

Why more women should take up humanitarian work in Middle East and North Africa

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DUBAI: "The need is so great for the work we do in this field." This comment, by Rana Sidani Cassou of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), sums up the state of her occupation as a female humanitarian worker in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The phenomenon of women in the region devoting their lives to helping people affected by wars, natural disasters and humanitarian crises is scarcely new. But what is different now is the gap between the availability and demand for female volunteers and staff.

Cassou, based in Lebanon, has witnessed her fair share of tragedies while working on the frontlines for various aid organizations since 2004.

As the IFRC's head of communications for 21 countries, it is her responsibility to keep the world's attention focused on MENA's humanitarian needs, and "to give a voice to local communities."

Cassou has vivid memories of her deployment in the ancient city of Bam, in Iran's Kerman province, following the devastating earthquake in 2003. "I was in Bam within 48 hours of the earthquake," she told Arab News. "The whole city had been destroyed. Everything was gone: Homes, schools, villages. It was a city of rubble."

She especially remembers the rescue of an elderly woman from underneath the rubble 11 days later.

"She explained that she'd been in a state of partial paralysis and therefore confined to her bed. Her son would visit her every day to make sure she had an adequate stock of food and other necessities," Cassou said.

"When the earthquake hit, she was protected by a block of wood that sheltered her. She survived by rationing out the food, medicine and water that her son had left with her," Cassou added.

"This incident really touched my heart. I realized that when your time isn't over, it isn't over. It made me into a person who believes I have to do my best to help people like this, regardless of war, disease, outbreaks or earthquakes."

Of course, not all stories have a happy ending. Cassou was sent to Tunisia after several migrants drowned when their boat – which had started out from the Libyan port of Zouara in the direction of Italy – capsized in the Mediterranean Sea. "I met a mother whose story haunts me to this day. She was on the boat with her 5-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter. She could tell the boat was going to capsize, and so asked another passenger to hold on to her son while she held on to her daughter when the vessel overturned," Cassou said.

"Rescue teams managed to save the mother and daughter and took them to Tunisia, while rescue helicopters were taking the survivors to Rome to a refugee camp there. The mother arrived in Tunisia with no idea if her son was dead or in some camp for refugees," Cassou added. "I tried to find the little boy, but I still don't know what happened to him. This is one of the downsides of the job. It hurts to be weighed down with questions without answers, to not be able to help everyone."

Salma Bahgat is another Arab woman who has devoted her working life to helping those in need of humanitarian assistance.

As director of the Egyptian Red Crescent's (ERC) department in charge of tracing and restoring family links, Bahgat's job is to find and reunite people, especially those separated from their families due to events beyond their control.

"When I got to do fieldwork, it changed my life. It's a two-way job, where you get to see the real impact of your efforts," she told Arab News from Cairo.

Bahgat joined the ERC barely 24 hours before Egypt's political upheaval of 2011. "So I pretty much participated as a humanitarian worker in the aftermath of the violent events," she said. "A stand-out moment for me early on in my career was during the evacuation of a camp. Helping many people belonging to different groups from the same place was overwhelming. For me, the best moment was when a young man published a Facebook post a year later describing how I saved his life. That day, I came to know how one could be touching people's lives without even realizing," she added.

"My job is to reunite separated family members, but it also involves offering protection and support to children, women and elders," Bahgat said.

"Recently, I was present during the reunification of several children with their families at the airport after years of separation. The hugs and tears of joy were very moving for everyone present there, but what moved me most was the sight of a stern security official looking at his own child's photo on his phone as he watched a girl being reunited with her aunt."

Bahgat said she would like to see more women in MENA pursuing a career in humanitarian work.

"Arab women are strong and caring at the same time, which is a perfect combination for a humanitarian worker," she said.

"Their work will have a huge impact on the upbringing of a new generation. I encourage women of the region to get exposure to humanitarian work. Any woman who joins this field will be following her heart."

One woman who has been doing so for more than three decades is Laila Toukan, director of training at the Jordan Red Crescent.

