

Lebanese security forces warn of rise in kidnappings for ransom

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's security forces have warned citizens and residents that there has been a rise in kidnappings in the country, with perpetrators seeking large sums of money for the safe return of their victims.

The General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces, or ISF, said that these gangs have been using social media to lure their victims, often through ads on TikTok, claiming they can help with emigration applications.

The gangs are mostly active in the Baalbek-Hermel area and on the Lebanese-Syrian border, but also operate deep in Syrian territory.

A security source told Arab News that between Jan. 1 and April 20, the security services in Lebanon recorded 53 cases of kidnapping in Lebanon.

A few days ago, the Lebanese army's intelligence officers managed to liberate local businessman Akram Jomaa seven hours after he was kidnapped in the town of Lala in the western Bekaa.

The kidnapers had fled with him to the Baalbek-Hermel area in the northern part of Bekaa and tried to sell him to another gang.

They demanded that his family pay a ransom for his return, but he was eventually released between the towns of Dar Al-Waseah and Bouday, in the vicinity of Baalbek.

The army's intelligence officers also managed to free Sadiq Roli, an Egyptian national working for the Al-Sabbah Media Corporation, after he had been detained by his kidnapers for about a month and a half.

On April 16, unidentified gunmen intercepted a car transporting Roli and crew members of a TV company filming a series in Baalbek, near the town of Brital on the Baalbek-Hermel road.

They fired at the car to stop, and kidnapped Roli, while the other passenger managed to escape. The kidnapers demanded a ransom of more than \$1 million in exchange for his release but at midnight on Tuesday, Roli's kidnapers released him in Baalbek.

Hassan Atoui, 32, was kidnapped by two Syrian men who sold him to a gang for LBP3 million (\$1,975.50).

Atoui was kidnapped in early April in the town of Nabatiyeh, south of Lebanon, after returning home from working in an African country.

Atoui had communicated via social media with a travel agency based in the Hermel region, which had offered to process a visa to the US in exchange for

a sum of money.

He agreed to meet the person who claimed he was running the agency, but was subsequently ambushed by unknown persons who took him to the Baalbek-Hermel area where they sold him to another gang. They also stole the money he had in his possession.

The new gang demanded his relatives pay a ransom of \$25,000 in exchange for his release, and sent his family video footage of him being beaten up.

The family's attorney, Ashraf Al-Moussawi, told Arab News: "The Baalbek-Hermel region is witnessing an unprecedented state of security chaos."

"There are organized gangs that include fugitives and others that have been formed recently, and find it easy to earn money through kidnappings, in the absence of (security provided by the) state."

"I have noticed that many gangs are now using women, mostly related to gang members, whom they train ... to lure victims and blackmail them."

"The security services know the members of these gangs by name ... some of them have no previous arrest warrants against them, which means that they are new to the world of kidnapping and crime, but are making a lot of money through this."

Despite the successful release of some victims, no kidnappers have yet been arrested, with the exception of three women suspected of being involved in Jomaa's kidnapping.

The security source noted: "Some of these kidnapping schemes are clever, but what is most dangerous, is that these gangs gather a lot of information about their victims, and have many accomplices helping them in various regions."

"The security services know the members of these gangs by name but cannot arrest them because they are hiding inside Syrian territory (from where they) are running their operations."

The source said Roli was taken into Syrian territory, and Jomaa would have ended up there as well.

Meanwhile, the source said Lebanese citizen George Mufrej, who was the first person to be kidnapped by these gangs, while he was traveling on the road to Beirut airport, was transferred by his kidnappers to Syrian territory and is still missing.

The border areas in the Hermel region with Syria are not subject to state control, as illegal crossings for smuggling abound, along with those controlled by Hezbollah, which have multiplied since the war began in Syria.

The source said that the Lebanese security services have been placing pressure on the families of the kidnappers to force their sons to comply.

"We need to use the same methods they are using, perhaps it would help in

freeing the kidnappees,” said the source.

“Roli and Jomaa have been released thanks to this method; we detained the mothers of the kidnappees, raided their homes, and forced the families to contact them and tell them to let the kidnappees go,” said the source.

“The kidnappees did not like the taste of their own medicine and have been threatening the army intelligence official in the area, Col. Mohammed Al-Amin,” he explained.

The source estimated the age of the kidnappees to range between 25 and 35 years of age.

“These people will one day have to come back from Syria to their homes in the Al-Sharwana neighborhood in Baalbek and Dar Al-Waseah. Some are from the Jaafar, Zeaiter, Mardi, and Saab families, and we will be waiting for them when they return.”

The source noted that they have cooperated with the Syrian army where necessary.

“We will tirelessly continue pressuring these gangs. This is the only way to get to them and curb their crimes,” said the source.

“We are doing the best we can with the available capabilities; stopping kidnappees is a priority but we have a million tasks ... every day, and fighting terrorism is one of them.”



