

Four Syrian refugees die of cold in Lebanon mountains

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BEIRUT: Four Syrian refugees – two women and two children – were found frozen to death Friday in a mountainous area of eastern Lebanon, local officials said.

Their bodies were found in the Ainata-Oyoun Orghosh area of the Mount Lebanon range, three days after they went missing, a civil defense source told AFP. They had been headed for Syria, he added.

The source said the four Syrians, including a child aged seven and an eight-year-old, got out of a car in a storm to continue on foot.

Bashir Khodr, the local governor, said on Twitter that the four had “died of freezing cold,” despite a search operation by security forces.

A Lebanese man who had been with them is to be questioned to determine whether he was a people smuggler, Khodr said.

Since the 2011 start of conflict in their country, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have crossed the border into Lebanon, often with people smugglers. Those who cross illegally avoid official border posts to return.

Lebanon says it hosts 1.5 million Syrians – nearly a million of whom are registered as refugees with the United Nations.

Nine out of ten Syrians in Lebanon live in extreme poverty, the UN says. Lebanese authorities have pressured Syrians to return even though rights groups warn that Syria is not yet safe.

In January 2018, 17 Syrians died of extreme cold while attempting to flee into Lebanon.



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Two Syrians dead in Lebanon refugee camp fire
Beirut blast brings fresh misery to displaced Syrians in Lebanon

[EU extends olive branch to Ankara with key conditions](#)

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Fri, 2021-03-26 19:52

ANKARA: Following a meeting Thursday, the EU leaders decided to work for the modernization of the Customs Union with Turkey, but urged Ankara to abstain “from renewed provocations or unilateral actions in breach of international law” for not facing any new sanctions.

However, experts note that the EU’s economic incentives do not give Turkey a

“blank check” for its regional policies and offer instead a “phased and conditional” plan to mend often-fraught ties.

The EU leaders, by remaining cautious, will also review progress in June regarding Turkey’s activities in the eastern Mediterranean to ensure that recent signs of de-escalation remain sustainable and consistent.

If Ankara builds tension, specific measures targeting the Turkish tourism sector could be taken into consideration by the EU.

Last year, the European leaders threatened sanctions on Ankara over the disagreements about maritime jurisdiction in the eastern Mediterranean. But they halted plans after a more conciliatory approach from Ankara by pulling back its Oruc Reis drilling ship from gas exploration activities in the contested waters and re-engaging in talks with Greece over disputed maritime borders.

The EU also expressed concern about the deterioration of fundamental rights and the rule of law in Turkey.

The withdrawal from the 2011 Istanbul Convention, which protects women from violence, with an overnight presidential decree along with the Turkish government’s recent plans to ban pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) drew EU’s anger.

As part of the Bogazici University protests, some 75 university students were taken into custody after the intervention of riot police to the campus and then to the Istanbul courthouse on Thursday and Friday, which coincided with the same dates of the EU Council meeting.

“Dialogue on such issues remains an integral part of the EU-Turkey relationship,” EU leaders said.

However, Ankara criticized the EU for violating international law by calling Turkish operations in the eastern Mediterranean illegal.

“We hope that linking these steps to conditions in the summit statement, addressing only certain areas and postponing them to June will not lead to the loss of the positive momentum that has been captured,” the Turkish Foreign Ministry (MFA) said in a written statement.

Madalina Sisu Vicari, an independent expert on energy geopolitics, thinks that the EU leaders emphasized the “reversible” character of the European engagement.

“It is rather unusual to tie EU’s future engagements with Turkey from Customs Union to visa liberalization to Turkey’s refrain from its drilling activities,” she told Arab News.

Vicari underlines that two principal conditionality tools are attached to the EU’s engagement with Turkey on Customs Union modernization: high-level dialogue in areas of common interest and eventual visa liberalization.

"The EU will approach its engagement in a phased, proportionate and reversible manner," she said.

"That means that if by June, when the EU leaders should further decide, the conditionalities would not be considered, then the EU could reverse the eventual advancements on the relation with Turkey."

In the meantime, the UN-led peace efforts for divided EU member state Cyprus are set to begin next month.

Moreover, for some experts, the revision of the Customs Union with Turkey will require tacit recognition of Cyprus by Ankara as the EU will require opening its ports and airports to ships and planes originating from southern Cyprus.

The EU is also expected to engage in high-level political dialogue on security issues and mobility with Turkey in June.

"But, the regional security, stemming the flow of migrants mainly from Syria, and geopolitical aspects in the eastern Mediterranean are much more pre-eminent now in the eyes of the EU leaders than democratic backsliding in Turkey," Vicari said.

According to Karol Wasilewski, an analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs in Warsaw, the wording of the summit conclusions suggest that the EU has managed to remain united behind policy toward Turkey and the stick-and-carrot approach.

"Thus, the EU clearly tries to regain its leverage over Turkey," he told Arab News.

Wasilewski thinks Ankara is aware of the pattern, although it seems it was taken aback by the wording of conclusions and the MFA statement.

"The Turks seem to suggest to the EU that they want to compartmentalize the relationship by focusing on a positive agenda rather than on democratic backsliding," he said.

Wasilewski expects this misunderstanding, when it comes to the way forward, will remain an important point of disagreement.

Although during the past weeks, the European leader surprised many observers with their positive approach towards Turkey despite its actions aimed at the HDP. While some suggest this is clear proof that the EU has lost interest in Ankara's democratic backsliding, Wasilewski suggests otherwise.

