

Iraq exhumes bodies thought to be Kurds killed by Saddam

Author:

AFP

ID:

1563884183953076100

Tue, 2019-07-23 12:08

BAGHDAD: Iraq on Tuesday began exhuming the remains of dozens of victims, including children, likely killed during ex-dictator Saddam Hussein's campaign against the country's Kurds, a forensics official told AFP. The mass grave was uncovered in Tal Al-Sheikhiya, about 300 kilometers (200 miles) south of Baghdad, said Zaid Al-Youssef, the head of Baghdad's Medico-Legal Directorate which is tasked with identifying the remains.

"More than 70 bodies including women and children, ranging from newborns to 10 years old" have so far been exhumed, Youssef said.

Those remains were recovered from the surface layer of the site, he said, but "there could be a second deeper layer" with additional bodies.

"The evidence collected indicates they were summarily executed in 1988," said Youssef, which coincides with Saddam's brutal "Anfal" campaign against Iraq's Kurds.

The operation took place between 1987 and 1988 and saw nearly 180,000 Kurds killed and more than 3,000 villages destroyed.

"The female victims were blindfolded and killed by gunshots to the head, but also have traces on various parts of their bodies of bullets that were fired randomly," Youssef said.

The grave lies in the southern province of Mutahanna, also home to the notorious Nigrat Salman prison camp.

Many Kurds and political opponents of the previous regime were held there, and survivors shared tales of humiliation, rape and detention of minors as part of Saddam's 2006 trial.

Iraq has been hit by wave after wave of conflict in recent decades, culminating in the fight against the Daesh group which ended in late 2017. Those years of conflict left grave sites all across the country where the remains of thousands of victims from Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious communities have been uncovered.

IS alone left behind an estimated 200 mass graves that could hold up to 12,000 bodies, the United Nations has said.

Authorities are testing remains from the most recent conflict as well as wars dating back three decades in an effort to identify the fates of missing Iraqis.

According to Iraqi authorities, Saddam's regime forcefully disappeared more than one million people in the 1980s and 1990s, and many of their families are still trying to find out what happened to them.



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More Basra water crises unless Iraq government fixes 'failures' Iraqi forces launch anti-Daesh operation north of Baghdad

[Israel says 12 Palestinian buildings destroyed in controversial demolition](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1563881248472676600

Tue, 2019-07-23 11:09

JERUSALEM: Israel said Tuesday a total of 12 Palestinian buildings it considered illegally constructed were demolished in a controversial operation the previous day, while a UN preliminary assessment showed 24 people displaced.

The demolitions of Palestinian homes, most of which were still under construction, drew condemnation from the European Union and UN officials.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia condemned on Tuesday Israel's demolition, urging world powers to "stop this aggression".

"The cabinet strongly condemned and denounced authorities of the Israeli occupation for the demolition of dozens of houses in... east Jerusalem," said a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency.

"It called on the international community to intervene to stop this aggression and dangerous escalation that targets Palestinians."

Israel says the homes south of Jerusalem were built too close to its separation barrier cutting off the occupied West Bank, posing a security risk, and the demolitions were approved by its supreme court following a lengthy process.

Palestinian leaders expressed outrage at the demolitions in the Sur Baher area, which straddles the occupied West Bank and Jerusalem.

They note that most of the buildings were located in areas meant to be under Palestinian Authority civilian control under the Oslo accords of the 1990s.

Before dawn Monday, hundreds of Israeli police and soldiers sealed off buildings in the area while residents and activists were dragged out.

A statement from Israeli defense ministry unit COGAT said "12 buildings and two building foundations were demolished," adding that they were "built illegally."

Israel's supreme court "ruled that the buildings may be demolished as they constitute a security danger to the area of the security fence," the statement said.

UN humanitarian agency OCHA said a preliminary assessment showed 24 people, including 14 children, were displaced.

More than 300 people were affected by the demolitions, it said.

