

Jumblatt expresses concern over torture of Syrian refugees

Author:

Mon, 2019-03-18 22:10

BEIRUT: Lebanese Progressive Socialist Party leader Walid Jumblatt has expressed concern about reports that Syrian refugees returning to their country from Lebanon face torture and murder.

This coincides with a debate in Lebanon about whether Syrian refugees should return without waiting for a political solution to the conflict in their country.

UN Special Coordinator Jan Kubis stressed after meeting with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Monday the “urgent need to ensure the safe, voluntary and dignified return of Syrian refugees home, according to international humanitarian norms.”

Kubis added: “The UN and the humanitarian community will continue to facilitate these returns as much as possible. Another very important message was also to support the host communities here in Lebanon.”

Mireille Girard, representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), on Monday said: “The reconstruction process in Syria may not be enough to attract refugees to return. We are working to identify the reasons that will help them to return.”

She added: “The arrival of aid to the refugees is an element of trust that helps them to return. Their dignity and peaceful living must be ensured.”

Social Affairs Minister Richard Kouyoumdjian said the Lebanese General Security “issued lists containing the names of refugees wishing to return to their homes, but the Syrian regime accepted only about 20 percent of them.”

He added: “The solution is to call on the international community to put pressure on Russia, so that Moscow can exert pressure on (Syrian President) Bashar Assad’s regime to show goodwill and invite Syrian refugees to return to their land without conditions, procedures, obstacles and laws that steal property and land from them.”

Lebanese Education Minister Akram Chehayeb said: “The problem is not reconstruction and infrastructure, nor the economic and social situation. The main obstacle is the climate of fear and injustice in Syria.”

He added: “There are 215,000 Syrian students enrolled in public education in Lebanon, 60,000 in private education, and there are informal education programs for those who have not yet attended school to accommodate all children under the age of 18.”

Cheyayeb said: “As long as the displacement crisis continues, and as long as

the (Assad) regime's decision to prevent the (refugees') return stands ... work must continue to absorb the children of displaced Syrians who are outside education to protect Lebanon today and Syria in the future."



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Lebanese president pledges safe return of Syrian refugees
Syrian refugees wade through their worst Lebanese winter

[Syria vows to bring Kurdish-held areas back under control](#)

Mon, 2019-03-18 22:20

DAMASCUS: Syrian regime forces will reclaim control of northeastern areas controlled by the US-backed Kurds, whether by force or through reconciliation, the defense minister warned Monday.

Marginalized for decades, Syria's minority Kurds have carved out a de-facto

autonomous region across some 30 percent of the nation's territory since the devastating war broke out in 2011.

Backed by a US-led coalition, Kurdish forces have spearheaded an offensive in Syria against Daesh.

Washington's shock December announcement that it would withdraw its troops from Syria has sent the Kurds scrambling to rebuild ties with the Damascus regime, but talks so far have failed to reach a compromise.

Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayoub said the Syrian regime will recapture territory controlled by Kurdish-led forces in the same way it "liberated" other parts of Syria.

"The only card that remains in the hands of the Americans and their allies is" the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), he said, referring to the force leading the battle to wipe out the last remnant of the Daesh's "caliphate."

"The Syrian government will deal with this issue in one of two ways: A reconciliation agreement or liberating the territory they control by force," he said at a joint press conference with the military chiefs of staff of Iran and Iraq.

His comments come as the SDF, backed by the US-led coalition, battle militants in their last patch of territory in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

Eight years into a war that has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions, Syrian regime forces control almost two-thirds of the country.

Just two areas remain beyond their control: The militant-held northwestern region of Idlib, and the third of the country under the control of the SDF.

Ayoub on Monday said Idlib will also be recaptured by regime forces.

"The Syrian government will reassert its complete control over all Syrian territory sooner or later," he said. "Idlib is no exception."

The Idlib region borders Turkey and is dominated by an alliance led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham.

Idlib has been protected from a massive offensive by Bashar Assad's regime since September, thanks to a buffer zone deal agreed by Damascus's ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

But it has been hit by sporadic regime shelling. The defense minister's comments come after a rare meeting with the military chiefs of staff of Iraq and Iran in Damascus.

Ayoub stressed the importance of cooperation and coordination between the three militaries to combat mutual threats.

He said what emerged from talks "will help us to continue to confront

challenges, dangers and threats” posed by terrorism.

Daesh seized large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq in 2014, but has since lost most of that to various offensives, including by the Russia-backed regime.

US-backers forces said they are facing difficulties defeating Daesh. A spokesman said their effort is being slowed by mines, tunnels, and the possibility of harming women and children still in the village.

Dozens of men and women were seen walking around the besieged Daesh encampment in Baghouz on Sunday, as Kurdish fighters watched from a hilltop close by.

SDF spokesman Kino Gabriel said the camp was approximately 250 km in size – much the same area it was five weeks ago, when the SDF said it was going to finally conclude the battle.

“We are facing several difficulties regarding the operations,” Gabriel told reporters outside Baghouz Sunday.



