

HRW slams Iranian crackdown on Khuzestan protests

Author:

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LONDON: Human Rights Watch (HRW) on Friday condemned Iran's violent crackdown on protests in Khuzestan province.

Amnesty International and UN Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet have also expressed condemnation in the past week.

HRW reported hundreds arrested and at least nine deaths, including a child. "Unconfirmed reports indicate the number of deaths and arrests may be higher," it added.

On July 15, massive protests broke out in Khuzestan over water shortages, spearheaded by the province's Arab community demonstrating against government negligence and anti-Arab discrimination.

Iranians in several other provinces have joined in solidarity. Iranian officials have blamed "rioters" for the killing of protesters.

But HRW said: "Videos shared on social media from protests in cities in Khuzestan show security officials shooting firearms and teargas toward protesters."

Karim Dahimi, a London-based Ahwazi human rights activist, told Arab News that the death toll could go higher since many protesters "haven't gone hospital for fear of being arrested and returned home with heavy injuries."

He said Iranian authorities have set conditions for the return of victims' bodies to families, including "protesters' mobile number, information on who they were in contact with, who was with them, and who informed the parents."

Another condition is that the fathers of victims go on camera and claim that "the protesters killed my son, and my son had no involvement in the demonstrations," Dahimi added.

"Some families are under pressure and want to take the bodies, so they've accepted the government's conditions. Other families haven't."

Eight of the protesters killed are Ahwazi Arabs and the ninth is Bakhtiari, Dahimi said. The crackdown on the mass protests is disproportionately impacting Iran's Arab minority.

Shadi Sadr, a lawyer and co-founder of London-based NGO Justice for Iran, tweeted that the hundreds of protesters and activists arrested are "mostly of Arab Ahwazi ethnicity." They have been arrested "in their homes and workplaces," he added.

HRW said Iranian authorities “should immediately and unconditionally release peaceful protesters, provide information about deaths, and allow an independent international investigation into security agencies’ alleged use of lethal force. All those responsible for abuses should be held to account.”



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US to hit Iran with more sanctions for missile, drone program
One killed in Iran water shortage protests: state media

[Foreign fighters in Libya must be held accountable for rights abuses, say UN experts](#)

Fri, 2021-07-30 21:07

NEW YORK: Human rights abuses committed by foreign mercenaries and private contractors in Libya must be investigated and the perpetrators held accountable, UN experts said on Friday.

The departure of foreign fighters from the country is a “vital precondition” for the peaceful staging of elections scheduled for December, they added.

The UN estimates there are more than 20,000 foreign fighters seeking to profit from the conflict in Libya, the majority of them from Syria, Turkey, Chad and Sudan.

The members of the UN Security Council have agreed that they must be repatriated. However two of the council’s permanent members, the US and UK, accuse another, Russia, of being responsible for some of the foreign fighters. In particular they point to the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-backed private-security firm that UN experts say is involved in the fighting in Libya.

Moscow has repeatedly denied any role on the country’s battlefields. Jelena Aparac, chair of the UN working group on the use of mercenaries, said that well-armed private contractors from Russia, Syria, Sudan and Chad threaten the security and stability not only of Libya but also other countries in the region.

“Nine months after the ceasefire agreement calling for withdrawal of foreign forces and mercenaries from Libya, mercenaries and private military and security contractors continue to operate in the country,” she said.

“Their continued recruitment and presence in Libya impedes progress in the peace process and constitutes an obstacle for the upcoming elections.”

The working group’s experts said these mercenaries must leave the country immediately and “there must be an immediate end to the transfer of military weapons and materiel into Libya.”

Aparac appealed to the international community “to take concrete steps” to move the repatriation process forward.

During the UN-facilitated Libyan Political Dialogue Forum, representatives of both sides in the conflict agreed a road map to “credible, inclusive and democratic national elections” that are due to take place on Dec. 24 this year.

If foreign fighters remain in the country at that time, Libyans will not be able to vote in a safe and secure environment, Aparac warned.

