

Russian army says 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home

Author:

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Sat, 2018-11-17 (All day)

MOSCOW: The Russian military said nearly 270,000 Syrian refugees have returned home in recent months, a fraction of the estimated 5.6 million Syrians who have fanned out across the world fleeing the seven-year conflict. Moscow and the government in Damascus have been encouraging refugees to repatriate, arguing that the violence has subsided. Russia launched military operations to help Syrian President Bashar Assad in 2015, changing the tide of the war in his favor.

Western governments have, however, argued that it's too early to encourage return. Rights groups and the UN fear refugees would face persecution returning to government-controlled areas in the absence of a comprehensive political agreement.

Col. Gen. Mikhail Mizintsev of the Russian Defense Ministry told reporters Friday that nearly 6,000 people have returned to Syria in the last week alone, according to data collected by Russia.

He said they are seeing large waves of refugees returning home.

The conflict has caused nearly half of Syria's population to be displaced, with an estimated 6 million internally displaced and 5.6 million fleeing to neighboring countries and Europe, and registering with the United Nations Refugee Agency.

Russia has negotiated local cease-fires that have greatly reduced the fighting, but the causes of the conflict have not been addressed. The Syrian government has regained control of nearly 60 percent of Syrian territory. But armed opposition, some backed by Turkey, and Daesh militants remain holed up in areas in the north and south of the country.

The violence has not completely stopped.

On Friday, the UN Children agency UNICEF said the first nine months of 2018 saw the highest number of children killed since the conflict began in 2011, putting it at 870 till September.

"These are only verified cases, with actual numbers likely to be much higher," UNICEF said in a statement Friday.

The agency said it is alarmed by recent reports of the killing of up to 30 children in the last IS-held pocket in eastern Syria where the U.S-led coalition and its local allies, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have been waging an offensive for over two months.

UNICEF didn't say how the children were killed, but reports by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights – the Britain-based group monitoring the war – said more than 30 children were killed last weekend in coalition airstrikes on Shafaa village held by the extremists. The coalition says it checks reports of civilian casualties, describing its airstrikes mostly as targeting IS installations or posts.



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Assad calls on Syria's Druze minority to do military service Ankara's handling of EU programs for Syrian refugees under scrutiny

Six convicted for 2016 Istanbul airport attack that killed 45

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Fri, 2018-11-16 (All day)

ISTANBUL: A court in Istanbul convicted six people and sentenced them to life in prison for involvement in an extremist attack at Istanbul's main airport that killed 45 people and was blamed on Daesh, Turkey's state-run news agency reported Friday.

The six were convicted of premediated homicide and contravening the Turkish Constitution in the 2016 attack that also injured 163, the Anadolu Agency said. Twenty-six other defendants were acquitted of all charges.

On June 28, 2016, three suspected militants armed with automatic weapons stormed Ataturk International Airport and opened fire. They eventually detonated suicide vests that killed them as well as more airport visitors. The attack was one of several in Turkey blamed on Daesh extremists.

The attackers were identified as Vadim Osmanov and Rakhim Bulgarov, while the third man's name remains unknown.

A total of 46 defendants were on trial for the attack, including Russian, Algerian, Tunisian, Egyptian, Syrian and Turkish citizens. Six were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to 12 years for membership in a terror group, Anadolu said.

Others were convicted of aiding a terror group or fraud. Four defendants remain at large.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but Turkish authorities blamed it on Daesh.



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Erdogan opens new Istanbul Airport, planned to be world's largest Turkey jails 24 Istanbul airport workers pending trial after protests

Arab coalition in Yemen facilitates UN and aid agencies access

Fri, 2018-11-16 16:34

JEDDAH: The Arab coalition fighting the Houthi militia in Yemen said on Friday it is continuing to provide facilities and permits for UN and aid agencies operating in the country.

The coalition is supporting pro-government forces fight the Iran-backed militants in the battle for the country's main port of Hodeidah. Fighting in the Houthi-held city, which is a key supply point for aid, intensified this month.

The coalition said 24 permits had been issued to the Red Cross, five to Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), and three to King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSRelief).

The coalition added that 157 orders to provide movement permits for humanitarian and relief organizations inside Yemen had been made during the last 72 hours.

The coalition said the Houthis continues to violate international law and deliberately obstructs the work of relief organizations in the country.



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Al-Jubeir: Saudi-led coalition 'working with UN to end Yemen conflict' Key officials meet in Riyadh to discuss economic crisis in Yemen

US envoy: Fight against Daesh in last Syria stronghold may end soon

Thu, 2018-11-15 22:03

WASHINGTON: The administration of US President Donald Trump hopes that the US-backed fight against Daesh in its last foothold in northeastern Syria will end within months but American forces will remain to ensure the "enduring defeat" of the militant group, a top US diplomat said on Wednesday.

