

UK urged to push for aid deliveries to northern Syria

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Sat, 2020-05-02 18:30

LONDON: The UK government has been warned that “unimaginable” and “catastrophic” damage could be caused if cross-border aid is not delivered to people in northern Syria as coronavirus is set to sweep the region.

Labour’s spokesperson for international development, Anna McMorrin MP, urged Downing Street to apply pressure on the UN Security Council to guarantee the delivery of aid, after the council voted in December to close half the official entry points to Syria.

In a letter to UK Secretary of State for International Development Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP, McMorrin wrote: “The omission of UN Security Council support for the renewal of two crossings at Al-Yarubiyah and Al-Ramtha, bordering Iraq and Jordan respectively, in north east Syria is already significantly (hindering) the ability of the UN, partners and humanitarian agencies to continue to provide aid to populations in need.”

She added: “Currently the only way the international community can take action to prepare, prevent and respond to COVID-19 is through cross-border aid ... Global leaders cannot allow the incubation of the virus, which threatens the lives of the most vulnerable and may also jeopardize the health of citizens at home if a second wave stemming from low-income and fragile nations is the result of our inaction.”

At least 4 million people in northern Syria rely on aid brought through the country’s official border crossings, according to the UN.

The World Health Organization recently said fewer than two-thirds of Syria’s hospitals were operational, and around 70 percent of all Syrian medical staff had fled the country, due to the civil war that has ravaged it for the past nine years.

Social distancing for internally displaced Syrians living in camps is all but impossible, while testing for COVID-19 is a hugely challenging enterprise, according to the Red Cross.

Medical and personal protection equipment destined for the embattled north, meanwhile, is regularly held up by the Syrian regime.



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Syria says Israeli helicopters strike targets in southern Syria
Syrian government ends school early for over 4 million students

[Iraq officials: Daesh militants kill 10 in coordinated attack](#)

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By QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA | AP

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Sat, 2020-05-02 12:39

BAGHDAD: Daesh militants killed at least 10 Iraqi militiamen in a coordinated assault overnight near the central city of Samarra, security officials said Saturday.

The attack added to concerns the extremist group that once controlled large areas of the country is staging a comeback.

The military and the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella group of mostly Shiite militias allied with the government, confirmed the attack in separate statements.

It was the deadliest of a series of attacks in recent weeks that come as authorities are grappling with a worsening economic crisis and trying to contain a coronavirus outbreak.

Iraq declared victory over Daesh in December 2017 after a costly three-year campaign. At its height, the group controlled around a third of Iraq and neighboring Syria, which it governed in accordance with a harsh and violent interpretation of Islamic law.

In recent months, remnants of Daesh have exploited security gaps resulting from a territorial dispute between Iraq's central government and the autonomous Kurdish region in the north, as well as the withdrawal of US forces in a planned drawdown.

Prime Minister-designate Mustafa Kadhim, who is expected to present his proposed Cabinet to parliament next week for a vote, expressed his condolences to the families of the killed in a statement on Twitter.

"Their blood will not go in vain," the statement said. "Our security forces will continue to pursue terrorists until we clear our land of its abomination."

Last week a suicide bomber targeted an intelligence office in the northern city of Kirkuk, wounding at least three security forces in the first such attack in months.

The PMF said six of its fighters were killed by direct fire late Friday in the village of Mekeeshfa, south of Tikrit. Another three fighters were killed by a roadside bomb as reinforcements were called in. A 10th militiaman was shot dead in the nearby village of Tal Al-Dahab.

The coordinated attack occurred around 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of the capital, Baghdad.



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Driver who rammed Paris police pledged allegiance to DaeshMozambique admits presence of Daesh fighters for first time

[Sudan moves to criminalize female genital mutilation](#)

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sat, 2020-05-02 13:21

CAIRO: Sudanese officials said Saturday they are working to criminalize the widespread practice of female genital mutilation after the transitional government approved a landmark draft law.

Under the proposed amendment to the criminal code, anyone found guilty of performing the procedure would be sentenced to up to three years in prison, according to a copy obtained by The Associated Press.

The law must still be ratified by a joint meeting of the Cabinet and the sovereign council, which assumed power after last year's overthrow of longtime President Omar Al-Bashir.

Female genital mutilation is a deeply-rooted practice in Sudan and other countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, where it is traditionally seen as a way of curbing female sexual desire in order to reinforce conservative behavior.

A 2014 report by the UN children's agency estimated that 87% of Sudanese women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 have been subjected to the procedure. Most undergo an extreme form known as infibulation, which involves the removal and repositioning of the labia to narrow the vaginal opening. The government's proposal is part of a set of sweeping amendments that would abolish the death penalty for people under the age of 18 and prevent pregnant women from being imprisoned for minor crimes.

Dalia Al-Roubi, a spokeswoman for Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, said the government hopes to convene a meeting with the sovereign council soon to ratify the law. Rajaa Nicola, a member of the sovereign council, said it has yet to be scheduled.

The proposed law has been brought forward by the country's interim government, which includes four female ministers. If passed it would be an achievement for the technocratic leaders who are trying to steer Sudan toward democratic and economic reforms.

However, rights groups warn that the practice remains deeply entrenched in the conservative society and that enforcement could face obstacles. Female genital mutilation has survived in other countries that have criminalized it. It's also unclear whether the country's military leaders, who make up a majority of the sovereign council, will approve the law, which could spark a backlash by powerful Islamist groups that backed Al-Bashir.