Her working group concluded more than a year ago that a reliance on mercenaries since 2019 contributed to the escalation of the conflict in Libya, undermined the peace process, and constituted a breach of the Security Council’s arms embargo on the country. Since then, the experts have repeatedly urged governments to investigate all allegations of violations of human rights and humanitarian law.

“A year on, and looking forward to elections, we remain concerned that any political process aiming to establish sustainable peace has to include a genuine commitment to human rights,” the experts said on Friday.

“There must be real accountability for abuses committed by mercenaries, mercenary-related actors, and private contractors.”

Working groups and special rapporteurs are part of what is known as the special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. They are independent experts and work on a voluntary basis. They are not members of UN staff and are not paid for their work.



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Libya headed back to ‘square one’ of post-Qaddafi turmoil if polls delayed, warns parliament speaker
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[Wildfires sweep Turkey as government](#)

slammed over emergency response

Author:

Fri, 2021-07-30 21:01

ANKARA: Emergency services in Turkey were on Friday desperately battling to contain more than 60 wildfires that had broken out in just one day across 17 provinces.

The raging fires have devastated homes and livelihoods, killed thousands of animals, and destroyed huge tracts of forest, forcing many residents to flee.

At least four people are reported to have died and dozens have been hospitalized as the blazes continued for a fourth consecutive day in the country's Aegean and Mediterranean regions.

And Turkey's civil aviation agency has come under public criticism for its handling of the crisis. Although wildfires during summertime are common in Turkey, this year the fires have reached an unprecedented level.

Turkish Forestry Minister Bekir Pakdemirli said strong winds and hot weather had made it difficult to bring the fires under control and prevent them moving toward settlements.

The mayor of the southern resort town of Marmaris blamed "sabotage" for the fires and said an investigation had been launched. A number of buildings and hotels in tourist zones of Marmaris and Bodrum were evacuated after separate fires.

Countries including Azerbaijan, Russia, Ukraine, and Greece have offered emergency help. Three planes, nine drones, 38 helicopters, 680 firefighting vehicles, and more than 4,000 personnel have been deployed to put out the fires.

Turkey has only three planes available to fight forest fires, but all are leased from Russia for 1.3 million liras (\$154,350) per day.

Alpay Antmen, a lawmaker from the southern Mersin province and a member of the main opposition Republican Peoples' Party (CHP), told Arab News: "We have been monitoring the situation on the ground since the beginning. Fortunately, they contained the fire from reaching the settlements. But this tragic case has shown once again the weakness of state apparatus in such emergency situations."

He, along with other opposition parliamentarians, have been lobbying the Turkish government for a year to upgrade the country's firefighting capacity.

"Nobody replied to our parliamentary inquiries, and we all witnessed the result of this incapacity. The Turkish president has 13 private planes in his possession, but why couldn't they buy one single firefighting plane so far?" Antmen said.

Tolga Ozbek, general coordinator of the aviation sector website kokpit.aero, told Arab News that Turkey had increased its annual water carrying capacity to 148,000 tons this year from 80,000 tons in 2018.

“Fighting wildfires requires an integrated approach, using different types of planes and helicopters based on the geographical conditions. Turkey has been leasing its firefighting helicopters for the last 35 years. This has turned out to be costlier than buying some,” he said.

He pointed out that Turkey needed a permanent fleet of firefighting planes and should allocate a reasonable budget for such emergency situations.

“Whatever you invest in fighting fires, it always falls short because the fires can erupt anywhere anytime. While formulating specific policies in this regard, one should always consider the implications of global warming and the ongoing drought in the country,” Ozbek added.



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[Why ecosystem restoration should be](#)

high on Arab region's agenda

Fri, 2021-07-30 19:44

DUBAI: Even after the passage of some 30 years, Saudi Arabia's environment continues to suffer the effects of the Iraqi invasion and occupation of neighboring Kuwait and its subsequent liberation during the 1991 Gulf War.

The establishment of major encampments for hundreds of thousands of allied troops, military fortifications and roadways, together with the remnants of munitions, including depleted uranium, left over from combat operations, have left deep and lasting scars on the terrain.