Having been raised in a household where "humanitarian volunteering is a habit and a way of life," Toukan, a Palestinian, said she had no doubt about her career choice.

As part of her job, she runs a vocational training center which strives to empower women and young girls with a view to improving their economic status and self-esteem.

"We give them training in sewing, handicraft skills, beauty and hair care, culinary art and literacy," Toukan told Arab News from Amman. "We teach them computer skills to enable them to access social media, as well as knowledge of business enterprise."

Toukan said she has given socially and economically useful training to

hundreds of young women every year. “We have many success stories,” she added. “For instance, two young women who met while doing a course together have launched a successful business from home together.”

Looking back on her life as a humanitarian worker, Toukan said she would not only like to see more Arab women in the profession, but also more of them in decision-making roles. “We need volunteers, committed volunteers, those who’ll stay and make a difference. Together, we can help girls and women in need,” she added. “If you give women cash or an in-kind donation, this eventually goes away. But once you teach them a skill, it stays with them for life.”

Toukan’s views are echoed by Cassou, who said there is a desperate need for dedicated female humanitarian workers in the region. But Cassou cautioned that anyone wanting to do humanitarian work has to be “realistic about their expectations” and realize they “can’t save the entire world.” Nevertheless, “there’s a real need for Arab women in our field. We’re based in a region where most countries have experienced wars, disasters, crises and upheavals, so there’s a need for more hands, especially in the form of Arab women,” she added. “We have empathy, we understand the culture and we speak the language. It makes a big difference.”







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Gaza medic succumbs to wounds inflicted by Israeli fire
Saudi Arabia, UAE to attend US-led Palestine investment meeting

[UN hears calls to enforce Libya arms embargo](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-06-10 23:50

UNITED NATIONS: The UN Security Council on Monday renewed a green light to a EU mission to combat migrant trafficking and arms smuggling off Libya's coast amid calls for action to cut the flow of weapons.

The council voted unanimously to extend authorization of Operation Sophia until June 2020.

Germany told the council that arms supplies delivered in violation of a UN embargo were the main hurdle in the way of an end to the fighting in Tripoli and a return to political talks.

“A seemingly unlimited arms supply fuel the erroneous belief in the military solution to the conflict and contributes to the unwillingness of actors on the ground to agree on a cease-fire and resume a political process,” said Germany’s Deputy UN Ambassador Juergen Schulz.

“It is time to redouble our efforts, to assume our responsibility and ... find ways to finally implement the arms embargo effectively,” he told the council.

Belgium also expressed concerns about arms flows as did South Africa. The resolution, first adopted in 2016, allows vessels of the EU operation to inspect ships in the Mediterranean suspected of carrying weapons.

The EU, however, suspended naval patrols in March, leaving it to air missions to keep track of suspicious ships.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini has urged European countries to send warships back to the Mediterranean to help enforce the embargo.

UN envoy Ghassan Salame last month called for immediate steps to cut off arms flows to Libya, warning that without quick action, Libya will descend into civil war that could lead to a partition of the country.



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Libyan coast guard intercepts Europe-bound migrantsLibyan Coast Guard

intercepts Europe-bound migrant boat

Russian jets kill at least 25 in north-western Syria

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Mon, 2019-06-10 20:27

AMMAN: Aerial strikes on Monday killed at least 25 people, mostly civilians, in northwestern Syria in the sixth week of a Russian-led military offensive that has so far killed hundreds of civilians, according to residents and civil rescuers.

They said war planes flying at high altitude, which monitors said were Russian Sukhoi jets, dropped bombs on the village of Jabala in southern Idlib province, with rescuer teams so far pulling out 13 bodies, including women and children.

Russian jets were also behind several raids that hit the town of Khan Sheikhoun, Kfar Batikh and several other villages that left at least another 12 civilians dead, according to another local rescuer.

Rescuers say the major aerial campaign that Moscow has thrown its weight behind since it was launched in earnest at the end of April has killed over 1,500 people with more than half of the death toll civilians.