Ambassador James Jeffrey, the US special representative for Syrian engagement, said the US believes the way forward in Syria includes defeating

Daesh, reinvigorating the political process and winding down the long-running civil war.

Toward that end, he said, the US hopes to see the formation of a committee before the end of the year to work on a new constitution for Syria as agreed by the leaders of Russia, Germany, France and Turkey during their meeting in Istanbul in October.

He said US forces would remain in place after the coalition forces prevail over Daesh military units to ensure the group does not "regenerate itself."

"The enduring defeat means not simply smashing the last of Daesh's (Daesh) conventional military units holding terrain, but ensuring that Daesh doesn't immediately come back in sleeper cells, come back as an insurgent movement," Jeffrey said.

Washington also wants the withdrawal of Iranian military forces from Syria once the underlying causes of the conflict have been resolved, he said, noting that Iran's continued military presence would represent a threat to US partners in the region.

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Russia's Foreign Ministry said the process of separating radical militants from moderate opposition groups in the demilitarised zone in Idlib region had not yet been successfully achieved.

Jeffrey said the final ground combat is along the Euphrates River and is being led by Syrian Democratic Forces assisted by US military personnel.

"The fight is continuing and we hope that it will be over in a few months and that will be the last of Daesh's terrain that it holds in a quasi-conventional way," he said.

Jeffrey said convening a committee under UN auspices to begin work on a new Syrian constitution was a "critical step" toward advancing the political process.

He said the US would hold Russia to account to use its influence to bring the regime of its ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad, to the negotiating table.

"Our goal, which again was supported by Russia, France, Germany and Turkey

and agreed in the Oct. 27 Istanbul communique, is to establish this constitutional committee by the end of the year," he said.

Jeffrey said getting Iranian forces out of Syria, where they back Assad's rule, was not a US military goal but should be an outcome of the process to end the civil war and the only way to achieve lasting peace.

He said newly reinstated US sanctions against Iran would encourage Tehran to scale back its presence in Syria.



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Assad calls on Syria's Druze minority to do military service 'Broken Dinners, Postponed Kisses' tells heart-wrenching story of Syria's lost artists

[Netanyahu faces snap election calls after defense minister quits](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Thu, 2018-11-15 16:36

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faced calls on Thursday from his coalition partners to hold an early election, a day after the defense minister's resignation left the government with a razor-thin majority.

Avigdor Lieberman quit on Wednesday over what he described as the government's too-soft policy on cross-border violence with Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

The loss of the five seats of Lieberman's Israel Beitenu faction leaves Netanyahu with control of just 61 of the 120 seats in parliament, raising the prospect that a scheduled November 2019 election would be brought forward. Lieberman's resignation takes effect 48 hours after being handed in, which he did early on Thursday. Each coalition partner will then have the power to bring down the government.

To avert a crisis, Netanyahu has been holding talks with ministers in an effort to stabilize the government.

Israel's Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, who heads the centrist Kulanu party, said he told Netanyahu in their meeting that the responsible step to take would be to establish a new and stable government.

"The best thing for Israel's citizens and economy is to hold an election as soon as possible," Kahlon said in a statement. His call was echoed by Interior Minister Aryeh Deri who heads the ultra-Orthodox Shas faction. Adding to the pressure, Israel's Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who heads the far-right Jewish Home party, has demanded the defense brief be given to him.

Both Lieberman and Bennett, who compete with Netanyahu's Likud for right-wing voters, have spoken in favor of harsh Israeli military action against Gaza's dominant Hamas Islamists.

Israel has fought three wars in Gaza since Hamas took over the enclave in 2007.

"I asked the prime minister yesterday to appoint me defense minister to fulfil one goal only – that Israel start winning again," Bennett said at a conference near Tel Aviv.

Jewish Home said on Wednesday that without the defense brief, there would be no point in keeping the government together.

However Bennett did not repeat this in his remarks on Thursday nor did he render an explicit ultimatum to Netanyahu, with whom he is due to meet on Friday.

It was unclear whether Netanyahu would opt for an early election.

Netanyahu is under investigation for corruption, and speculation has been rife that he may bring the ballot forward in order to win a renewed mandate before Israel's attorney-general decides whether to indict him.

A poll published on Wednesday by Israel's Hadashot television news showed Likud falling by one seat from 30 to 29 after months of surveys that have shown it gaining power. Only 17 percent of respondents were happy with Netanyahu's Gaza policy.



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