But more devastating still was Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's deliberate policy of burning an estimated 700 Kuwaiti oil wells as his forces retreated and the spillage of an estimated 11 million barrels of crude into the Gulf – one of the worst oil spills in history.

Most of this gigantic oil slick came ashore on the Saudi coastline, killing wildlife and devastating fishing communities along an 800 km stretch from the Kuwaiti border to Abu Ali Island and Jubail Industrial City.



An abandoned Iraqi Soviet-made T-62 tank sits in Kuwaiti desert 02 April 1991 as an oil well at the Al-Ahmadi oil field is burning in the background.
(AFP/File Photo)

“Although they removed lots of the oil for reuse, much of it damaged marine fauna and there was air pollution,” Samira Omar, director of the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR), told a recent conference on ecosystem restoration.

“Nearly \$3 billion from the UN Compensation Commission has been invested for restoration and rehabilitation from destruction and burning of oil wells during the Kuwait war.”

Approximately \$1 billion of this was awarded to Saudi Arabia to undertake environmental remediation and restoration activities, overseen by the Kingdom’s General Authority of Meteorology and Environment.

Omar says other states in the region can learn a great deal from the experience of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. “We have great opportunities to collaborate together with the Kingdom in learning from our restoration program,” she told Arab News.

“Since we have a lot of similar environmental problems and conditions, it’s a very good opportunity for scientists from KISR and Saudi Arabia to work together in a regional project or program, whether in marine or land ecosystems.”



Clean-up workers pump oil from a man-made reservoir into waiting trucks 18 March 1991. Oil released by the Iraqi army during the Gulf War continues to drift south in the Arabian Gulf. (AFP/File Photo)

Indeed, with their shared shoreline, whatever happens in Kuwait affects the Kingdom also. Likewise, any environmental restoration program launched by

Saudi Arabia would no doubt benefit neighboring countries, including Iraq, Kuwait and Jordan.

“Any policies issued by these governments to reduce the impact of overgrazing for example, or any demographic changes in land use, will be very useful for the region,” Omar added.

Along with other GCC countries, Saudi Arabia is accelerating action toward the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ahead of the COP26 summit in Glasgow this November.

It has unveiled a National Renewable Energy Program – through which it aspires to meet 50 percent of its domestic energy needs from renewable sources by 2030 – and launched the Saudi Green Initiative, a project to plant 10 billion trees in the country to mitigate its CO2 emissions.

Riyadh has also initiated the Middle East Green Initiative to work with other Arab states to plant an additional 40 billion trees across the region – representing the world’s biggest reforestation program.

INNUMBERS

*** 700+ – Kuwaiti oil wells set on fire during the Gulf War.**

*** \$3bn – War reparations used for Kuwait eco-restoration.**

*** 50%+ – Saudi renewable energy generation by 2030.**

The Kingdom has also pioneered the “circular carbon economy,” an integrated strategy for tackling emissions while enabling economic growth that was endorsed by G20 leaders under last year’s Saudi presidency.

Omar was among a host of experts taking part in a virtual session of SER2021, the 9th World Conference on Ecological Restoration, which took place in June. Participants warned that without a collaborative approach involving regional governments, businesses and civil society groups, environmental degradation would only continue.

The conference coincided with the launch of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. The decade runs from 2021 to 2030, which is also the deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals and the timeline scientists have identified as the last chance to prevent catastrophic climate change.

The UN General Assembly proclaimed the UN Decade following a proposal for action by over 70 countries from all latitudes. It is a rallying cry for the protection and revival of ecosystems all around the world, for the benefit of people and nature, and aims to halt the degradation of ecosystems, and restore them to achieve the global sustainability goals.



Kuwaiti reporter Barak al-Hindi stands on charred ground 12 March 2003 in front of a destroyed oil tank during a visit to the al-Ahmadi oil complex outside Kuwait City, which was destroyed by retreating Iraqi troops as they left Kuwait at the end of the Gulf war in 1991. (AFP/File Photo)

Climate change, overfarming and a slew of other man-made disasters have already taken a devastating toll on Middle Eastern ecosystems, degrading soil quality, polluting waterways, destroying biodiversity and displacing rural and coastal communities.

