

Onslaught in Syria may spark humanitarian disaster: UN

Author:

Wed, 2019-07-31 22:46

NEW YORK: The UN humanitarian chief urged the Security Council on Tuesday to take action to end the “bloody onslaught” in Syria’s last opposition-held stronghold, warning that continued violence could create the worst humanitarian disaster of the 21st century.

An exasperated Mark Lowcock told council members they have ignored previous pleas to stop the bombing and shelling in Idlib province by Syrian and Russian warplanes and “done nothing for 90 days as the carnage continues in front of your eyes.”

“Are you again going to shrug your shoulders ... or are you going to listen to the children of Idlib, and do something about it?” he asked.

The Security Council has been deeply divided over the Syrian conflict since it began in 2011, with Russia backing the government and Western nations supporting the opposition. That has kept the UN’s most powerful body from taking any significant action.

Britain’s UN Ambassador Karen Pierce told the council that responsibility for its failure to act lies with Russia, Syria and Iran.

What’s happening in Idlib “makes a mockery” of the responsibility of the five permanent veto-wielding council members – Russia, China, the US, Britain and France – to ensure international peace and security, she said.

Idlib was supposed to be a de-escalation zone under an agreement reached between Russia and Turkey, which backs the opposition. But that deal has all but collapsed since the government launched an offensive on April 30, saying it wanted to get rid of “terrorists” that took refuge there.

Russia’s UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia responded to what he called “invectives” against Syria and Russia from Britain and others, saying their goal “is to maintain a terrorist presence in Idlib, and in the future to use this presence for the purpose of combatting the legitimate Syrian authorities.”

Nebenzia said the same “emotionally charged” attacks happen “every time when the end of another terrorist enclave in Syria was close.” He cited eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta, saying “now the propaganda machine is firing full artillery around the situation in Idlib.”

Britain, France, the US and other council nations have been especially angered at the increasing number of attacks on health facilities and schools, and the growing number of civilian casualties in Idlib.

A petition from 10 Security Council members delivered to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Tuesday asks the UN chief about the possibility of launching an investigation into attacks on medical facilities and the so-called "de-confliction mechanism" under which the locations and coordinates of health facilities are reported to the warring parties.

The petition was signed by Britain, France, the US, Kuwait, Peru, Poland, Belgium, Dominican Republic, Germany and Indonesia. Russia, China, South Africa, Ivory Coast and Equatorial Guinea did not sign it.

Humanitarian chief Lowcock said it was an "extremely important question" whether information provided through the de-confliction system was being used to protect civilian facilities or target them.

He said parties to the conflict have been notified of six different attacks in northwest Syria this year, and that "in the current environment de-confliction is not proving effective in helping to protect those who utilize the system."

Lowcock said his team will meet with humanitarian organizations "to update them on the current situation and determine again whether we should continue to provide information to the parties on new sites or humanitarian movements."

On July 26, the UN human rights office reported that at least 450 civilians have been killed since late April, including more than a hundred in the previous two weeks.

"There is no refuge for the people of Idlib," Lowcock stressed. "Hundreds of them have been killed, hundreds more injured, 440,000 of them displaced, but there is nowhere else for them to go."

"There's been a bloody onslaught in full swing now for more than three months on the people of Idlib, and if it doesn't stop ... it has the potential to create the worst humanitarian disaster the world has seen so far this century," he warned.

Susannah Sirkin, policy director at Physicians for Human Rights, told the council that since Syria launched its offensive the organization had received reports of 46 attacks on health care facilities. So far, she said, it has verified 16 of them.

Sirkin said many health facilities in Idlib have been forced out of service and accused Syria and Russia of continuing to target them.

Russia's Nebenzia said it was a "lie" that Russia was deliberately conducting airstrikes targeting hospitals and schools.

He said Lowcock and others should contact the Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides, which deals with de-confliction and operates around the clock, instead of spreading information based on "dubious sources."