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US-backed forces take positions in last Daesh enclaveUS-backed forces admit to 'difficulties' beating Daesh in Syria

Turkey, Iran carried out joint operation against Kurdish militants

Author:

REUTERS

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Mon, 2019-03-18 12:02

ANKARA: Turkey and Iran carried out a joint operation against militants from the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) on Monday, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said according to state-owned media.

"We started carrying out an operation with Iran against the PKK on our eastern border this morning (and) will announce the result," news agency Anadolu quoted Solyu as saying. State broadcaster TRT Haber also cited him commenting on the operation.

Turkey's military regularly carries out air strikes against PKK militants in northern Iraq and has carried out operations to arrest alleged members of the group in Turkey. The PKK is deemed a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and European Union.



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Two Iraqi troops killed in rare clashes with PKK: armyTurkey says two of its soldiers killed, eight wounded in northern Iraq

[US-backed forces take positions in last Daesh enclave](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Mon, 2019-03-18 09:22

BAGHOUZ, Syria: US-backed fighters said they had taken positions in Daesh's last enclave in eastern Syria and air strikes pounded the tiny patch of land beside the Euphrates River early on Monday, a Reuters journalist said. Smoke rose over the tiny enclave as warplanes and artillery bombarded it.

Another witness said the militants had earlier mounted a counter attack. "Several positions captured and an ammunition storage has been blown up," said Mustafa Bali, a spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia, on Twitter late on Sunday.

The enclave resembles an encampment, filled with stationary vehicles and rough shelters with blankets or tarpaulins that could be seen flapping in the wind during a lull in fighting as people walked among them.

Backed by air power and special forces from a US-led coalition, the SDF has pushed Daesh from almost the entire northeastern corner of Syria, defeating it in Raqqa in 2017 and driving it to its last enclave at Baghouz last year. But while its defeat at Baghouz will end its control of populated land in the third of Syria and Iraq that it captured in 2014, the group will remain a threat, regional and Western officials say.

The SDF has waged a staggered assault on the enclave, pausing for long periods over recent weeks to allow surrendering fighters, their families and other civilians to pour out.

Since Jan. 9, more than 60,000 people have left the enclave, about half of them surrendering Daesh supporters including some 5,000 fighters, the SDF said on Sunday.

People leaving the area have spoken of harsh conditions inside, under coalition bombardment and with supplies of food so scarce some resorted to eating grass.

Last month, the SDF said it had found a mass grave in an area it captured. Still, many of those who left Baghouz have vowed their allegiance to the militant group, which last week put out a propaganda film from inside the enclave calling on its supporters to keep faith.

Suicide attacks on Friday targeted families of Daesh fighters attempting to leave the enclave and surrender, killing six people, the SDF said.

Late on Sunday, the Kurdish Ronahi TV station aired footage showing a renewed assault on the enclave, with fires seen to be raging inside and tracer fire and rockets zooming into the tiny area.

The SDF and the coalition say the Daesh fighters inside Baghouz are among the group's most hardened foreign fighters, though Western countries believe its leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, has left the area.



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US-backed SDF says assault on Daesh enclave is as good as overSDF to resume attack on Daesh enclave if nobody else emerges by Saturday afternoon

[Two Iraqi troops killed in rare clashes with PKK: army](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1552900583567794900

Mon, 2019-03-18 09:15

BAGHDAD: Two Iraqi soldiers were killed in rare clashes Sunday with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the north of the country where the group has bases, the army said overnight.

The PKK, seen as a “terrorist” group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union, has waged an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984.

It has rear bases in the Qandil mountain area of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region.

An Iraqi military statement said PKK fighters "attacked an army checkpoint in the (northern) Nineveh province... (and) two soldiers were killed" around 100 kilometers west of Mosul near the Syria border.

Five PKK members were wounded in the clashes which erupted when an Iraqi soldier manning the checkpoint asked the group for a permit, usually issued by Iraqi security forces, which would allow them to go across.

"It is the first time that we have confrontations of this scale in the region," Mohammad Khalil, the mayor of the nearby city of Sinjar, told AFP. The PKK deployment in northern Iraq has been a constant source of tension between Baghdad and Ankara, with Turkey pressing Iraq to play a bigger role in fighting the group.

Earlier this month Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said his country would carry out a joint operation with Iran against the PKK.

Soylu did not specify which PKK bases the planned operation would target but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has previously said it would be against militant hideouts in Iraq.

Like Turkey, Iran has for decades fought the PKK affiliate, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), which also has rear bases in neighboring Iraq. The Turkish military has often bombed PKK bases in Iraq's mountainous regions.

In January, one person was killed when Turkish troops opened fire at Iraqi Kurds who stormed a Turkish army position in northwestern Iraq to protest the deaths of four civilians in alleged Turkish bombardment.

Baghdad summoned the Turkish ambassador while Ankara accused the PKK of having provoked the incident.

US-backed Kurdish fighters are leading the battle against the Daesh group in Syria.



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