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Extortion, kidnappings on rise in crisis-hit LebanonLebanese border town sounds alarm over Syrian 'takeover'

[UN Yemen envoy seeks to rescue truce, resume flights from Sanaa airport](#)

Thu, 2022-04-28 21:11

AL-MUKALLA: UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg said on Thursday that he is working hard to salvage the two-month truce and resume commercial flights from Houthi-controlled Sanaa amid new reports of dozens of violations of the truce across the country.

Grundberg said that the Houthis and the Yemeni government told him again that they would stop hostilities during the truce and discuss challenges to resuming commercial flights from Sanaa, urging both sides to stick to their commitments.

"The parties have reiterated their commitment to upholding the truce. We are working tirelessly to help them identify solutions to resume flights from Sanaa," the UN envoy said in a statement, vowing to keep pressure on the parties till they open roads in Taiz and the other provinces.

"We also continue pushing for progress on opening roads in Taiz and other governorates," said the envoy. "I have called on the parties to work constructively and in good faith to prioritize the interests of Yemeni civilians."

The UN-brokered truce came into effect on April 2 as warring factions agreed to stop fighting on all fronts, mainly outside the central city of Marib, open roads in the provinces, resume commercial flights from Sanaa airport and allow fuel ships to enter Hodeidah seaport.

The truce received a heavy blow on Sunday when the first commercial flight from Sanaa airport was postponed as the Houthis insisted on adding dozens of passengers with unofficial passports.

The Yemeni government on Wednesday proposed opening a new passport office in Sanaa to help people in Houthi-controlled areas get passports and to end the

impasse over the departure of flights from Sanaa airport.

Hundreds of violations by the Houthis, including the deployment of military forces, tanks and heavy artillery outside Marib, have also threatened to torpedo the truce.

Yemen's army said that the Houthis violated the truce 74 times in Taiz, Hajjah, Marib, Hodeidah and Jouf on Tuesday, accusing the Houthis of sending more military reinforcements to flashpoint sites in Marib, Hodeidah and Hajjah.

On Thursday, the government's Joint Forces announced unilaterally opening the Al-Jarahi-Hays road in Hodeidah province under the UN-brokered truce, urging the Houthis to open the road from their side.

The current raging conflict in Yemen began in late 2014 when the Iran-backed Houthis militarily seized power in the country and expanded across the country.

The war has killed tens of thousands of people and caused the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the UN.



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UN special envoy for Yemen condemns Houthi attacks on UAE
Houthis snub new UN envoy for Yemen, president welcomes appointment

[UN requests international support for Palestinian rights groups falsely labeled 'terrorists' by Israel](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-04-28 18:39

RAMALLAH: Officials at the United Nations have urged the international community to acknowledge the lack of evidence against the six Palestinian human rights organizations that Israel sanctioned and designated as "terrorist groups" in October 2021, and called on governments worldwide to resume funding those organizations.

The six groups are Al-Haq; Addameer Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association; Defense for Children International – Palestine; Bisan Center for Research and Development; the Union of Palestinian Women's Committees; and the Union of Agricultural Work Committees.

The officials criticized Israel for failing to provide any credible evidence against the organizations after banning them. They also expressed concern that Israel is abusing anti-terror laws to target and persecute Palestinian human rights and civil society organizations.

Shawan Jabarin, director of Ramallah-based Al-Haq, called the appeal against the ban "an important message from professional bodies that enjoy international respect. Although it is not binding, it reveals the falsehood of the Israeli occupation narrative."

He told Arab News that Israel's decision was political, not legal, and that countries' response to it was determined by their relationship with Israel.

Jabarin believes that Israel is angered by the activities of Palestinian civil rights groups, including Al-Haq, which he said confronts Israel at international forums and exposes the crimes committed by the Israeli military and politicians against the Palestinians, including war crimes punishable under international law.

"It was easier for Israel to make a political decision and consider us a terrorist organization after it tried for 15 years to dry up our financial resources, attack our computers, and put pressure on our funders to stop their support," said Jabarin.

Palestinian human rights institutions, including Al-Haq, played an essential role in preparing cases for the International Criminal Court to prosecute Israeli war crimes.

Al-Haq pursued foreign companies that invested in Israeli settlements and forced them to withdraw those investments, which they were told were in violation of international law.

Ghassan Al-Khatib, a Palestinian political analyst, told Arab News: "Israel has a problem with the work of Palestinian human rights institutions because they have recently succeeded in embarrassing Israel internationally over the issues of arresting children and torture. (It wants to) silence these voices that (turn) international public opinion against it."

Al-Khatib said the harassment and persecution of these organizations has given their work and activities greater credibility internationally, especially after Israel failed to deliver on its promise to provide evidence linking the organizations to terrorism.

Sahar Francis, director of Addameer Prisoners' Support and Human Rights Association, which defends jailed Palestinians, told Arab News: "At first, Israel claimed that it had a secret file that proves the six institutions' relationship with terrorism, but the world told Israel that a secret file cannot be used against human rights institutions and that evidence must be presented.

"We call on countries that have stopped supporting Palestinian institutions due to false Israeli accusations to resume support," he continued.

Francis claimed that most countries have continued supporting the six institutions, except for those in the European Union.



