

Proposed UK law to shut door on historic war crimes cases

Author:

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LONDON: New legislation proposed in the UK could lead to changes in the prosecution of serving and former service personnel, which could hamper efforts to bring those accused of war crimes to justice.

The UK government is seeking to install a five-year limit on prosecutions for alleged crimes committed abroad while on active service, which could only be exempted in "exceptional circumstances."

Among other things, it would render almost impossible any proposed cases against members of the UK's armed forces for crimes supposedly committed while deployed during the occupation of Iraq or the US-led war in Afghanistan.

"This package of legal measures will reduce the unique pressure faced by personnel who perform exceptional feats in incredibly difficult and complex circumstances," said Johnny Mercer, the UK's minister for veteran affairs, who served three tours in Afghanistan with the British Army.

"This important next step has gone further than any other government before to protect military personnel who put their life in jeopardy to protect us."

Peter Glenser QC, a barrister with extensive experience of cases involving UK personnel, said the legislation is being introduced against a backdrop of public sympathy.

"There has been significant public concern over repeated investigations into allegations made against Her Majesty's Forces, sometimes many years after the events complained of have taken place, especially when there has been no new and compelling evidence," he told Arab News.

"Concerns have been expressed over the credibility and reliability of evidence and witness statements that may be decades old, and the reopening of investigations that had already concluded," he added.

"There may be a debate to be had about the length of the time limit, but the erosion of evidence over time presents difficulties. I don't think this will impact international law, which requires a domestic investigation in the first place."

Despite support from swathes of UK society for the new rules, they have still proved controversial, on both sides of the aisle.

Nicholas Mercer, the British Army's chief legal advisor in Iraq during the 2003 invasion, said the move has even caused division within the ranks of the army itself, as it could incentivize human rights abuses and war crimes in

future.

“Discipline and accountability are absolutely essential on the battlefield, and anything which might undermine this must be resisted,” he said.

“Officers are concerned that, not only do the proposals undermine international law, but also potentially encourage other rogue nations to follow suit,” he added.

“The British Army does not need or require any special protection from the law. A professional army complies with the rule of law, rather than circumvents it.”

Nicholas said there are other reasons to oppose the legislation. “If it’s known on the battlefield that British soldiers will not be held to account for crimes they have committed, then enemy combatants might be less inclined to hand themselves over as prisoners,” he added. “It will increase their resolve to fight.”

Cases brought against British soldiers in the UK have been rare, but they have commanded a significant amount of public interest in the past.

The case of Sgt. Alexander Blackman, pseudonymously referred to as “Marine A” during his trial, grabbed headlines in the national press when he was convicted in 2013 of the murder – later reduced to manslaughter on grounds of diminished responsibility – of a wounded Taliban fighter in Afghanistan’s Helmand province in 2011.

Even where no case has been brought, investigations have tended to be prolonged, leading to suggestions that UK personnel have been unfairly treated by the process.

Prominent human rights lawyer Phil Shiner, meanwhile, was struck off as a solicitor in 2017 after a disciplinary tribunal found him guilty of misconduct in pursuing cases against UK service personnel for allegations of wrongdoing – such as torture and mutilation – in Iraq, including knowingly bringing false claims and paying Iraqi middlemen to find people to provide fictitious eyewitness accounts.

At the time, Johnny referred to Shiner as a “modern-day traitor,” while former army chief Lord Richard Dannatt called for him to face criminal prosecution.

Leading UK tabloid The Sun reported Shiner’s case with the headline “Good riddance,” while the Daily Telegraph claimed he “ruined people’s lives.”

Shiner’s defenestration led to the closure of the UK’s Iraq Historic Allegations Team (IHAT) in 2017, as well as Operation Northmoor, which investigated historic allegations from the war in Afghanistan. But despite the scandal, there remains plenty of evidence of wrongdoing in both countries.