Prior to the demolitions, OCHA said the buildings were to include some 70 apartments. It said those being displaced were from three households.

On June 18, a 30-day notice was given by Israeli authorities informing of their intent to demolish the buildings.

Residents fear another 100 buildings in the area in a similar situation could be at risk in the near future.

Israel occupied the West Bank and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War. It later annexed east Jerusalem in a move never recognized by the international community.

It began construction of the separation barrier during the bloody second Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in the early 2000s and says it is necessary to protect against attacks.

Palestinians see it as an "apartheid wall" and a potent symbol of the Israeli occupation.



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Palestine Cup postponed due to Israeli travel restrictions

[Tunisia toils to find final resting place for drowned migrants](#)

Author:

Kaouther Larbi | AFP

ID:

1563814303137712200

Mon, 2019-07-22 14:29

GABES: A putrid odour lingers outside a morgue in Tunisia's coastal city of Gabes as dozens of bodies of would-be migrants to Europe pulled out of the

sea await burial.

A string of deadly shipwrecks since May have left the North African country overwhelmed with bodies and struggling to find them a final resting place. More than 80 drowned migrants have been retrieved from Tunisian waters – most of them victims of a deadly July 1 shipwreck that left only three survivors. Fished out of the sea between the port city of Zarzis and the tourist island of Djerba in the south, their bodies were brought to Gabes hospital – the only facility in the region capable of taking DNA samples.

Under pressure from civil society groups, Tunisian authorities have stepped up efforts to systematically collect the DNA of each unidentified drowned migrant, hospital director Hechmi Lakhrech told AFP.

The samples could well be the only hope of informing the victims' families of their fate, he added.

In the basement morgue, staff use surgical masks or simple scarves to fend off the stench of bodies stacked one top of the other on the floor.

Since July 6, the numbers have "overwhelmed" the morgue's 30-body capacity, said Lakhrech.

With just two forensic doctors and two assistants, not to mention a lack of equipment, the facility is struggling to keep them properly stored, he added. After forensic tests, the bodies are kept at the morgue until a burial site is found, which in Tunisia is complicated, according to Gabes governor Mongi Thameur.

Many municipalities have refused to allow the drowned migrants to be buried in their cemeteries.

"Some fear the bodies carry cholera, and others refuse to bury people in Muslim cemeteries if their religion is unknown," he told AFP.

It comes down to "a problem of mentality and also of humanity in some cases," he said, adding that many people needed to be "sensitised."

At the Bouchama cemetery, the only one in Gabes to have so far accepted migrant bodies, 16 graves dug off to the side lie empty.

"My parents are resting here, I don't want non-Muslims to be buried by their side," said one local resident.

In front of the hospital, the stifling midday heat beats down as 14 white bags are carefully loaded onto the back of a garbage truck.

Once loaded, it will make the two-hour journey to Zarzis, where an improvised cemetery flooded with the bodies of migrants for several years is now full, and a new one has just been opened.

Each grave is marked with a simple plaque bearing the victim's DNA file number and burial date.

"On July 12, we collected 45 bodies in one day!" said Zarzis deputy mayor Faouzi Khenissi, calling it a "phenomenal problem."

The city has taken in the bodies "because we have this culture, we can't just leave the remains unburied," he said.

Zarzis is a hotspot for illegal departures to Europe and Khenissi says some of the city's own youth have also been victims of the wrecks.

Municipal workers and officials take shifts volunteering after work to conduct the burials.

After three hours of prep under the blazing sun, 14 bodies are buried alongside the 47 others already laid to rest at the new site, just outside a shelter for rescued migrants.

Mongi Slim of the country's Red Crescent called for "international

mobilization” to address the issue which “does not concern Tunisia alone.”
“The country is already struggling to take care of rescued migrants, but even more so for those who’ve died.”



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[Turkey to expel Syrians living illegally in Istanbul](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Mon, 2019-07-22 13:52

ISTANBUL: Syrians living illegally in Istanbul have until August 20 to leave the city or face expulsion, authorities warned Monday, as hostility mounts toward the millions of refugees in Turkey.