"It's a great victory for Sudanese women," said Nahid Gabrellah, director of the Seema center for women's rights, adding that more efforts were needed to raise awareness.

The UN children's agency also welcomed the efforts to outlaw the practice. "This practice is not only a violation of every girl child's rights, it is harmful and has serious consequences for a girl's physical and mental health," said Abdullah Fadil, the agency's representative in Sudan.

"We need to work very hard with the communities to help enforce this law," he said. "The intention is not to criminalize parents."



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Sudan to probe violence against Khartoum protesters UAE sends COVID-19 aid to Sudan

[British student reunites with family in Abu Dhabi amid coronavirus pandemic](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-05-02 15:19

ABU DHABI: A British student reunited with her family after being repatriated from Britain to Abu Dhabi, where she was stuck in the country for one month due to the coronavirus outbreak, state news agency WAM reported. Eilidh Ashton, 19, said she was born in the UAE, where she lives.

“I am very thankful for the government of UAE for bringing me back home to be with my family,” she added.

Her mother Christina Ashton thanked the UAE’s leadership for helping in facilitating the return of her daughter to the country.



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UAE helps return more than 37,000 passengers to their home countries
UAE calls on Libyan parties to commit to political process

[Lebanon signs request for IMF aid](#)

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Fri, 2020-05-01 17:18

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab and Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni have signed a request for aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Diab called it an “historic moment” in the history of Lebanon. “We have taken the first step on the path of saving Lebanon from the deep financial gap and it would be difficult to get out of it without efficient and impactful help,” he said.

Lebanese politicians have traded blame over who is responsible for the country's financial crisis, the worst since its 15-year civil war ended in 1990.

International donors have long demanded that Lebanon institute major economic changes and anti-corruption measures to unlock \$11 billion in pledges made in 2018.

But the country's economic crisis deepened, and the cash-strapped government announced in March it was defaulting on its sovereign debt for the first time.

The request for IMF aid comes as thousands of people lose their jobs and key sectors buckle under the double-whammy of a worsening economic situation and the coronavirus pandemic.

The Lebanese Ministry of Labor said it had received 234 requests between Oct. 17, 2019, and April 30, 2020, to terminate employment contracts.

The figure means 5,012 registered workers have lost their jobs, but it is believed that this number is not realistic and that hundreds of institutions have terminated employment contracts with their employees without informing the ministry.

Acting president of the General Labor Union, Hassan Fakihi, said that more than 75 percent of institutions, especially those in the tourism, industrial, commercial, and transport sectors, had closed because of dire straits.

"More than 60 percent of workers and employees have left their workplaces, while the rest are working in dangerous conditions in hospitals, retail stores, food factories, and transportation," he told Arab News.

"Some of them are receiving half or quarter a salary. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been laid off. Many of them did not even receive compensation in light of the disrupted judiciary. The government has not taken the appropriate, rapid, and transparent measures, and it suspiciously slowed the distribution of planned aid, leaving people to two options: Dying of hunger or allowing the coronavirus epidemic to claim their lives."

Coca-Cola said Thursday that it would permanently shut down in Lebanon and lay off all its employees, the second time it has ceased operations in the country. The first time was during the civil war.

The news followed the prestigious Le Bristol Hotel in Beirut saying that it was closing its doors permanently and laying off its employees.

The worsening situation and the return of the political old guard, despite a new government promising reforms, has led people to resume their protests amid the coronavirus shutdown.

Labor Day, an official holiday in Lebanon, gave activists the chance to reoccupy public squares and restore the tents that security forces had removed to prevent gatherings during the pandemic.

The activists took to Riad Al-Solh and Martyrs' squares in the center of Beirut. They staged a sit-in outside the Banque du Liban on Hamra Street, the Ministry of Labor, and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

They also demonstrated in Aley in Mount Lebanon, in Nabatieh, Tyre, and Rachaya in the south, and in Tripoli in the north. There were chants against corruption and "the officials who looted the country." People waved the Lebanese flag and raised banners on which they wrote their demands.

Activists believe that the reform plan approved by the government on Thursday aims to burden people with the economic collapse while relieving those in power of accountability.

Army units were brought in to prevent riots. Some banks resorted to shielding their glass windows with iron plates to avoid damage after riots in some areas affected branches.

Retired Brig. Gen. George Nader, who is involved in the movement, said they had no confidence in a government of "disguised" advisers. "The economic plan has not addressed any of the main files," he added. "The solution is to recover the stolen money – there is no other solution."

Ján Kubiš, the UN secretary-general's representative in Lebanon, tweeted that peaceful protests were not only a right, they were a "critical necessity" to continue pressing on the government and, at times, reluctant political forces to implement deep structural reforms for a better, just and dignified future for the Lebanese. "They will always have full support of the UN," he added.

According to World Bank estimates, 45 percent of Lebanese people live in poverty, while the proportion of extreme poverty expanded from 8 percent to 20 percent.

Minister of Labor Lamia Yammine promised to follow up on labor protection policy by announcing an emergency plan to address cases of mass layoffs.

Yammine said that 30 percent of institutions in Lebanon were closed, while 20 percent were paying salaries reduced by half.



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Coca-Cola fizzles out in Lebanon with economic downturn
Hezbollah 'a burden' on Lebanon, says former MP Fares Souaid