Vast numbers of fish – one of the Gulf region’s main sources of food – have been killed off by chemical changes in the oceans caused by pollution, rising temperatures and nitrification from the excessive use of fertilizers.

“We need a collective effort at the regional level with rules and regulations on fishing, pollution and waste management,” Omar said.

Plus, with winter temperatures expected to exceed 2.5 degrees above the historical average by the middle of the century – and five degrees higher in the summer months – experts concur that collective action is needed to avert climate catastrophe.

“With sea levels rising, the many islands off the coast of countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are at risk because they have important resources that should be preserved for generations,” Omar said.

“This water rise can also impact the biodiversity of these islands, so a good restoration plan should be considered for them and the coastal zone.”



Boats anchored along the Red Sea coast, in Saudi Arabia, on January 5, 2020.
(AFP/File Photo)

Other challenges to regional ecosystems include urbanization, overgrazing, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification and pollution. These have been particularly pronounced in Jordan.

Moreover, ongoing conflict in the region and the influx of refugees in recent years, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, have placed tremendous strain on soil quality, grazing pastures and food systems.

The situation is similar in Lebanon, a country that has endured years of conflict and which has struggled to provide even the most basic waste collection services.

To address these strains on the environment, while also working to resolve intercommunal conflict, the Lebanon Reforestation Initiative (LRI) has created a raft of educational programs and youth groups that bring local Lebanese and Syrian refugees together to serve a common goal.

“The LRI’s continuum is a perfect tool for approaching restoration in the region,” Maya Nehme, LRI’s director, told the World Conference on Ecological Restoration.

“In a country with political issues like Lebanon, stability and continuity are rare, so getting the concept of repairing ecosystem function into the mindset of a population, such as in Beirut, that’s trying to repair their windows after the blast that devastated their capital, is not easy.”



The Lebanon Reforestation Initiative (LRI) has created a raft of educational programs and youth groups that bring local Lebanese and Syrian refugees together to serve a common goal. (Supplied)

One of its schemes, designed to help communities avoid overgrazing and to prevent pastures being reduced to dry scrub, works with local shepherds to map out areas where their animals can feed, while other fields are left fallow to recover. “New grazing approaches are assisting with fire protection and prevention,” Nehme said.

“Shepherds have become the guardians of the sites. LRI also implements important and highly successful community reforestation programs – working across a wide variety of ecosystems in Lebanon to preserve and restore biodiversity.”

It is activities like these at the local level that will help the Middle East restore its ecosystems. But, in the words of Princess Basma bint Ali of Jordan, founder of Jordan’s Royal Botanical Garden, it is a unified regional strategy that is urgently needed to help prevent further decay.

“Many of the issues we are facing can be addressed with restoration and it is a really vital tool that we can use. Our ecosystems have an intrinsic right to life and to exist,” she told the conference.

“As stewards of the earth, we have a duty to ensure that we manage it, not just for utilitarian purposes, but to hand it over to the next generation. We don’t own it.”

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[Lebanon restricts cafes, beaches to the vaccinated or COVID tested](#)

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BEIRUT: Lebanon is to limit entry to restaurants, cafes, pubs and beaches to people holding COVID-19 vaccine certificates or those who have taken antibodies tests, the tourism ministry said on Friday. Non-vaccinated employees of these establishments would be required to conduct

a PCR test every 72 hours, it added.

The move comes amidst a surge in infections with around 1,104 positive cases registered on Thursday compared to a few hundred a day in previous months. Lebanon's cases peaked when a total lockdown was enforced in January after hospitals became overwhelmed amid a crippling financial crisis, with medicines running low and frequent power cuts.

The country gradually re-opened over the spring.

Lebanon's vaccination drive has been slow with only around 18 percent of the population fully vaccinated.



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