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US congresswoman slams Israel for labeling human rights groups as terrorists
UN experts denounce Israeli branding of Palestinian rights groups as terrorists

[Iran executions see 'alarming rise' in 2021: report](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2022-04-28 18:48

PARIS: Executions in Iran rose by 25 percent in 2021, a report by two leading

NGOs said Thursday, expressing alarm over a surge in the numbers executed for drug offenses and also the hanging of at least 17 women.

The rate of executions in Iran also accelerated after the June election of hard-line former judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi to the presidency, said the report by Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) and France's Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM).

The report urged world powers negotiating with Iran on reviving the deal on its nuclear program to put use of capital punishment in the Islamic republic – which executes more people annually than any nation other than China – at the center of the talks.

At least 333 people were executed in 2021, a 25-percent increase compared to 267 in 2020, said the report, based on official media but also sources inside Iran.

Meanwhile, at least 126 executions were for drug-related charges, five times higher than 2020's figure of 25.

This marked a major reversal of a trend of a decline in drug-related executions since Iran in 2017 adopted amendments to its anti-narcotics law in the face of international pressure.

Over 80 percent of executions were not officially announced, including all those for drug-related offenses, it said.

The report "reveals an increase in the number of executions, an alarming rise in the implementation of death sentences for drug offenses and an ongoing lack of transparency," the NGOs said.

IHR director Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam expressed concern that there was "less scrutiny" on Iran's rights record as powers focused on bringing the nuclear negotiations to a positive conclusion.

"There will be no sustainable (deal)... unless the situation of human rights in general and the death penalty in particular, are central parts of the negotiations," he said.

The report said at least 17 women were executed in 2021, compared to 9 in 2020. Twelve were sentenced for murder and five on drug-related charges.

There has been growing concern over the numbers of women executed on charges of murdering a husband or relative who activists believe may have been abusive.

It noted the case of one woman, Zahra Esmaili, who shot her husband dead in 2017. It said she was executed in February 2021 and may have had a heart attack before being hanged after watching others suffer the same fate before her.

In another case, Maryam Karimi was convicted for the murder of her husband and was hanged in March 2021, with her daughter personally carrying out the execution by kicking away the stool as is allowed under Iranian law.

The report also expressed concern that the execution of ethnic minorities also continued to rise in 2021, accounting for a disproportionately large number of those hanged.

Prisoners from the Baluch minority accounted for 21 percent of all executions in 2021, although they only represent 2-6 percent of Iran's population, it said.

Most prisoners executed for security-related charges belonged to the ethnic Arab, Baluch and Kurdish minorities, it added.

"We are alarmed at the disproportionate number of ethnic minority executions as evidenced in this report," said ECPM Director Raphael Chenuil-Hazan.

In one welcome development, the report said that there were no public executions in Iran in 2021 for the first time in a decade but expressed concern they could start again.

“A society routinely exposed to such organized violence has accepted the death penalty as a legal solution, and the death penalty has consequently become a tool of repression in the government’s hands,” the Iranian director Mohammad Rasoulof, whose films on the impact of the death penalty in Iran have won international prizes, wrote in a preface to the report.



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Iranian accused of role in mass executions to face trial in Sweden

Demand for qidra increases during Ramadan in Palestine

Author:

Thu, 2022-04-28 00:57

HEBRON: A dozen men are standing and waiting at the door of Khalil Al-Rahman bakery, a famous shop that sells qidra in Hebron, to receive their perfectly prepared traditional, delectable dish.

Qidra is the most important meal of the feast served to friends and relatives at all important occasions; it is present at weddings, Ramadan and other special occasions. It is one of the most important and oldest traditional dishes from Hebron that has been passed down from one generation to another.

Saqr Abu Sunaina, a cook at Khalil Al-Rahman bakery, said: "Friday is the day of qidra. Dozens of families do not cook in their homes but rather bring meat or chicken, and we prepare the qidra for them, so they take it after their Friday prayers to their homes and on their picnics."

The restaurant is responsible for sourcing other ingredients like rice and spices such as salt, turmeric and ghee. The dish is cooked in an oven made of salt, sand and white dirt, which is not easy to make or available in homes.

Abu Sunaina said: "The demand for qidra increases in the month of Ramadan as everyone is exhausted and tired because of fasting so they are looking for ready and delicious food, and qidra is the solution, and all they have to do is bring meat or chicken only."

The cook said that most people only cooked soup in their homes during Ramadan, and for rich food they preferred to have it prepared from outside.

Among those waiting for qidra in front of the bakery was 53-year-old Muhammad Al-Natsheh. "I am here waiting for two qidra dishes, one with meat and one with chicken, for Ramadan dinner as I am inviting about 30 of my brothers, sisters and their children in."

Although qidra is a traditional food from Hebron, people living in other Palestinian areas have different methods of preparing it.

There are many stories surrounding the origin of qidra in Hebron. Some attribute it to the Qasrawi family while others say it came from the Abu Sunaina family, two of the oldest families in Hebron. Some sources also attribute its origins to the Ottomans.



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Demand for tasty, tangy pickles increases during Ramadan in Palestine