Turkey has 3.5 million Syrian refugees – more than any other country – but they are only under “temporary protection” because the government does not

offer them formal refugee status.

Under the system, they must stay in the province to which they are assigned, and can only visit other cities with short-term passes.

In a statement published in Turkish and Arabic, the Istanbul governor's office said it would no longer tolerate Syrians who are assigned to other provinces.

"Foreigners of Syrian nationality who are not registered under the system of temporary protection or who do not have a residency permit will be expelled to their designated provinces by the Ministry of the Interior," it said. Those without any registration papers at all would be sent back to Syria, it added.

But Mahdi Daoud, who heads a coalition of Syrian NGOs in Istanbul, said more than 600 people were already sent back to Syria last week – even though most had protection cards issued for other Turkish provinces.

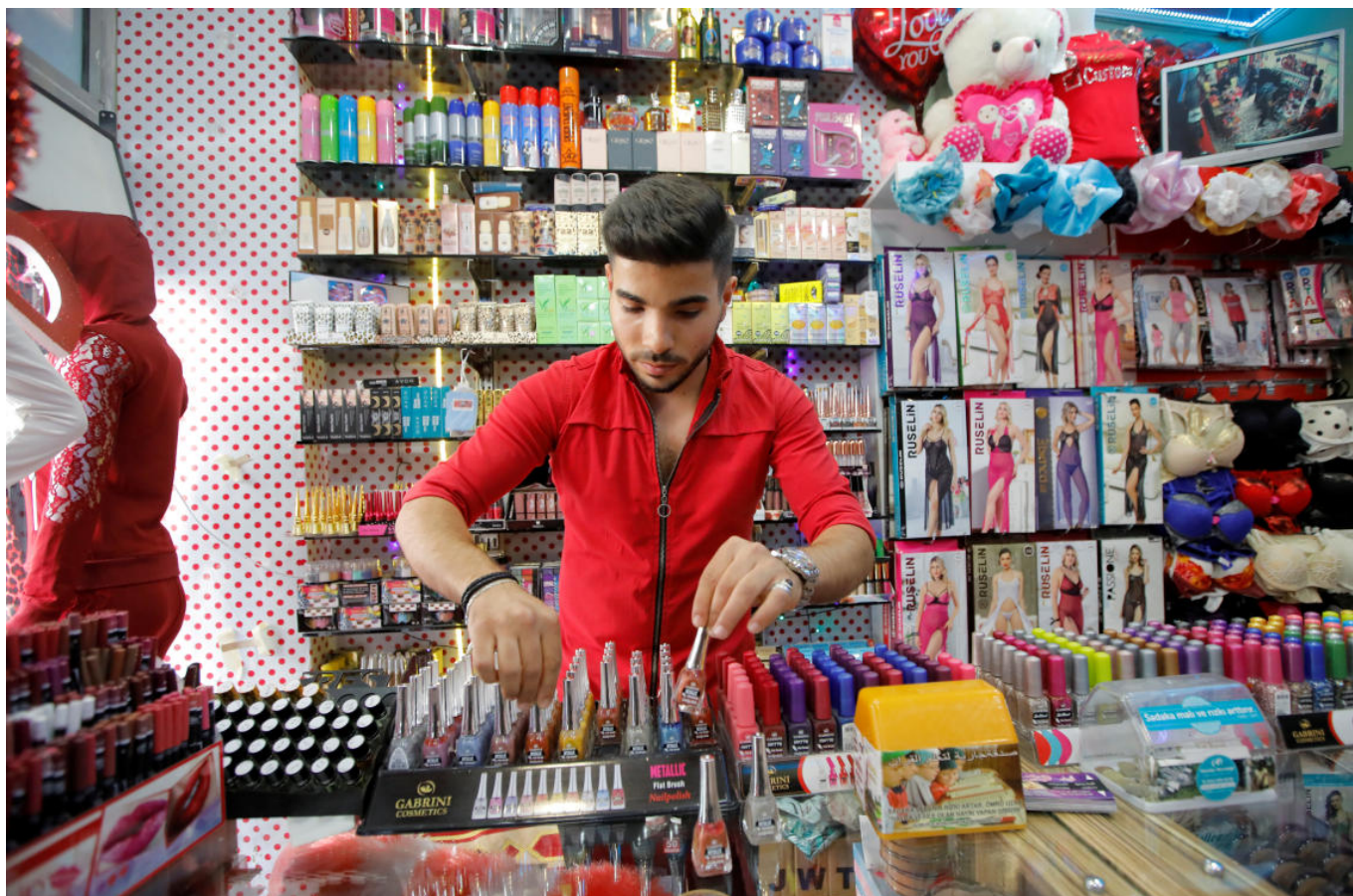
"They were forced to sign documents saying they returned voluntarily to Syria," he told AFP.

