

Iraq begins examining Yazidi mass graves remains

Author:

AP, AFP

ID:

1560114574325682600

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BAGHDAD: The head of Iraq's forensics administration said his office will begin DNA testing to identify the remains of 141 bodies found in mass graves, believed to contain the Yazidi victims of Daesh's killing campaign five years ago.

Zaid Al-Yousef said the bodies were found in 12 graves located by Yazidi survivors in the Sinjar region in north Iraq.

Al-Yousef told The Associated Press on Sunday it will take until August to identify the remains.

Exhumation

The Iraqi government exhumed a mass grave containing victims of Daesh in the Yazidi stronghold left behind by Daesh in the northwestern Sinjar region, where militants brutally targeted the minority.

The exhumation, which was carried out with UN support, began on March 15 in the village of Kocho.

The militants rampaged across Sinjar in 2014, killing Yazidi men and abducting thousands of women and children. Many followers of the minority faith are still missing, after women were forced into sexual slavery and boys were indoctrinated in extremist ideology.

Over 70 mass graves have been discovered in Sinjar since it was liberated from Daesh in November 2015.

Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad, a Yazidi who escaped Daesh and became an outspoken advocate for her community, attended the ceremony in her home village of Kojo to mark the start of exhumations.

The UN, which is assisting with the forensic work, says the first opening of a mass grave in the region will help to shed light on the fate those inhabitants killed by Daesh militants.

Hundreds of men and women from the village are believed to have been executed by the militants when they took over the area in 2014.

The Yazidi people were targeted by the Daesh militants who swept across northern Iraq in 2014 and seized their bastion of Sinjar near the border with Syria.

Daesh militants slaughtered thousands of Yazidi men and boys, then abducted women and girls to be abused as sex slaves.

The UN has said Daesh actions could amount to genocide. It is investigating its atrocities across Iraq, it added.

Murad called at Friday's event for Iraq's central authorities and those in the Kurdistan region to "protect the mass graves" so that proof could be found of the "genocide of the Yazidis."

"There will not be reconciliation with the Arab tribes of our region if their

dignitaries don't give the names of those who carried out the crimes so they can be judged," she said.

The head of the UN investigative team, Karim Khan, said the exhumation marked an "important moment" for the probe, with 73 mass graves discovered so far in Sinjar alone.

"The road toward accountability is a long one, and many challenges lay ahead," he said in a statement.

"Notwithstanding this, the spirit of cooperation between the survivor community and the government of Iraq is to be applauded."

Daesh is currently battling to defend the last shred of its crumbling "caliphate" across the border Syria in the face of Kurdish-led forces backed by an international coalition

The Yazidis are a religious minority with unique beliefs that distinguish them from Muslim and Christian worshippers in the region. The Kurdish-speaking Yazidis follow an ancient religion rooted in Zoroastrianism, but Daesh considered them to be "apostates."



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Iraq to identify remains from Daesh graves in Yazidi area
Syria Kurds return
25 Yazidis freed from IS to Iraq

Tension forces evacuation of Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon

Author:

AP, AFP

ID:

1560114100705636600

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DEIR AL-AHMAR/LEBANON: Dozens of Syrian refugees have dismantled their tents in a camp they lived in for years in eastern Lebanon after authorities ordered their evacuation following a brawl with locals.

Jean Fakhry, a Lebanese official from Deir Al-Ahmar in the Bekaa Valley, said on Sunday the decision to evacuate the 90 tents was to avoid further friction.

Lebanon hosts over 1 million Syrian refugees who fled the war next door since 2011, overwhelming the country of nearly 5 million.

A fight broke out last week between camp residents and Lebanese firefighters who arrived to put out a fire.

More than 30 Syrians were arrested and unknown assailants burned down three tents.

Samar Awad, a 27-year-old Syrian, said camp residents are moving to a new area, miles away, with no water or electricity.

The authorities in April had set a June 9 deadline for Syrian refugees living in shelters built with materials other than timber and plastic sheeting in Aarsal to bring their homes into compliance.

The planned demolition of concrete shelters housing Syrian refugees near the border could make at least 15,000 children homeless, aid groups earlier warned.

In Aarsal, which lies in northeastern Lebanon, more than 5,000 structures made with concrete are slated for demolition. Similar measures could affect other communities in the near future.

SPEEDREAD

The authorities in April had set a June 9 deadline for Syrian refugees living in shelters built with materials other than timber and plastic sheeting in Aarsal to bring their homes into compliance.

Lebanon allows only informal camps for Syrian refugees to prevent permanent settlements that would affect its delicate demographic balance.