The “Marine A” case was just the latest, at the time, in a litany of

allegations made against UK personnel that turned out to be true, including the murder in 2003 of Iraqi hotelier Baha Mousa.

He was apprehended and tortured by British soldiers in the city of Basra, before dying in what an inquest into his death called an “appalling episode of serious gratuitous violence.”

In 2017, a judge ordered the UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) to pay compensation to Abd Ali Hameed Ali Al-Waheed after he was detained and tortured by British soldiers in Iraq in 2007.

Several former soldiers, including in a book co-written by The Sun’s Political Editor Tom Newton Dunn, alleged that the British Army had “relaxed” the rules of engagement to allow the shooting of unarmed civilians suspected of being “dickers” (spotters) running surveillance on them, which, they said, led to the deaths of children and teenagers.

The soldiers were instructed, they said, that they would be protected from prosecution as long as they claimed that they believed their lives were at risk. The shooting of spotters is permitted in international law only when they engage in combat.

A joint investigation by The Times of London and the BBC’s “Panorama” documentary program in November 2019 claimed that the Shiner tribunal had been used as a pretext to close IHAT and Operation Northmoor prematurely.

A senior detective told “Panorama”: “The MoD had no intention of prosecuting any soldier of whatever rank he was unless it was absolutely necessary, and they couldn’t wriggle their way out of it.”

The MoD did not immediately respond to a request from Arab News for comment. The International Criminal Court, meanwhile, is currently conducting a preliminary inquiry into the conduct of British personnel in Iraq suspected of war crimes, with a view to opening a full investigation.



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UN probe highlights Russia, Turkey roles in Syria 'war crimes'

[Egyptians' 'negligence is fueling coronavirus threat'](#)

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CAIRO: Many Egyptians are ignoring strict government measures to combat coronavirus and risk adding to the human toll of the global pandemic through negligence, observers warn.

Amr Hashem, a political analyst at Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, condemned what he called "wrong behavior" and said the government should be firmer "to protect Egyptians from themselves."

The coronavirus pandemic is believed to have killed ten people in the country

and infected nearly 300 others.

Egypt's government has closed schools and universities until the end of March, and suspended flights to and from the country for two weeks from March 19. It has also ordered the closure of coffee shops, restaurants and malls from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. every night for two weeks.

On Saturday, Al-Azhar, the highest religious authority for Muslims, and the Egyptian Ministry of Endowments, as well as Coptic Pope Tawadros, decided simultaneously to close mosques and churches. Friday prayers in mosques were also halted for two weeks.

The measures are in line with additional steps taken by the government to sanitize major streets along with private and public institutions.

"We have seen through social media how many Egyptians are refusing to heed health instructions or avoid public gatherings. They even mass in some places like wedding halls, coffee shops and supermarkets," Hashem said.

"We now see some people smuggling hookahs into cafes. We see them making fun of a virus that is claiming hundreds of lives around the world daily."

Sociology researcher Magda Mustafa said the government's decisions were "a bit late because they gamble on Egyptian behavior."

There are 100 million Egyptians and it is extremely difficult to control the behavior of such a large number of people, she said.

"We said on Thursday last week that the Friday prayer must be canceled in mosques to avoid the spread of the virus, and to follow the decisions taken by Saudi Arabia and other countries," Mustafa said.

"However, our calls were in vain. The minister of endowments himself delivered the Friday prayer sermon before a large number of people. He said in his sermon something to the effect that nobody knows when he will die.

"Why do we take action only after catastrophes happen?" Mustafa asked, predicting a surge in the number of infections in Egypt as a result of mass gatherings during Friday prayers in mosques, in addition to the carelessness by which Egyptians have shown in dealing with the virus.

Dr. George Atteya, a gastroenterologist, said that Egypt's Ministry of Health has been giving advice to people through awareness campaigns in print and broadcast media, and even on the streets.

"However, the problem lies in the people themselves," he said.

Atteya said that Egyptians' behavior is difficult to change in one day. "The issue is all about a virus, a pandemic that is spreading due to negligence and ignoring hygiene."