He said his coalition, the Forum for Syrian Associations, had complained to the Turkish authorities and there had not been any new cases since Saturday. Security forces have stepped up identity checks in recent days in Istanbul – at metro and railway stations and in areas with large numbers of Syrians. There are currently 547,000 Syrians living in the city, according to the governor's office, which said no new registrations were being accepted for refugees.

Daoud said nearly 26,000 Syrians live in Istanbul without a protection card. He was not sure how many had cards from other provinces.

A survey published this month by Kadir Has University in Istanbul showed growing hostility toward Syrian refugees in the city, rising from 54.5 percent of respondents in 2017 to 67.7 percent in 2019.

#SyriansOut became part of the discourse during municipal elections this year – with many complaining about the number of Arabic signs appearing on shops in Istanbul and elsewhere.



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Turkey will retaliate if US imposes sanctions over S-400s

[Iran had 'no right' to board British tanker, says UK's Jeremy Hunt](#)

Mon, 2019-07-22 19:05

LONDON: UK's foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt told Britain's parliament on Monday that under international law, Iran had "no right" to board the British tanker Stena Impero last week.

Hunt also said on Monday said Britain wanted to establish a European-led maritime protection force in the Gulf but emphasized that London was not seeking a confrontation with Iran.

"We will now seek to put together a European-led maritime protection mission to support the safe passage of both crew and cargo in this vital

region,” Hunt told parliament after Iranian authorities seized a British-flagged tanker in the Gulf on Friday.

“We will seek to establish this mission as quickly as possible,” he said, adding: “It will not be part of the US maximum pressure policy on Iran.

“Under international law Iran had no right to obstruct the ship’s passage – let alone board her,” Hunt said. He also described Friday’s incident as an act of “state piracy.”

A British warship in the region, HMS Montrose, attempted to warn off Iranian forces and raced to the scene but arrived too late to be able to assist.

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Hunt said a second British warship, HMS Duncan, that is being dispatched to the region, would arrive by July 29.

Hunt said all British-flagged ships would be asked to give the British authorities notice when they plan to pass through the Strait of Hormuz, where Friday’s incident happened, “to enable us to offer the best protection we can.”

But he added: “It is, of course, not possible for the Royal Navy to provide escorts for every single ship or indeed eliminate all risks of piracy.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Monday accused the US National Security Adviser John Bolton of trying to enlist British support for the US campaign against Iran. “Having failed to lure Donald Trump into the War of the Century, he is turning his venom against the UK in hopes of dragging it into a quagmire,” Zarif said.

However, Hunt refuted the claims. “When it comes to freedom of navigation, there can be no compromise,” he said, adding that while the US no longer supports the nuclear deal which Britain still backs, they still co-operated on most issues.

“That is why the solution that we are proposing to the House (of Commons) this afternoon is one that brings in a much broader alliance of countries, including other countries like us that have a different approach to the Iran nuclear deal.”



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