Residents and local and international aid agencies that support the rebel-held areas say the sustained campaign that has bombed schools and knocked down medical centers was to smash the spirit of civilians in opposition areas.

More than 300,000 people have fled the frontlines to the safety of areas near the border with Turkey, UN and aid agencies say.

The Russian-backed offensive has so far failed to make major inroads into rebel territory in northern Hama and southern Idlib provinces, where mainstream rebels backed by Turkey alongside hardline fighters are putting up fierce resistance in their last remaining bastion in Syria.

Russia and the Syrian army deny allegations of indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas or a campaign to paralyze everyday life in opposition-held areas and say they are fighting Al-Qaeda-inspired extremist militants.

Moscow blames the rebels for breaking a truce by hitting government-held areas and says Turkey has failed to live up to its obligations under a deal brokered last year that created a buffer zone in the area that obliges it to push out militants.

Civilians in rebel-held areas, where many oppose returning to Syrian President Bashar Assad's one-party rule, look to Turkey which has steadily built up a military presence in the area as a protector against the Russian-led strikes.

Northwest Syria – including Idlib province and parts of neighboring provinces – has an estimated 3 million inhabitants, about half of whom had already fled fighting elsewhere, according to the United Nations.



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Syrian Kurds hand over 12 French orphans from Daesh families
Syrian goalkeeper who became icon for the opposition dies in battle

[Sudan's military blames protest leaders for escalation](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-06-10 23:03

KHARTOUM: Sudan's ruling military blamed the country's protest movement for an escalation as the second day of the opposition's general strike kicked in on Monday.

For the second day, shops and businesses were closed in the capital, Khartoum, though there was visibly more traffic in the streets than on Sunday, when the strike began.

The military said actions by the protest movement as doing major harm to Sudan and its security.

It has been two months since the military ousted Sudan's former ruler, Omar Al-Bashir, on April 11, following months of protests against his government. The generals put Bashir behind bars and took over the country, promising free elections following a transitional period.

The protesters, however, remained in the streets demanding the generals relinquish power right away. The standoff lasted until troops moved in last Monday and broke up opposition sit-ins, including the main encampment outside the military headquarters in Khartoum.

Over 100 people have been killed in the violence since then. The Health Ministry disputes the death toll, saying the official total tally of those killed in the violence stands at 61, including three members of the security forces.

On Sunday, the military council said it was willing to return to the talks with what looked like a concession on a plan offered by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed who visited Khartoum last week trying to revive negotiations between the generals and the protest leaders.

The opposition said it accepts Aby as mediator but put forth several conditions.

The protest leaders urged people to close up roads again, rebuild dismantled barricades across the country, and avoid clashes with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. In a video posted late Sunday, Mohammed Al-Asam, a protest leader, urged the Sudanese to continue the campaign.

Security forces on Sunday removed barricades from main roads and reopened the sit-in area outside the military's headquarters.

"The solution is to get life paralyzed," the protest leaders said.

Lt. Gen. Jamaledine Omar, from the ruling military council, said late Sunday that by closing roads and setting up barricades, the protesters committed a crime.

"The technique of closing the roads and building barricades ... is a full-fledged crime as it deprives people from being able to go about their normal life," he said.

Omar said the Forces for Declaration of Freedom and Change, which represented the protesters in negotiations with the military council that went on for weeks till the generals suspended the talks earlier this month, are to blame for "all the regrettable events" of the past days.



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Four killed in Sudan as protesters launch civil disobedience campaign
Sudan protesters call for new civil disobedience campaign to press demand for a civilian government

[Recording of the week: Loss of a world and a need to capture it](#)

This week's selection comes from Charlie Morgan, Oral History Archivist. Someone asked Goha what was his favourite music and he replied, 'The clanging of pots and pans and the tinkling of glasses' (Middle Eastern Food, p.520) In 2018 Gaby's Deli closed after 50 years on Charing Cross Road. A popular...