

Syrian war criminals will face justice 'sooner or later, at home or abroad'

Fri, 2022-01-14 00:25

NEW YORK: "This conviction has put state authorities on notice: no matter where you are or how senior you may be, if you perpetrate torture or other serious human rights violations you will be held accountable, sooner or later, at home or abroad."

The warning came from Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, after the "historic" conviction by a German court of a former senior intelligence official for the Syrian regime, who was jailed on Thursday for life for crimes against humanity.

Anwar Raslan, 58, was standing trial in Koblenz on charges of murder, torture, rape and sexual assault, and hostage-taking. He was a supervisor of Eyad Al-Gharib, a junior regime officer sentenced in February last year, also in Koblenz, to four-and-a-half years in prison for aiding and abetting crimes against humanity in Syria.

Al-Gharib was accused of rounding up peaceful anti-government protesters and delivering them to a detention center where he knew they would be tortured. The verdict marked the first time a court outside of Syria had ruled on a case involving state-sponsored torture by members of the Assad regime.

Christoph Heusgen, Germany's permanent representative to the UN when Al-Gharib was convicted, said at the time that the verdict sent a clear message to Assad that "whoever commits such crimes cannot be safe anywhere." He added: "Assad's state has turned the cradle of civilization into a torture chamber."

On Thursday, Bachelet urged other countries to follow Germany's lead by investigating and prosecuting international crimes using established principles of universal and extra-territorial jurisdiction.

She said that Raslan's trial "cast a much-needed, renewed spotlight on the kinds of sickening torture, cruel and truly inhuman treatment – including abject sexual violence – that countless Syrians were subjected to in detention facilities."

She added: "It is a landmark leap forward in the pursuit of truth, justice and reparations for the serious human rights violations perpetrated in Syria over more than a decade."

The verdict serves as a powerful deterrent and will help to prevent future atrocities, Bachelet said as she urged other nations to intensify their efforts to "widen the net of accountability" for those guilty of crimes committed during the Syrian conflict.

"This is a clear example of how national courts can and should fill

accountability gaps for such crimes, wherever they were committed, through fair and independent investigations and trials carried out in line with international human rights laws and standards,” she added.

Bachelet also paid tribute to the Syrian victims, their families and the civil society organizations who have braved “tremendous obstacles” in their persistent calls for justice.

A dozen other criminal and civil cases involving Syrian former government officials and members of other armed groups are in progress in Germany and other countries including Austria, France, Hungary, Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

The Security Council has for years called for those guilty of crimes committed during the Syrian civil war to be held accountable, but has not referred the matter to the International Criminal Court because Syria is not a party to the court’s Rome Statute.



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Syrian war being forgotten in UK as poll shows growing apathy
Political solution ‘only way’ to end Syrian war: Saudi foreign minister

US reiterates concern over Houthi detention of Yemeni staff

Author:

Fri, 2022-01-14 00:03

LONDON: The US reiterated on Thursday its concern over the Iran-backed Houthi militia's continued obstruction of the peace process in Yemen and harassment of American and UN-employed local Yemeni staff.

"If they are serious about peace and upholding international norms, they will release our colleagues immediately," said Samantha Power, administrator of the US Agency for International Development.

The UN Security Council had condemned in the strongest terms the Houthis' seizure and intrusion into a compound that was formerly used to house the US embassy in Sanaa, when dozens of local employees were detained.

Power was speaking a day after US ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield issued a similar statement saying the Houthi militia is continuing these actions despite condemnation from the Security Council.

"The Houthis must immediately cease threats, release unharmed those detained, vacate the compound, return seized US property, and cease their threats against our employees and their families," she said during a Security Council briefing on Yemen on Wednesday.

The Houthis continue to obstruct the peace process and detain and harass US and @UN-employed local Yemeni staff. If they are serious about peace & upholding international norms, they will release our colleagues immediately. <https://t.co/6V28c9A0Ae>

– Samantha Power (@PowerUSAID) [January 13, 2022](#)

UNESCO and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on Dec. 28 said they continued to be deeply concerned for the well-being of two of their staff members who were detained in early November in Sanaa.

No communication from the UN has been possible with the staff members since that time.

"Although the two staff members remain in custody, the UN has not received information about the grounds or legal basis for their detention, or their current status, despite earlier assurances by the Ansar Allah movement (who are also called Houthis) of their immediate release," the two UN bodies said in a joint statement.

"OHCHR and UNESCO recall the privileges and immunities accorded to staff of the UN system under international law, which are essential to the proper discharge of their official functions, and call for the staff members' immediate release without any further delays," they added.



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US senators issue scathing remarks on Houthi militia UN expresses 'great concern' over Houthis' use of Hodeidah ports for warfare

[Controversial tree planting bid nearly topples Israeli government](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 22:47

AMMAN: A controversial tree-planting effort on lands owned by Palestinians in

the Negev area of Israel by the Jewish National Fund has threatened to blow up the razor-thin ruling coalition in Israel.

Jafar Farah, head of the Mossawa (Equality) NGO, told Arab News that the controversy had been brewing for weeks.

Farah said: "Last week, security-protected JNF employees dug up the area of Sawa in the Negev.

"Knesset Member Mansour Abbas, whose list received 40 percent of its vote from Palestinians in the Negev, came to the area and promised the tree planting would stop.

"It didn't, as the JNF came against this Monday. Abbas responded by threatening not to vote in favor of any government laws in protest."

The Israeli coalition needs Abbas's four votes to retain their one-member majority of 61 out of 120 Knesset members.

Farah told Arab News that his organization has three demands.

"We call on the government to recognize the rights of the Palestinian landowners, issue building permits to 36 unrecognized villages where 100,000 Palestinian Citizens of Israel live, and thirdly the JNF should be dissolved."