Three international aid agencies – Save the Children, World Vision and Terre des Hommes – warned that children were most at risk and urged the government to hold off.

“For a child who barely eats, and often doesn’t go to school, losing a home is extremely traumatic. And we are talking about 15,000 children,” said Piotr

Sasin from the Swiss-based Terre des Hommes charity.

The joint statement warned that the “demolition of many of these homes could result in the destruction of household water and sanitation systems, leaving children at high risk of illness and disease.”

Lebanon is home to an estimated 1.5 to 2 million refugees who have fled the conflict that erupted in 2011 when the Syrian regime repressed initially peaceful protests.

Lebanon’s economic and other woes are routinely blamed on Syrian refugees by local politicians and the government has ratcheted up the pressure to send them back.



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[Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon](#)

Lebanese move may render 35,000 Syrian refugees homeless
Syrian refugees struggle to make ends meet during Ramadan

[Two states ‘only solution’ to resolve dispute, says Germany](#)

Author:

AFP, Reuters

ID:

1560113677865580700

Sun, 2019-06-09 23:53

AMMAN: Germany's top diplomat on Sunday reaffirmed his country's support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ahead of a long-awaited US peace plan.

"We are still in agreement that reaching a two-state solution through negotiations is the only solution," Heiko Maas said during a press conference in Amman with his Jordanian counterpart.

Washington is gearing up to roll out economic aspects of its plan at a conference in Bahrain later this month, but it is not yet clear when its political details will be unveiled.

The Palestinians have already rejected the deal, citing a string of moves by US President Donald Trump they say show his administration is irredeemably biased.

"We and Germany agree that the two-state solution is the only way to end the conflict," Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said.

Maas and Safadi met a day after US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman was quoted by the New York Times as saying Israel had the "right" to annex at least parts of the occupied West Bank.

Palestinian leaders said the US envoy's comments showed "extremists" were involved in White House policy on the issue.

Israel occupied the West Bank in the 1967 Six-Day War and its construction of settlements there is viewed as a major stumbling block to peace as they are built on land the Palestinians see as part of their future state.

Friedman has in the past been a supporter of Israeli settlements as has the family of Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and adviser leading efforts to put together the peace deal.

Kushner has hinted that it will not endorse international calls for the creation of a Palestinian state.

Path to peace

Several UN resolutions have enshrined the two-state solution, which envisages separate homelands for Jews and Palestinians, as the path to a peace settlement.

Both ministers also stressed the importance of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, just weeks after the US called for it to be dismantled after cutting its roughly \$300 million annual donation.

Jordan is home to nearly 2.2 million Palestinian refugees, who make up almost half of the kingdom's population.

Separately, Maas said Germany would give Jordan a \$100 million loan to help cope with economic difficulties in the kingdom where IMF-backed fiscal reforms sparked mass protests last year.

Jordan, whose stability is seen as vital for the volatile Middle East, also hosts some 1.3 million refugees from neighboring war-torn Syria.

HIGHLIGHT

Washington is gearing up to roll out economic aspects of its plan at a conference in Bahrain later this month, but it is not yet clear when its political details will be unveiled.

The German Parliament voted last month to condemn as anti-Semitic a movement that calls for economic pressure on Israel over its policies on the Palestinians.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had welcomed the Bundestag decision in a statement on Twitter. "I hope that this decision will bring about concrete steps," he said in a statement in Hebrew on Twitter.

The BDS condemned the motion as anti-Palestinian.

"The German establishment is entrenching its complicity in Israel's crimes of military occupation, ethnic cleansing, siege and apartheid, while desperately trying to shield it from accountability to international law," it said on Twitter.

Lawmakers from the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party abstained during the symbolic vote. They had submitted their own motion calling for a total ban of the BDS in Germany. That motion was defeated.



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Palestinians say US envoy's annexation comments show 'extremist' approach
Israel has 'right' to annex West Bank land, says US ambassador

Israel has 'right' to annex West Bank land, says US ambassador

Author:

afp

ID:

1560035207968174200

Sun, 2019-06-09 02:06

JERUSALEM: The US ambassador has said Israel has the right to annex at least "some" of the occupied West Bank, in comments likely to deepen Palestinian opposition to a long-awaited US peace plan.

The Palestinians have rejected the plan before it has even been unveiled, citing a string of moves by US President Donald Trump that they say show his administration is irredeemably biased.

They are likely to see the latest comments by US Ambassador to Israel David Friedman as new nail in the coffin of a peace process that is already on life support.