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Russian-backed regime forces recover area in northwestern Syria
Deported from Turkey, Syrians return to unfamiliar country

[Hundreds protest in Sudan city against killings of students](#)

Author:

Wed, 2019-07-31 21:50

AL-OBEID/SUDAN: Hundreds of protesters marched through the streets of a central Sudanese city on Wednesday, denouncing the killing of six demonstrators there including schoolchildren at a rally this week.

“Blood for blood, we don’t want compensation,” chanted men and women as they marched in Al-Obeid where the killings took place on Monday.

Many carried Sudanese flags and some held photographs of those killed as they gathered in the downtown area, after marching through several parts of the city, an AFP correspondent reported.

"It is unacceptable that young people are being killed," said protester Fatima Mohamed as behind her crowds chanted revolutionary slogans that have rocked the country for months.

"These schoolchildren were chanting only slogans. Why were they shot with bullets?"

"Those who committed these crimes must be brought to justice," she said.

Tragedy struck the city on Monday when six people, including five secondary school pupils, were shot dead at a rally against a growing shortage of bread and fuel in the city. It was a sudden tripling of the price of bread in December that sparked the mushrooming protests that led to the toppling of longtime president Omar Al-Bashir by the army in April.

Al-Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan state some 350 km southwest of Khartoum, remained largely quiet during the long months of demonstrations.

For much of his three decades in power, Bashir was able to look to Al-Obeid for support but the city drew scant reward in terms of investment. Many of its roads remain unpaved and heavy rains this week left huge pools of water for want of drainage.

In the downtown area, many houses are built of cement. In poorer neighborhoods, mudbrick is still widespread.

"There has been no electricity in our house since this morning," said Babikir Awad, sitting on a chair in front of his single-story home in the city center.

"We have been suffering for months, but the situation has escalated in the past two weeks."

Frequent power cuts are the biggest complaint.

"The main problem is that there is no steady supply of electricity," said bakery owner Mohamed Al-Hassan.

"Having your own generator means increasing your costs and in turn exposing yourself to losses."

Residents are angry that the authorities have failed to resolve the bread shortage.

"The city has witnessed a complete deterioration in services," said Shadiya Othman.

"This has led to anger."



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Sudanese hit by bread shortages as currency crunch escalates
Sudan opposition leader says 22 killed in bread protests

['Growing concern' for Stena Impero tanker crew captured by Iran](#)

Tue, 2019-07-30 23:00

LONDON: The owner of the British tanker seized by Iranian forces in the Strait of Hormuz said Tuesday they are increasingly concerned about the crew's welfare.

The Stena Impero was captured on July 19 with 23 people on board as it passed through the waterway under the watch of a British warship.

The ship was impounded at the southern port of Bandar Abbas for allegedly breaking "international maritime rules." Other Iranian officials said the seizure was in retaliation for British forces capturing an Iranian tanker

accused of carrying oil to Syria.

The Stena Impero's owners, Stena Bulk and Northern Marine Management, said it has growing concern for the welfare of the crew confined to the vessel.

"With little progress being made since the vessel was seized on 19 July, we urge governments involved to find a swift resolution so our 23 valued seafarers can return to their families and move on from this ordeal," Stena Bulk's president and chief executive Erik Hanell.

"We reiterate that there is no evidence of a collision involving the Stena Impero, and at the time of the seizure the vessel was well within the inbound traffic separation scheme and out-with Iranian territorial waters."

The company said all required navigational equipment was fully functioning and in compliance with maritime regulations.

The crew members are Indian, Russian, Latvian and Filipino. Stena Bulk said last week that they were all safe.

The seizure of the ship came after months of tensions in the Gulf between the US and its allies, and Iran. Washington ramped up sanctions against Tehran after Donald Trump withdrew last year from an international deal to restrict Iran's nuclear program.

Iran is accused of carrying out a series of attacks on ships near the Strait of Hormuz as a calculated response to its oil exports being reduced to a trickle by the tough sanctions.