Social media users shared photos showing large gatherings in market places on Friday along with images of coffee shop owners supposedly closing their doors after 7 p.m. but actually leaving them ajar.

Online comments included calls for authorities to impose a curfew to help reduce the number of viral infections.



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[Yemen speeds up coronavirus awareness drive as vital aid arrives](#)

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AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's government has asked governors to join hands with local NGOs, charities and medical colleges and institutes to spread awareness about coronavirus as vital aid began trickling into the country, Yemen's deputy prime minister said on Saturday.

Salem Al-Khanbashi, who is also the head of government-led emergency committee dealing with the pandemic, said that his government has authorized governors of the Yemeni provinces to take measures to boost people's

awareness about the virus as his government distributes health supplies to health facilities in the provinces liberated from the Iranian-backed Houthi militia.

"They (governors) can also take further decisions such as banning large gatherings. But since the country has not recorded any (coronavirus) cases, we focus our efforts on awareness and preparing health centers," Al-Khanbashi said.

On Saturday, the committee extended the date for school closures to March 29, but did not approve taking more aggressive measures such as imposing curfews in cities.

Yemen has already stopped flights in and out the country, shut down land crossings and intensified screening measures at seaports that are still open for shipments. Al-Khanbashi said that the country has received vital aid from the World Health Organization (WHO) including medical equipment, test kits, hazmat suits, masks and gloves.

The Yemeni government has also reiterated its commitment to transfer salaries of health workers in the Houthi-controlled northern Yemen, but not before receiving guarantees from the international community and the UN envoy to Yemen that the Houthis would not confiscate the money.

"Why would we transfer salaries to Sanaa if the Houthis are going to confiscate them?" Al-Khanbashi asked.

Condemnation

Yemen's government has urged the UN, rights organizations and the international community to pressure Houthis to allow thousands of stranded travelers to return to homes inside the rebel-controlled areas in northern Yemen, saying that Houthi quarantines in Baydha and Dhalae are breeding grounds for diseases. "For those under the Houthi quarantine, Houthis did not provide any masks, gloves or sanitizers; and they kept them cramped together with a severe shortage of both food and water," the Yemen embassy to the US said on Twitter.

At the same time, the UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths has urged the internationally recognized Yemeni government and the Houthis to accelerate the prisoner swap process before the spread of the disease in Yemen.

"Risks posed by COVID-19 make even more urgent the need to release all conflict-related prisoners, as per the parties' obligations under the Prisoner Exchange Agreement. The parties must take all measures to expedite these releases and allow people to return home safely," Griffiths said on Twitter on Friday.

In Aden, the government said in a statement on Saturday that it is committed to the UN call for the immediate and complete release of prisoners.



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UAE shuts beaches, parks, pools, cinemas and gyms over coronavirus concerns
Turkey poised to release thousands of prisoners over coronavirus fears

[UAE shuts beaches, parks, pools, cinemas and gyms over coronavirus concerns](#)

Sat, 2020-03-21 20:53

LONDON: The UAE shut beaches, parks, pools, cinemas and gyms from Sunday for two weeks over coronavirus concerns, Emirates News Agency said on Saturday.

Restaurants and cafes will be allowed to operate for the same period at 20% of capacity, and as long as customers are at least two metres apart, and for

delivery services, subject to review, the Supreme Council for National Security announced.

The UAE reported the first deaths due to the coronavirus in the country on Friday.

The victims were two men – a 78-year old Arab and a 58-year-old Asian, the health ministry said.

Also on Friday, Dubai launched an 11-day disinfection campaign to begin cleaning and sterilising the streets and roads of the emirate, as part of its precautionary measures against the virus.



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Dubai Municipality carries out street sterilisation amid coronavirus outbreak
UAE National Media Council halts distribution of print publications

Turkey's new anti-corona economic package 'unrealistic'

Author:

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ANKARA: As official figures report increasing rates of deaths and confirmed cases linked to the coronavirus, the Turkish government has announced a new package intended to tackle the economic effects of the unprecedented outbreak.

