

World Food Programme suspends Yemen aid in Houthi-controlled Sanaa

Thu, 2019-06-20 23:08

LONDON: The World Food Programme has begun the partial suspension of aid in areas of Yemen under Houthi control.

The move announced Thursday comes after the UN agency warned this week that the Iran-backed militia was diverting food away from those most in need.

The suspension will start in Sanaa, affecting 850,000 people, WFP said. The city is the former capital of Yemen where the Houthis seized power from the internationally recognized government in 2014, sparking the conflict.

The organization said the decision was taken as a last resort after negotiations stalled to introduce controls to prevent food being diverted away from those who needed it by Houthi officials.

"As in any conflict zone, some individuals seek to profit by preying on the vulnerable and diverting food away from where it is most needed," the WFP said.

"WFP has been seeking the support of the Sana'a-based authorities to introduce a biometric registration system that would prevent diversion and protect the Yemeni families we serve, ensuring food reaches those who need it most.

"Unfortunately, we are yet to reach agreement."

The agency said it will maintain support in the city for malnourished children, pregnant women and nursing mothers.

David Beasley, the WFP's executive director, warned the Houthis Monday that aid would be suspended unless the militants immediately implement registration and monitoring agreements.

He said up to 60 percent of beneficiaries at seven centers in Sanaa "confirmed they had not received any assistance."

"Children are dying right now because of this", Beasley told the UN Security Council.

More than four years of conflict in Yemen have created what the UN describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The WFP feeds more than 10 million people a month across the country.



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UN food chief accuses Houthis of diverting Yemen aid for profit
Arab Parliament classifies Houthis as a terrorist group, calls on UN and Arab League to do the same

[Libyan commander marching on capital dismisses negotiations](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-06-20 20:41

CAIRO: A Libyan commander, whose forces are fighting to take the country's capital of Tripoli from militias allied with a UN-backed government based there, has dismissed an initiative by its prime minister for negotiations to end the crisis.

Instead, Khalifa Haftar vowed in comments to a news website on Wednesday that his fighters would press on with the weeks-long offensive until Tripoli is rid of what he described as “terrorist militias.”

“Our military operations will not stop” until Tripoli is taken, Haftar told almarsad.co.

“The situation is excellent and I call on the Libyans to ignore rumors about our withdrawal,” Haftar said in interviews with Libyan news websites The Address and The Observer published overnight Wednesday to Thursday.

The offensive to seize the capital “will not stop before all its objectives are reached,” he said.

The campaign by Haftar’s Liberation National Army has raised fears of another bout of violence after the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Qaddafi. Since then, the country has sunk into chaos, with rival administrations in the east and the west, and an array of forces and militias allied with either side.

On Monday, the World Health Organization reported the latest casualty tolls for the fighting in and around Tripoli, saying 691 people have been killed so far, including 41 civilians, and 4,012 wounded, 135 of them civilians.

The head of the Tripoli-based government, Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj, told a news conference on Sunday he is proposing a “Libyan forum,” aimed at finding a peaceful solution to the conflict.

The talks would draw up a roadmap for parliamentary and presidential elections to be held before the end of 2019, Al-Sarraj said.

In his remarks to the news website, Haftar dismissed Al-Sarraj’s initiative and criticized him as an ineffective leader.

“Initiatives have no meaning unless they are brave and carry clear clauses that address the causes of the crisis and its very roots,” Haftar said.

Haftar has presented himself as someone able to restore stability. In recent years, his campaign against militants across Libya won him growing international support from world leaders who say they are concerned the North African country has turned into a haven for armed groups, and a major conduit for migrants bound for Europe.



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Libya's Haftar says to fight until Tripoli 'militias' defeatedHaftar's rule brings security to eastern Libya, at a cost

[Malaysia flight MH 17 investigations](#)

Today marks a significant development in bringing to justice those responsible for the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 over Ukraine nearly five years ago.

[Migrants stranded at sea for three weeks face deportation](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-06-20 00:49

TUNIS: Tunisia has allowed dozens of migrants, mostly from Bangladesh, to disembark after three weeks stranded in the Mediterranean, so that they can return to their home countries, the Red Crescent said on Wednesday.

An Egyptian boat rescued at least 75 migrants in Tunisian waters last month. But local authorities in the governorate of Medinine said its migrant centers were too overcrowded to let them ashore, leaving the vessel stranded 25 km off the coastal city of Zarzis.

"After they were stranded for three weeks at sea in difficult conditions, Tunisia agreed to dock the ship, and migrants accepted to return to their countries in coming days," Red Crescent official Mongi Slim told Reuters.

After a visit by officials from Bangladesh Embassy, the migrants agreed to return home, according to Mongi Slim, a Red Crescent official.

Earlier, Red Crescent representatives welcomed to port 64 Bangladeshis, nine Egyptians, a Moroccan, a Sudanese citizen, who left Zuwara in Libya in late May.

The migrants, which include at least 32 children and unaccompanied minors, are to be transferred to a reception center in Sfax from where they are set to return home, Slim added.

Worried about creating a precedent, Tunisian authorities said they accepted the migrants as an exception and for "humanitarian" reasons.

"We thank Tunisia's renewed commitment to life and dignity," said Lorena Lando, the head of the International Organization for Migration in Tunisia.

She added that it is urgent to put in place a collaborative approach to helping migrants in the Mediterranean.

Neighboring Libya's west coast is a frequent departure point for African migrants hoping to reach Europe by paying human traffickers. But their numbers have dropped after an Italian-led effort to disrupt smuggling networks and support the Libyan coast guard.

