

Chemical weapons watchdog checking Kurdish allegations in Syria

Author:

AFP

ID:

1571761054739954000

Tue, 2019-10-22 15:40

THE HAGUE: The UN's chemical weapons watchdog said Tuesday it was checking Kurdish allegations that Turkish forces fired non-conventional weapons in northern Syria, but emphasised it had not launched a formal investigation. "OPCW experts are engaged in the process of assessing the credibility of allegations concerning the situation in Northern Syria," the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said in a statement.

The Hague-based body added however that "the OPCW has not launched an investigation" into charges by Kurdish authorities in northeastern Syria that Turkey has used banned weapons such as napalm and white phosphorus munitions since it launched an offensive there on October 9.

Ankara has denied the charges.

OPCW specialists continue to collect information "with regard to any alleged use of chemicals as a weapon," the watchdog group said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has a network of Syrian sources, has said it could not confirm the use of chemical weapons.

Kurdish fighters suffering from burns had reached a hospital in Tal Tamr, near the border town of Ras al-Ain that was bombarded by pro-Turkish forces,, the observatory said.

The use of chemical weapons, including substances similar to napalm and phosphorous has been alleged many times since the Syrian conflict began in 2011.

Kurdish authorities posted images on social media that showed children suffering from burns that a local doctor said might have been caused by chemical substances.

Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar has told reporters that Turkish forces have not resorted to using "chemical weapons."



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[Egypt arrests 22 for planned protest over grisly murder case](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1571759436379821600

Tue, 2019-10-22 15:25

CAIRO: Egypt says it has arrested nearly two dozen people for allegedly trying to incite protests over a grisly murder that's shocked the country. Earlier this month, a teenage boy fatally stabbed another boy who was defending a girl from sexual harassment.

The killing of Mahmoud el-Banna has stunned Egypt. Surveys indicate that a vast majority of Egyptian women feel insecure in the streets.

Egypt's interior ministry says the 22 arrested people intended to provoke a

riot outside a courthouse in the Nile Delta. That's where the murder trial began earlier this week.

The ministry said Tuesday that the arrested men and women are all members of the banned Muslim Brotherhood group.

It says they had "inciting posters and weapons," but didn't specify when or where the arrests took place.



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[Syria's Al-Assad vows support for Kurds against Turkey assault](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1571757291759681900

Tue, 2019-10-22 14:12

DAMASCUS: Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad on Tuesday said the regime would support Kurdish fighters in the northeast of the war-torn country against Turkish soldiers and their Syrian allies.

"We are prepared to support any group carrying out popular resistance against the Turkish aggression," he said in a video shared by the presidency.

"This is not a political decision... We are not taking any political decisions now," he told government troops on the frontline in the province of Idlib.

"It is a constitutional duty and a national duty," he said.

Turkey and its Syrian allies on October 9 launched a cross-border attack against Kurdish fighters in northeastern Syria after an announced US military pullout.

Turkey wants to set up a buffer zone in Syrian soil along the length of its southern frontier to keep Kurdish forces it views as "terrorists" at bay.

Under a US-brokered truce deal announced last week, the Kurds have until late Tuesday to pull out their fighters from a 120-kilometer (70-mile) long strip along the frontier that it has largely overrun during the operation.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have been a key ally of the United States in the battle against Daesh group in Syria, at the cost of 11,000 fighters.

The US pullout has largely been seen as a betrayal of Syria's Kurds, who have spent most of the country's civil war working toward autonomy.

Damascus has previously accused Kurds of treason over their alliance with Washington.

The Turkish attack forced the Kurds to seek aid from the regime and make a deal to deploy Assad's forces in some northeastern areas for the first time in years.

The regime has since deployed in the border town of Kobani as well as the town of Manbij further south, without clashing with Turkish forces.

Al-Assad has repeatedly said he would eventually restore government control over all parts of Syria, driving out rebels and extremists.



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[Two years on, Turkish dissident remains behind bars](#)

Mon, 2019-10-21 23:12

JEDDAH: The situation of many peaceful dissidents who are still in jail in Turkey, like Osman Kavala, who recently completed his second year in pretrial detention, is still criticized by Western countries and human rights defenders.

The solitary confinement of Turkish philanthropist, activist and businessman Kavala is described by many as a "Kafkaesque" experience, as charges brought

in the indictment against him are still without concrete evidence.

Kavala, who was put behind bars over his alleged involvement in Gezi Park protests in summer 2013 to “overthrow the government” by funding and organizing the whole process, had his third hearing on October 8, but the court ruled that he should remain in custody.