The package, named Turkey's Economic Stability Shield Package, is worth 100 billion liras (\$15.3 billion). It includes provisions for the rescheduling of tax duties, loans and social insurance payments, along with some incentives for Turkish businesses in the country's \$750 billion economy.

In order to stimulate credit expansion, the Credit Guarantee Fund limit has been increased to 50 billion liras from 25 billion liras. The value-added tax on airlines was decreased to 1 percent from 18 percent. Tradesmen's loans held by the state-run Halkbank were delayed for three months.

The measures come at a time when Turkish citizens are advised to stay home as a precaution to curb the spread of the virus.

Social insurance payments retail, iron and steel, logistics, food, automotive, cinema, textile and hotel businesses were postponed for six months. The package also promises to financially support export companies. Economists have criticized the multibillion-euro package in response to the expected slowdown, however, finding it unrealistic considering the extent and speed with which the pandemic is spreading.

Many bankruptcies and payment defaults are expected in Turkey, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises, which could trigger mass unemployment.

Shopping malls throughout the country have recorded a 70 percent decrease in sales over the past week.

Turkey's service industry constitutes about 60 percent of the country's domestic economy.

Oner Guncavdi, professor of economics at Istanbul Technical University, said that the package does not meet the needs of ordinary citizens.

"It instead helps employers in recovering from this crisis," he told Arab News.

"The package may also increase the debt burden because Turkey currently has no financial capabilities to finance this package."

Turkey's unemployment rate reached 13.7 percent in 2019 with a 2.7 percentage point rise from the previous year, mainly because of the recession, the state-run statistical body announced on Friday.

There is a need to ensure income transfer and direct cash injection to households to support demand. Infrastructure megaprojects are no longer needed because there is now an urgent need for public spending in the health sector.

Oner Guncavdi, Professor of economics

COVID-19 is also expected to weigh down economic growth for the rest of 2020 in Turkey. A growth rate of 5.1 percent is expected for the last quarter of 2019 and 0.6 percent for the overall year.

Guncavdi expects a serious rise in unemployment within two months, which would have dramatic repercussions as the shrinkage in economic activity leads to a decrease in domestic demand.

"There is a need to ensure income transfer and direct cash injection to households to support demand. Infrastructure megaprojects are no longer needed because there is now an urgent need for public spending in the health sector," he said.

Some analysts also draw attention to the possible financial problems that Turkey's newly built Istanbul airport and its operating consortium could face following the corona outbreak, which has negatively impacted the tourism and transport sectors.

Credit rating agency Moody's has recently downgraded its forecast for the growth of the Turkish economy in 2020 to 2.5 percent.

According to economist Cuneyt Akman, the coronavirus pandemic caught the Turkish economy at a very bad time as the country is already indebted and its financial resources are especially weak after the 2018 currency crisis.

"This economic stimulus package is employer-friendly. Currently, ordinary citizens don't intend to buy cheap houses or take a cheap holiday ticket, because everybody stays at home. Such incentives are not rational in light of the dynamics on the ground," Akman told Arab News.

Turkey's budget balance posted a deficit of 123.7 billion Turkish liras (\$21.77 billion) last year, and bank credits have provided the government with a key instrument for economic stimulus.

Akman anticipates a wave of dismissal in the following months, which would hit low-income households first.

"During recession periods, employers first prefer to dismiss their workers. If such a practice expands, people will begin feeling unsafe and will avoid spending any money, which would trigger wide-ranging effects. Maybe this will be an occasion to initiate structural reforms in the economy," he said.

The Turkish Central Bank recently announced that the country's short-term external debt stock totaled \$123.6 billion as of end-January.

As the spread of coronavirus continues to crush tourism and hospitality, the two sectors will not be able to support the economy this year. Export-based sectors are also expected to shrink.



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