At least 65 migrants drowned last month when their boat capsized off Tunisia after setting out from Libya.

In the first four months of 2019, 164 people are known to have died on the route, a smaller number but a higher death rate than in previous years, with one dying for every three who reach European shores, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said.



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Tunisia stops rescued migrants from coming ashore
Up to 70 migrants drown after their boat sinks off Tunisia

[Tunisians fight to preserve cultural heritage](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-06-20 00:39

FOUSSANA/TUNISIA: Standing near the shrine of the Sufi scholar Sidi Boughanem in western Tunisia, Karim points to the earth below his feet.

“There are stairs under the ground,” he said. “We started digging, but we had to stop because someone called the police.”

At the foot of a mountain covered with Roman villas and antique olive oil

factories, the shrine sits atop buried structures and catacombs that date back to the Roman and Byzantine periods.

Archaeological sites such as this one in the region of Kasserine are often looted or damaged during illegal nighttime excavations by people looking for goods to sell, said Karim, a local historian from the nearby town of Foussana.

Then there are farmers who stumble across antiques by accident while planting crops, he added, and other people who go digging on their own land in the hope of finding artifacts they can sell.

Karim takes part in these digs out of curiosity. But his colleagues are hunting for treasures, he said.

"There are multiple groups (that do this)," said Karim, whose name has been changed for his safety.

The looting of archaeological sites is a longstanding problem in Tunisia, said Yasser Jrad, head of the seized objects department at the National Heritage Institute (INP).

Objects of significant historical and cultural value often end up on the European market and in the homes of Tunisia's rich and powerful, he explained.

The issue was brought into the spotlight in 2011, when Tunisia's ousted Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali was sentenced to 35 years in prison in the first of several trials for a range of crimes, including possession of archaeological artifacts.

In 2017, the Tunisian authorities seized a rare 15th-century Torah scroll that they thought was being smuggled to Europe.

More recently, in March customs seized 600 antique coins dating from the 2nd century from a car in the coastal town of Sfax.

Figures from the INP, which is tasked with protecting and recording the country's artifacts, show that the team has received more than 25,000 recovered archaeological items since the 2011 uprising.

Today, the INP gets more than double the number of reports for Kasserine than it did before the uprising, said Mohamed Ben Nejma, head of the region for the institute, adding that the instability and chaos of conflict often provides a window for archaeological looting.

But he also attributed the increase in recovered objects to the fact that the authorities are getting more serious about tackling the illicit antiquities trade.

"It might have been partly to do with state interests," said Jrad.

"Especially, since we discovered pieces stolen from our (national) sites in

the houses of Ben Ali and his family.”

Keeping hidden

The western region of Kasserine, where the shrine of Sidi Boughanem is located, is one of the most marginalized parts of the country – with government figures showing about one in four people unemployed, far higher than the 15 percent unemployment rate for the country as a whole. It is also one of the most archaeologically rich. There are four major sites located in an area of 8,000 sq. km, and the land is peppered with architectural ruins and antique stones.

Bigger sites are guarded around the clock, according to the INP, while less significant sites have security guards during the day. But the sheer number of small sites makes it impossible to keep an eye on all of them, said Nejma.

Ridha Shili, an expert in national heritage promotion with the University of Tunis, said it is the lack of proper excavation projects and cultural investment in general that leaves the Kasserine region open to looting.

“It is kind of a virgin region,” said Shili, pointing out that his hometown of Thala alone has about 350 archaeological sites.

“The state prefers for (these sites) to remain hidden because we don’t have the means to protect them,” he said.

When a new site is discovered, instead of guarding it or moving the artefacts to somewhere secure, “the state documents it, they take photos and then they put the earth back over it,” Shili added.

As she surveys sites around Foussana for her research, Wafa Mouelhi, an archaeology masters student at the University of Tunis, takes pictures whenever she sees that someone has been digging.

“You see holes, you notice with the placement of stones that someone has been there,” she said. “People are looking for statues or gold and jewelry.”

Mouelhi and other residents inform the local authorities about illegal excavations. In January, she caught someone from the town attempting to dig up a mosaic and ceramics from a Roman site that contains a church.

‘Everything is stolen from us’

Matthew Hobson of the UK-based Endangered Archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa project, said multiple factors need to be taken into account when it comes to protecting heritage sites from theft, which is often driven by poverty and political instability.

“There are economic reasons (for looting),” he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in Tunis. “The blame should not be put on the people who are trying to get by day-to-day, but the persons who are furnishing these collections.”

Unlike in Libya or Egypt, the antiquities trade in Tunisia is fairly small and disorganized, according to a local policeman, who asked to remain anonymous to protect his job.

“It’s just pocket money, people sell things for less than they are worth,” he said.

Abdelbaki Idoudi, a civil servant from Foussena, said the country’s unprotected artefacts are fair game and that citizens have the right to benefit from rogue archaeological digs.

“The state left of all of (the artefacts) and doesn’t look after them,” he said. “I’m for the practice because people can profit, it can help people get some money from their (heritage).”

Others, such as Ayoub Sayhi, a 22-year-old amateur filmmaker from Thala, called on the government to do more to care for the country’s ancient objects.

To Sayhi, the looting of Kasserine’s antiquities was just another symptom of what he saw as the state’s neglect of the region.

“(My film) is to get the government to do something about this region because it is poor even though it is rich in natural resources,” he said.

“Everything is stolen from us, both in the day and in the night.”



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