

France urged to suspend boat delivery to Libya over migrant concerns

Author:

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:40

PARIS: Eight international NGOs including Amnesty International and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) demanded on Thursday that France suspend the delivery of boats to Libya's coast guard on concerns they would be used to intercept migrants.

French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly had in February agreed to donate six boats to the Libyan navy, under which the coast guard operates, in a move she said was aimed at helping them "in the fight against illegal immigration."

But the offer angered rights groups who said they would be used to block migrant boats seeking to reach Europe, forcing those on board to return to war-torn Libya.

The demand was laid out in a legal challenge that was filed at the administrative court in Paris on Thursday morning.

In it, the groups demand "the suspension of the decision" until the court decides whether or not the donation is legal. The court has 48 hours to make a decision.

The NGOs believe forcing people to return to Libya would expose them to "serious human rights violations." Massimo Moratti, regional director for research at Amnesty International, said the pledge to deliver boats to the Libyan coast guard was "an unlawful and reckless decision."

He said it was all the more dangerous at a time when fighting has intensified after Eastern commander Khalifa Haftar launched an offensive on the capital Tripoli earlier this month.

HIGHLIGHT

The NGOs accused the Libyan coast guard of having a bad track record in respecting those in distress at sea, saying it should not be given the logistical means to step up such abuses.

"Doing it now, as the armed conflict in Libya escalates, is even more callous and irresponsible," Moratti said in a statement, warning the donation would make France "complicit" in trapping people inside the country.

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The statement accused the coast guard of abuses including pushing those in distress back into the water, threatening them with weapons and firing toward them.

The six vessels, which are to be delivered in the coming weeks, are 12-meter, semi-rigid boats made by French specialist Sillinger.

Besides Amnesty and MSF, the legal petition was joined by France's Human Rights League, immigrant support group GISTI, Lawyers Without Borders, migrant aid groups La Cimade and Migreurop and Italian research and aid group ASGI.



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Italy urges EU to ready plan for Libya refugee flight, work on joint initiative
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[**Russia firm to take over Syria port**](#)

for 49 years: Damascus

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:32

A Russian firm is to take over Syria's largest port for 49 years and invest \$500 million in expanding it, the transport minister in Damascus said Thursday.

A deal would be signed for the "management, expansion and operation" of port of Tartus with Russian company Stroytransgaz, Transport Minister Ali Hammoud was quoted as telling pro-government newspaper Al-Watan.

"The length of the contract – 49 years – was decided after a feasibility study" so both sides could reap benefits, it said.

Russia has been a key ally of President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria's eight-year civil war, providing it with crucial military backing.

The minister on Tuesday told Syrian state television that the port, which started operating in the 1960s, was not deep enough to allow heavy ships to dock.

"Tartus is an old port whose docks range between four and 13 meters deep," he said.

The current facilities are not suitable for ships heavier than 30-35 tons and "we needed to try to ensure very deep docks to accommodate cargoes of up to 100 tons."

BACKGROUND

Russia has been a key ally of President Bashar Assad's regime in Syria's eight-year civil war, providing it with crucial military backing.

The expansion works are expected to increase the eastern Mediterranean port's capacity from 4 million to 38 million tons a year, Hammoud said.

He told Al-Watan that the project would help lessen the burden of international sanctions against the Damascus regime since the start of the war in 2011.

On Saturday, Russian media quoted the country's Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov as saying a deal for the port was in the works.

"We hope the deal will be signed within a week," Russian news agency RIA Novosti quoted him as saying after meeting Assad in Damascus.

Backed by Russian air power since 2015, Assad has made great military gains against rebels and jihadists, and the regime now holds up to 60 percent of the country.

Even during the war, Russian companies have invested in Syria's oil, gas and mining sectors and won contracts to build flour mills and water-pumping stations.



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Kosovan women returned from Syria face house arrest
In north Syria, skin disease ravages young and old

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Thu, 2019-04-25 21:27

AL-KARAMAH, Syria: Inside a dank clinic in the north of war-torn Syria, a girl covered in scabs wails and tries to wriggle out of her mother's arms to escape a nurse's needle.

Gently holding fluffy cotton wool over her eyes, the male health worker injects a transparent liquid into the crusty blemishes on the tip of her nose.

She is one of hundreds in the northern province of Raqqa to be suffering from

leishmaniasis, a skin disease caused by a microscopic parasite spread by sandflies.

The illness is endemic to Syria, the World Health Organization (WHO) says, but has become more prevalent during the eight-year civil war.

Dozens of children and adults are seeking treatment between the damp-smelling walls of the health center in the northern town of Karama.

Among them, 15-year-old Shaza Al-Omar awaits her turn.

"I've got some on my leg, my sister's got 11 lesions on her face, and my brother has some on his eye," says the teenager, draped from head to toe in black.

Not far off, a father tries in vain to pacify his toddler daughter, who screams as the nurse injects solution into lesions on her face.

Once it is over, he carries her out of the clinic clutching a large packet of potato crisps.

A woman sits on a stretcher, an ailing leg stretched out in front on her, as a nurse injects medicine into one blemish after another.

The number of leishmaniasis cases in Syria doubled from 2010 to 2018 to more than 80,000 patients, WHO says.

Leishmaniasis is usually linked to poverty, poor sanitation, and malnutrition, WHO says, factors likely compounded by the war.

"Marshes, humidity, the house's proximity to farming land, as well as widespread rubbish" have fueled the spread of the skin condition, says Younes Al-Naeemi, the manager of the Karama health center.

"He's always scratching it until it bleeds," she says of her husband's sore on his hand.

"He itches it, and I tell him not to," says Jarrad, a black and white scarf wrapped around her greying hair.

"We can't sleep at night because of all the flies," she adds.