Botrus Mansour, a Nazareth-based lawyer and political analyst, told Arab News that Abbas needs to show his constituency that he can defend them and their rights.

"The government already approved providing electricity to homes built without a license in Israel. Even though the implementer is right-wing Interior Minister Ayelet Shaked, but the coalition needs to understand the needs of one of its partners. Now he needs to use his power to end the JNF's controversial involvement."

Wadie Abu Nassar, director of the International Center for Consultations, told Arab News that he is not sure of the outcome of the situation in the Negev. Israel's strategy for confiscating land through tree planting has seen the state take control of more than 90 percent of the land. Nassar warned that Israel is seeking more gains.

"MK Mansour appears to have averted temporarily the crisis but it will be interesting to see what happened to the 30 detainees who are in jail now," said Nassar.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel tweeted that "the intent of JNF's 'forestry' is clear: To seize as much land as possible and prevent Bedouin communities from accessing their lands."

Jessica Montell, executive director of the Jerusalem-based Human Rights Organization, Hamoked, tweeted: "Don't be fooled by any green-washing. JNF's mission is to dispossess Arabs/Palestinians."

Ofer Zalzburg, director of the Middle East Program at the Herbert C. Kelman Institute, told Arab News that the disagreement in the Negev is particularly challenging because the issue relates to land ownership and use, therefore evoking national and religious sentiments on both sides.

Moreover, the coalition faces pressures from both ends simultaneously: Right-leaning parties in government are criticized by Likud for betraying settlement ideals; and Raam, – Abbas’s Islamic party – whose electoral base draws heavily on Negev Bedouins, is criticized by the Joint List and the Islamic movement’s Northern Branch for being complicit in Israeli land grabs.

“The coalition seems likely to overcome this and in so doing signal that it can address even differences regarding highly symbolic matters.”



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Israeli police and Bedouin clash in tree-planting protests
Israeli MP faces heat for remarks on settlers

Russian airstrikes in Syria kill 11 Daesh members

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 23:52

BEIRUT: Russian airstrikes in desert areas of eastern Syria have killed 11 suspected members of Daesh, a war monitor reported Thursday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors casualties of the decade-old conflict, said the overnight strikes focused on an area between Palmyra and Al-Sukhna.

Daesh's members "hide in caves in this area," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said.

The strikes killed 11 Daesh suspects and wounded around 20 others, some of them seriously, he said.

Abdel Rahman said he had counted a total of 229 Russian airstrikes against targets in the Syrian desert already this year.

Thursday's strikes were the deadliest of their kind since November, when the Observatory reported 16 killed in terrorists' ranks.

Daesh's self-declared caliphate once stretched across vast parts of Syria and Iraq and administered millions of inhabitants.

A long and deadly military fightback led by Syrian and Iraqi forces with backing from the US and other powers eventually defeated the extremists' proto-state in March 2019. The remnants of Daesh mostly went back to their desert hideouts from which they continue to harass Syrian government and allied forces.

The group is thought to be attempting to secure sources of funding through trafficking and racketeering, prompting observers to warn of an extremist resurgence in the region.



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Syrian, Russian airstrikes in Idlib amount to war crimes, as do extremist attacks – UNFirst Russian airstrikes in three months hit northwest Syria

[Lebanese bus, truck drivers block roads over soaring prices](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-01-13 22:22

BEIRUT: Lebanon's public transport drivers blocked roads on Thursday, paralyzing traffic throughout the country in protest against the manipulation of exchange rates that has left them out of pocket.

A driver in downtown Beirut said: "We can barely afford hospitalization or medicine. We are begging healthcare associations for our rights that the state is supposed to secure for us."

Banks did not open on Thursday, as employees were unable to get to work, while schools and universities were also closed.

In less than a year since the removal of subsidies, the price of a 20-liter canister of gasoline has increased tenfold to almost 400,000 Lebanese pounds (\$264), while the minimum monthly wage of 675,000 pounds has remained unchanged.

Fadi Abou Shakra, a representative of Lebanon's fuel distributors who took part in the protests, said: "Our issue with the state is the rise in the exchange rate. Officials did nothing to control the illegal platforms manipulating the exchange rate. It is not our hobby to block roads and create problems. Today is a day of anger and we'll see what next week brings."

Soldiers and other security forces were deployed to control the situation after disputes broke out between protesters and members of the public trying to use the blocked roads.

The protesters were supported by the head of the General Labor Union, Bechara Al-Asmar, who said the action was "a cry for officials to perform their role and duties toward the people."

The protesters' demands focused on maintaining subsidies on bread, fuel and other basic items, he said, adding that he was disappointed at the small number of people involved in the action.

Several public transport drivers said they were against the protest and would not take part and were not affiliated with the parties that initiated it.

Bassam Tlais, head of the Land Transport Union, said: "Today is directed against the government, which has not fulfilled its promises to support the land transport sector and stop violations. We could not care less about politics or the reasons for the Cabinet's failure to convene."

Political observers said Thursday's protests were linked to the Cabinet impasse caused by ministers from Hezbollah and the Amal Movement boycotting sessions. The labor unions are controlled by unionists loyal to the two parties.

Meanwhile, a huge explosion rocked the Nabatiyeh region at dawn on Thursday.

Lebanon's National News Agency said: "A fire broke out in a private electricity generator. The flames quickly reached a diesel tank belonging to a cafe in Wadi Houmine. The fire spread to neighboring areas and caused the explosion of mines, cluster bombs and old unexploded ordnance from the Israeli aggression in July 2006."

Residents of the towns of Houmine, Roumine and Deir Ez-Zahrani reported fires breaking out in the surrounding forests. Others said members of Hezbollah rushed to the scene of the explosion and cordoned off the area, preventing reporters from getting too close.



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