On Monday, the UK ruled out swapping the two oil tankers, and accused Iran of breaking international law.

A second British warship arrived in the Gulf to help secure passage for ships transiting the strait.



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New audio shows Iran threatening British warship during Stena Impero seizure
Stena Impero operator says tanker's crew safe and well

[Iraq says ex-governor embezzled \\$10m in aid for displaced](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-07-30 22:23

BAGHDAD: Around \$10 million in aid for the displaced in northern Iraq's Nineveh province, where the Daesh group was based, has been embezzled by its fugitive ex-governor, the country's anti-corruption commission said Tuesday.

A spokesperson for the Integrity Commission told AFP that its investigators had uncovered "invoices from developers in Iraqi Kurdistan."

But, he added, "no receipt was found" for these debited sums, which were meant for the rehabilitation of two hospitals in the northern metropolis of Mosul, capital of Nineveh.

Many of the province's inhabitants are still displaced as public services have not been fully reestablished.

Currently, 1.6 million Iraqis are still crowded into camps for the displaced, of which 40 percent are originally from Nineveh, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

A total of 11.3 billion Iraqi dinars (\$9.4 million) had been allocated to the Provincial Council by the Ministry of Migration and Displaced, according to the commission.

"It has been debited and doesn't appear in any provincial authorities' bank accounts or in the Provincial Council funds," he said.

"It was transferred to Kurdistan," an autonomous region where the sacked governor of Nineveh, Nawfel Akoub, is thought to be in hiding, along with several other officials wanted by Baghdad.

He has been on the run since a ferry sank in Mosul on Mother's Day in March, killing 150 people.

In April, the commission said that more than \$60 million of public funds were diverted by officials close to Akoub from Nineveh's budget of \$800 million.

Graft is endemic across Iraq, which ranks among the world's worst offenders

in Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index.

Since 2004, a year after the US-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein, almost \$250 billion of public funds has vanished into the pockets of shady politicians and businessmen, according to parliament.



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Iraqi forces launch anti-Daesh operation north of Baghdad
Iraqi woman who supported Daesh jailed for six years

[Israel jails Palestinian lawyer over shootings](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-07-30 22:10

JERUSALEM: An Israeli military court jailed a prominent Palestinian lawyer for 13-and-a-half years on Tuesday for shooting at Israeli vehicles in the

occupied West Bank, the army said.

Tareq Barghout, a Ramallah-based lawyer who represented Palestinians accused by Israel of security-related offenses, was himself arrested in February, along with Palestinian Authority official Zakaria Zubeidi.

The army said in a statement that Barghout was convicted as part of a plea bargain.

"Barghout fired at Israeli buses and at security forces on a number of occasions," it said.

Zubeidi, a former head of a militant group who later became an official of the PA commission for Palestinians in Israeli jails, is still awaiting trial.

Both men were charged in May with carrying out shooting attacks in the Ramallah area between November 2016 and January 2019, in which three Israelis were slightly injured.

According to Israel's Shin Bet domestic security agency the pair used Zubeidi's official PA vehicle for transport.

Israeli lawyer Leah Tsemel, representing Barghout, said that he alone fired the shots.

"He said in his statement that he opened fire after feeling that Palestinians were being treated very unjustly by Israeli courts," she told AFP.

She said that he was also distressed by having to accompany bereaved Palestinians to receive from Israeli authorities the bodies of loved ones killed in conflict with Israeli forces.

"Once, Barghout fired from a distance at a settlers' bus to make them understand that they can never feel secure in the occupied territories," Tsemel said.

Excluding annexed east Jerusalem, more than 400,000 Israeli settlers live in the West Bank alongside more than 2.5 million Palestinians.

International law considers the settlements to be illegal and a barrier to peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

They are built on land Israel seized in the Six-Day War of 1967, which the Palestinians claim as part of their future state.



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Palestinian killed by Israeli fire in Gaza border clashes