“It is not Kavala who has lost his freedom and independence, it is the Turkish judicial system,” his lawyers said in a statement.

In the indictment, Kavala is accused of providing milk, fruit juice and pastries as well as gas masks to protesters.

The fact that he was on the board of the Turkish branch of George Soros’ Open Society Foundation at that time was also a source of suspicion. But he denied that the charity had ever provided financial support for the protests.

The next hearing for the case is set for December 24-25.

Some of his friends shared with Arab News their thoughts and feelings about the lengthy judicial process

“It is hard to put into words how much influence one person can have at changing historical and current perspectives,” Louis Fishman, an assistant professor at City University of New York, told Arab News.

“Kavala is man who has dedicated his life to creating spaces within the Turkish public sphere, where narratives of Armenians, Kurds, and other silenced groups can find a place. This soft-spoken man has contributed greatly to the development of a civil society in Turkey and even after his imprisonment his work is being carried out through multiple non-profit organizations and art galleries,” he added.

Fishman also said that the presence of Kavala was missed, but his legacy continued, and all his friends and supporters were waiting for his release and his return.

Aysen Candas, a Turkish political scientist from Yale University, is another friend of Kavala who took part of the international campaign to raise awareness of his incarceration.

“Osman Kavala’s unlawful imprisonment, the violation of due process at every step of his detainment, bogus charges against him, the ridiculous nature of what is presented as ‘evidence,’ namely illegally tapped phone conversations irrelevant to the charges, the fact that the indictment was submitted one year after Osman was imprisoned ... are all plain facts about his case,” she told Arab News.

According to Candas: “What renders Kavala’s imprisonment politically significant is his relentless defense of the rule of law, human rights, minority protections and his advocacy of implementing the standards of constitutional democracies in Turkey.

“He was a firm, unyielding proponent of norms of rule of law and democracy and minorities, he lent a legitimacy to the political initiatives he was a part of,” she added.

Candas also noted that: “While the activities of Kavala’s cultural association Anadolu Kultur have been highlighted and targeted by the false accusations that are scattered all through the ridiculous indictment against him, his imprisonment is not due to cultural activities but is aiming to attack the political meaning of these cultural activities, such as peaceful coexistence, such as dialogue and public deliberation, such as equal respect.”

Candas thinks Kavala’s imprisonment reflects the new hostage-status of constitutional democracy in Turkey; the negation of not just the democratization efforts since the 1980s, but also of the secular republic, of cosmopolitan modernization, of Turkey’s efforts to become an international, law-abiding member of UN and of all international conventions that Turkey is a part of.

“Osman is also a secular businessman, a member of Turkey’s top business association. His family is from the Balkans and they had arrived in mainland Turkey through the population exchange with Greece, so perhaps the secular identity, of those who established the republic in 1923, is being targeted and criminalized in Osman’s person,” she said.



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of using illegal phosphorus munitions in Syria

Baha'i community fears deportations as Yemen sentence looms

Author:

AFP

ID:

1571689133713248500

Mon, 2019-10-21 19:52

WASHINGTON: The Baha'i community voiced fear Monday that a court under Yemen's Houthi rebels could order the mass expulsion of members of the faith. The community said that an appeals court in Yemen's capital Sanaa, which is controlled by the insurgents, is expected to rule Tuesday on a death sentence handed down on religious grounds to Hamed bin Haydara, a Baha'i detained since 2013.

Citing statements by the prosecutor, the Baha'i International Community said it feared the judge would not only uphold the execution but order the deportation of Baha'is from Yemen.

"By such a ruling, he would target and threaten an entire religious community in Yemen – which wishes for nothing more than to contribute to its nation's progress," Diane Ala'i, a representative of the community to the United Nations, said in a statement.

She warned Baha'is could face "statelessness and expulsion, confiscation of assets and threat of extermination in the country."

Sam Brownback, the US ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, voiced concern about reports that the Houthis were looking to deport the Baha'is or seize their assets.

"We urge them to release arbitrarily detained Baha'is like Hamed bin Haydara and respect religious freedom," he tweeted earlier this month.

Several thousand Baha'is – members of the 19th century faith founded by the Iranian-born Baha'u'llah that calls for unity among religions and equality between men and women – are estimated to live in Yemen.

The Houthis are allied with Iran's Shiite clerical regime, which restricts the rights of Baha'is despite allowing freedom of religion for Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians.



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