Across Karama, insects hover over piles of rubbish between rows of modest houses, some still bearing scars of battles that resulted in Kurdish-led forces kicking IS out in 2017.

Younes Al-Naeemi, the manager of the Karama health center, says the clinic has received 4,000 cases of leishmaniasis from the town and surrounding villages since April last year.

But lack of awareness has also compounded the problem.

Some people “come immediately after discovering they have been affected, while others don’t do anything until it gets worse and treatment becomes much harder,” he says.

“Treatment is available, but awareness is more important,” he says.

After a peak of almost 6,800 cases in Raqqa province last year, WHO says there has been a decline in cases at the start of this year.

The international organization has distributed mosquito nets, provided medicine to treat the disease, and supports six health centers in Raqqa, including in Karama.

But it warns the rates could again rise as the weather becomes warmer.

“Sandfly breeding usually peaks when the temperature starts to rise in spring and summer,” WHO spokesman Yahya Bouzo said.

“Unless prevention measures are taken, the number of cases is expected to” increase.

But Karama’s residents say their rural town is neglected.

They complain of a lack of services including regular trash pick-ups.

Hussein Hamoud, 50, says official measures taken to counter the spread of the disease were simply not enough.

“They once sprayed insecticide inside the houses, but then they never did again,” he says.

“Nobody cares. If there was even the slightest concern, this would not have happened,” he says, referring to leishmaniasis.

At a primary school in the nearby village of Jadeeda, a young boy sits upright in his seat, a blemish on his cheek.

Outside the classroom, school director Abd Zeen Al-Morei pulls up his jeans to show off leishmaniasis marks on his leg.

“I’ve got 15 lesions all over my body and I’m still receiving treatment,” says the 26-year-old. Up to 40 children at the school also have the skin disease.



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Kosovan women returned from Syria face house arrest 'No peace without justice' for victims of Syrian war, says Saudi envoy

[Syria negotiators reach Kazakhstan for peace talks](#)

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:19

NUR-SULTAN: Delegations from Iran, Russia and Turkey were in Kazakhstan's capital Nur-Sultan on Thursday seeking an end to the conflict in Syria while shoring up their interests in any future political settlement.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry confirmed that teams from the three powers as well as negotiators from the Syrian regime and its armed opponents had arrived in the capital on Thursday.

Talks will take place throughout the day in "two-way and three-way formats" ahead of an expected plenary session on Friday, the ministry said in a statement.

UN's Syria envoy Geir Pedersen was to arrive later in the day, the ministry

added.

The situation on the ground in the northwestern region of Idlib, under the administrative control of Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), is expected to feature prominently in the talks.

Idlib has been protected from a massive regime offensive by a September deal inked by Damascus ally Russia and opposition backer Turkey. But regime bombardment has increased since HTS took full control of the region from rival fighters in January. Other items expected to be included in negotiations include prisoner swaps and the distribution of humanitarian aid.

FASTFACT

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Tehran, like Moscow, is an ally of Assad's regime, while Ankara has aligned itself with the opposition but has repeatedly threatened to attack Kurdish fighters on the Syrian side of its southern border that it views as "terrorists."

A Western diplomat told AFP that Moscow will be aware of perceptions that recent rounds of the so-called "Astana process" have made little progress and may push to speed up the creation of a long-awaited constitutional committee.

The capital of Kazakhstan was called Astana until last month, when it was renamed after the country's outgoing president.

The committee is of particular interest to the UN which favors a Syrian-led resolution to the conflict but it may be hamstrung from the outset, the diplomat warned.

"Even if a constitutional committee is created, it will then take a long time to reach a very uncertain result," the diplomat told AFP.

Any proposal would therefore be "low risk" for Moscow, whose military intervention in 2015 has helped Damascus assert control over two-thirds of the country's territory. Syria's war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions.



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[UN force says third tunnel crossed Lebanon-Israel border](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-04-25 21:12

BEIRUT: A UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon on Thursday said a tunnel discovered earlier this year by Israel had crossed the Lebanese-Israeli border, in the third such breach of a cease-fire resolution.

Israel in January accused Lebanese movement Hezbollah of having dug what it described as the deepest, "longest and most detailed" tunnel it had discovered.

The Israeli army said the tunnel from the Lebanese town of Ramyeh – just 800 meters from the border – reached a few dozen meters into Israel, and descended to 55 meters underground.

UN Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) on Thursday said the tunnel was the third to have crossed the "blue line," a demarcation line drawn by the UN to mark Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

"UNIFIL's independent assessment confirms that this tunnel crosses the blue line in violation of resolution 1701," which ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, it said.

"UNIFIL has informed the Lebanese authorities about the violation and has requested urgent follow-up actions," the UN force said in a statement.

Lebanon and Israel are still technically at war. Israel is currently building a wall along the 130 km frontier to block Hezbollah attempts to infiltrate.

Since early December, Israel has said it discovered six tunnels, destroying them either with explosives or by filling them with a cement-like material.

Five have been confirmed to exist by UNIFIL.

"Of these, three tunnels have been found to be crossing the blue line," the peacekeeping force said.

Israel alleges Hezbollah had planned to use the tunnels to kidnap or kill its civilians or soldiers, and to seize Israeli territory in the event of any hostilities.

On Jan. 26, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said it had taken Israel "years" to discover some of the tunnels, but did not specify who had constructed them.

Hezbollah is the only side not to have disarmed after Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war.

In recent years, Israel has repeatedly carried out airstrikes against what it says are Hezbollah weapons convoys in war-torn Syria next door, where the group is backing regime forces.

The US has designated Hezbollah a "terrorist" group since 1997, while the EU blacklisted its military arm in 2013.

But it also functions as a political party, with posts in the current Cabinet.

The US on Monday offered a \$10 million reward for information that would disrupt the group's finances.



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