

Lebanon's economic and other woes are routinely blamed on Syrian refugees by local politicians and the government has ratcheted up the pressure to send them back.

Keen not to encourage Syrians to settle permanently, authorities allow only informal camps for refugees.

LHIF, whose members include the British charity Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council and Mercy Corps, urged the Lebanese government and people to show "compassion" for refugees living in tents.

"We ask that Lebanese authorities cease these demolitions and work with the community, including refugees, landlords, and municipalities, to find a solution that allows refugees to continue to live in safety and dignity, where all parties respect the rule of law," the statement said.

It also reported that on Thursday the army arrested 47 people, including a minor, "on the grounds that they do not have valid legal residency papers" and that other arrests were made on Friday.

"We believe that it is excessive and punitive to arrest refugees on this basis and to use demolitions as a means for doing so," the NGOs said.



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Lebanon ups pressure on Syrian refugees to return
Two Syrians dead in Lebanon refugee camp fire

[Clashes kill six civilians in Yemen's Aden](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1565378844548183800

Fri, 2019-08-09 18:26

ADEN: At least six civilians were killed and 12 others wounded Friday during clashes in Yemen's second city Aden, a security source said, as violence flares between pro-government fighters and those seeking an independent south.

The fighting erupted on Wednesday and has continued unabated between the two

sides, who are in effect backers of the Aden-based internationally recognized government of President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi.

One faction however is known as the Security Belt, a force dominated by fighters who seek independence for southern Yemen.

On Friday, fierce clashes broke out between the two sides during which a mortar round crashed into a house killing six people, four of whom were from the same family, a security source said.

Twelve other people were wounded in the fighting, the source said.

Doctors Without Borders (MSF) tweeted Friday that it had treated 75 people in a hospital run by the charity "since yesterday (Thursday) night" including seven who were in a critical condition.

"Most of the patients we admitted are civilians and were injured by shrapnel during shelling on their houses or stray bullets," MSF said.



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Yemen government blames separatists for Aden clashes Clashes erupt in Yemen's Aden, killing one

[KSRelief calls for UN probe into](#)

'serious reports' of Yemen aid agency corruption

Author:

Zaynab Khojji

ID:

1565355668016413100

Fri, 2019-08-09 16:00

RIYADH: The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSRelief) has called for a full-scale probe into "serious reports" of corruption in UN agencies delivering vital aid to war-torn Yemen.

Senior KSRelief officials have demanded an urgent investigation following allegations of wrongdoing brought to their attention by a number of international news organizations.

A statement, issued by KSRelief's media center, said: "The KSRelief called upon the United Nations aid agencies to review and enforce accurate, credible, neutral and transparent monitoring mechanisms for their humanitarian work in Yemen to prevent any abuse or exploitation of humanitarian aid.

"KSRelief officials were recently briefed on serious reports from some international news agencies alleging the existence of corruption in some UN agencies working in Yemen. KSRelief relies heavily on these agencies to deliver urgent humanitarian assistance to Yemenis in desperate need of help." It added: "While the center values its strong strategic partnerships with the UN and its agencies, there are clearly stated mechanisms in its contracts with humanitarian partners which prohibit the exploitation of aid by individuals or groups working or affiliated with the UN or international organizations for any individual or other interests."

The KSRelief statement noted that aid contracts required the immediate disclosure of any incident of irregularity or corruption, and that KSRelief had the right to participate in any investigation into such incidents.

The center was also entitled to review all partner agreements to ensure compliance with transparent monitoring and implementation procedures.

"Therefore, the KSRelief calls upon the UN and its humanitarian agencies to immediately begin transparent investigations into these incidents, and to disclose any suspicion of the involvement of their staff members in corruption, abuses or complicity with any party with regards to the allocation of humanitarian grants and aid provided by Saudi Arabia," said the statement.

"Moreover, the KSRelief emphasizes the importance of its valuable partnerships with the UN agencies in carrying out its mission to alleviate the suffering of all in need, and calls upon the UN and its humanitarian agencies to immediately review their monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanisms to ensure impartiality and transparency in aid delivery."



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[King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center \(KSRelief\)](#)

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World Food Programme to resume food aid in Yemen's Sanaa
Yemen government blames separatists for Aden clashes

[Tunisia PM Chahed announces run for president](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1565295039030811700

Thu, 2019-08-08 19:42

TUNIS: Tunisia's Prime Minister Youssef Chahed announced Thursday he would stand in presidential elections next month.

"I have thought hard and decided to put myself forward for the position of president of the republic," he said during an assembly of his Tahya Tunis

party.

The 43-year-old, Tunisia's youngest prime minister, faces possible competition from Abdelfattah Mourou of the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party and controversial media magnate Nabil Karoui.

Originally scheduled for November, the vote was brought forward following the death of incumbent Beji Caid Essebsi on July 25.

Chahed said he wanted to "break with the old system and give hope to all Tunisians, including young people, that they can take on important positions in the state."

Launched at the start of the year, Chahed's Tahya Tounes has become the second largest party in parliament behind Ennahdha.

Tahya Tounes said last week the premier would be their candidate for the presidential polls.

Tunisia has been praised as a rare case of democratic transition to emerge from the Arab Spring uprisings.

But it has struggled with repeated jihadist attacks, along with inflation and unemployment that have hit Chahed's popularity.

The agricultural engineering graduate entered politics after Tunisia's 2011 uprising which ousted autocratic president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Presidential hopefuls have until Friday to register for the election on September 15.

Over 50 people had registered their candidacy by Thursday.

They include Abir Moussi, who heads a group formed from the remnants of Ben Ali's ruling party and has called for Islamists including Ennahdha to be excluded from the poll.

On Thursday, openly gay lawyer Mounir Baatour announced he would stand in the elections, a first for the Arab world.

The electoral commission is set to announce on August 31 which candidates it will allow to run in the poll.



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