In the interview published by the New York Times on Saturday, Friedman said that some degree of annexation of the West Bank would be legitimate. "Under certain circumstances, I think Israel has the right to retain some, but unlikely all, of the West Bank," he said.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat has said any such policy would be tantamount to "US complicity with Israeli colonial plans."

The establishment of a Palestinian state in territories, including the West Bank, that Israel occupied in the Six-Day War of 1967, has been the focus of all past Middle East peace plans.

No firm date has yet been set for the unveiling of the Trump administration's plan although a conference is to be held in Bahrain later this month on its economic aspects.

The public comments made by administration officials so far suggest the plan will lean heavily on substantial financial support for the Palestinian economy, much of it funded by the Gulf Arab states, in return for concessions on territory and statehood. "The absolute last thing the world needs is a failed Palestinian state between Israel and Jordan," Friedman said in the Times interview.

SPEEDREAD

The Palestinians have rejected the plan before it has even been unveiled, citing a string of moves by US President Donald Trump that they say show his administration is irredeemably biased.

"We're relying upon the fact that the right plan, for the right time, will get the right reaction over time."

Friedman, a staunch supporter of the Israeli settlements, told the Times that the Trump plan was aimed at improving the quality of life for Palestinians

but would fall well short of a “permanent resolution to the conflict.”

He said he did not believe the plan would trigger Palestinian violence. But he said the United States would coordinate closely with Arab ally Jordan, which could face unrest among its large Palestinian population over a plan perceived as overly favorable to Israel.

Publication of the plan looks set to be further delayed after the Israeli parliament called a snap general election for September, the second this year.

The plan is regarded as too sensitive to release during the campaign. During campaigning for the first general election in April, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged to annex West Bank Jewish settlements, a move long supported by nearly all lawmakers in his alliance of right-wing and religious parties.

Earlier, in February, Netanyahu told lawmakers he had been discussing with Washington a plan that would effectively annex settlements.

In a rare public show of disunity between the close allies, the White House then flatly denied any such discussion.

Following persistent expansion of the settlements by successive Netanyahu governments, more than 600,000 Jewish settlers now live in the West Bank, including annexed east Jerusalem, among some three million Palestinians. The international community regards the settlements as illegal and the biggest obstacle to peace.



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Israeli strike hits air base in Syria's Homs: state media Israel eases Gaza

fishing restrictions

[Freed US scientist of Turkish origin vows to clear name](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-06-09 02:04

ANTAKYA, Turkey: A former Turkish-American NASA scientist, detained in Turkey for nearly three years until his release last week, told AFP in an interview that he would do everything he could to clear his name.

The arrest of Serkan Golge – who took US citizenship in 2010 and has worked for NASA in Houston since 2013 – is just one of a number of incidents that have caused relations between Washington and Ankara to deteriorate sharply in recent years.

US Consulate staff, journalists and even an American pastor have all been detained, accused of having ties with Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen, who is in exile in the US and whose extradition Ankara has requested over his alleged role in the failed July 2016 coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Pastor Andrew Brunson was released in October 2018.

Golge, 39, was initially sentenced to 7.5 years in prison in July 2016, but then saw it reduced to five years before finally being released on probation last week.

In an interview at his parents' home in Antakya, southern Turkey, he said people tended to believe there must be something to the charges if a NASA scientist is detained for so long.

But "I will give you an answer straight out: There was nothing," he insisted. Golge said he was arrested on an "anonymous tip," of which there were many in the months following the coup attempt.

Vowing to take his case to both Turkey's Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights, Golge pledged to "do whatever I have to do to fulfil my obligations" in the meantime. These included reporting to police four days a week and not leaving Antakya.

Nevertheless, the scientist is hoping that the restrictions will be lifted so that he can "go back to the US and get back to my work" as part of a team studying the impact of space radiation on astronauts.

Golge said his release on May 29 came shortly after a telephone conversation

between Erdogan and US President Donald Trump.

He learned about it at 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. and it all “happened in 15-to-20 minutes,” he said.

Golge said he was kept in isolation and only allowed out of his cell for an hour a day.

The ordeal left both him and his family scarred forever, not to mention the devastating impact it had on their financial situation.

Golge said his wife became so pale and thin during the first weeks after his arrest that he barely recognized her when she visited.

It also deeply affected his sons, now aged three and eight, who came to fear that their father would never be released, Golge said.

His youngest son was only three months old when Golge was arrested.

“He calls me ‘Dad’ but he doesn’t know me that well,” he said.

“They say time heals most of the things ... but I don’t believe that. I think it heals most of the things but some of the things we experienced will stay with us forever.”



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