"Turkey's drift away from democracy will always constitute a political cost for most European leaders, and thus the dilemma on how to respond to this will prevail," he said.



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Push to ban pro-Kurdish HDP erodes Turkey's political pluralism
furtherTurkish official sees Ankara unswayed over EU sanctions on Eastern
Mediterranean

[UN warns against massive reduction in UK aid to Syria](#)

Fri, 2021-03-26 19:36

LONDON: The UN has urged the UK to abandon its planned cuts in aid to Syria next week, warning that the move could further destabilize the war-torn country and ultimately backfire on Britons.

Mark Lowcock, the UN's chief humanitarian coordinator, issued the warning ahead of a high-profile donor conference on Syria in which organizers hope to

raise \$10 billion – the largest ever appeal for the country.

“This is absolutely not the moment for donors to downgrade Syria in their priorities. Millions of Syrians are resorting to desperate measures to survive. To cut aid now would be massively destabilizing. It would be a grave step in the wrong direction,” said Lowcock.

Earlier this month, leaked documents revealed that the UK was planning a reduction in aid to Syria from the £137 million (\$189 million) pledged in 2020 to just £45 million for 2021.

The aid money is used to help refugees in Syria by funding their education, housing and employment across borders in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. The UK is said to be the only major donor that is threatening to make a large cut.

“A decision to turn away from Syria today will come back to bite us all tomorrow,” said Lowcock, who headed Britain’s Department for International Development before taking up his role at the UN.

“In 2014, our appeal was poorly funded. In 2015 there was a huge exodus of people from Syria to Europe.”

The UK should remember its historical responsibilities to Syria, Lowcock told the Guardian.

“On Tuesday in Brussels we are asking donors – out of generosity and in their own interests – to stay the course and continue supporting the people of Syria. Particularly those like the UK who have played a prominent role at points in the past.”

An estimated 13.4 million people need humanitarian assistance in Syria, up 20 percent compared with 2020. In the surrounding region, the UN and partners aim to help 10.5 million people, including 5.6 million refugees and the communities that host them.

Due to economic hardship amid the pandemic, the UK has been reducing its contributions to international aid across the board, and has cut its aid budget from 0.7 percent of gross national income to 0.5 percent – representing a £5 billion reduction in real terms.

Yemen, Somalia and South Sudan are among the countries also expected to receive significantly less British aid in 2021 compared with the previous year.

Syria’s collapsing economy, skyrocketing food prices and persistent violence in parts of the country means that about 90 percent of Syrians now live below the poverty line.

Lowcock said: “The majority of people can’t afford to eat. Millions of Syrians are resorting to desperate measures to survive.”

David Miliband, CEO of the International Rescue Committee, said: “British aid is saving thousands of lives for people living in areas outside government

control. This is only possible because British diplomatic efforts have sustained border crossings – but they have been reduced to just one. In northern Syria, 3 million depend on humanitarian aid through this mechanism – it is a vital lifeline that Britain has worked hard to protect.

“Now is not the time for the UK to abandon this legacy. During this conference, I sincerely hope that the UK will sustain its humanitarian support to Syria. The human cost of aid cuts at this critical time is unthinkable.”



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[UK aid](#)

UK told foreign aid cut could be 'unlawful' UK puts pressure on UN for Syria aid details ahead of likely showdown with Russia

Houthis use force to break up migrant protest calling for probe into fatal fire

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Thu, 2021-03-25 23:32

AL-MUKALLA: Iran-backed Houthis in Sanaa on Thursday used strong-arm tactics to disperse hundreds of protesters demanding an international probe into the deaths of dozens of migrants in a detention center fire in the Yemeni city earlier this month.

Yemen's Human Rights Minister Ahmed Arman told Arab News that armed Houthis roughed up Ethiopian migrant demonstrators who had taken to the streets of Sanaa to call for an investigation into the March 7 blaze and to highlight their conditions in the war-torn country.

Protesters told Oromia News Network, an Ethiopian news agency, that the militia group used "excessive force" to break up the rally and rounded up several organizers and people attending the demonstration. A number of migrants were reportedly beaten with sticks and others thrown into military vehicles.

Dozens of migrants have been camped outside the UN office in Sanaa since the fatal fire demanding that the international organization launch an inquiry into the incident at the overcrowded holding center.

Under mounting international pressure, the Houthis blamed 11 policemen for throwing explosive devices that sparked the blaze and accused UN bodies of failing to renovate and increase the size of migrant detention centers in areas under their control.

Government officials, local and international human rights activists, and foreign diplomats in Yemen have called for an independent investigation to bring to justice Houthi officials they claim ordered the torching of the center.

But the Houthis have rejected pleas for a probe instead accusing their opponents of exploiting the incident to discredit the movement.

Yemeni officials say the international community had left the migrants in the lurch as the Houthis were still abusing them and refusing to compensate fire victims and their families.

Majed Fadhail, Yemen's deputy minister of human rights, told Arab News that the migrants had on Thursday left their sit-in outside the UN office to take

their protest to the streets of Sanaa.

“They fear that their case could be forgotten and that the criminals will get away with their crimes as the international momentum after the incident did not yield any fruits,” he said, adding that the Yemeni government stood by the migrants and their demands for justice.

Meanwhile, on the Yemeni battlefields, dozens of rebels and government forces have recently been killed in fierce fighting in the central province of Marib and southern province of Taiz, according to local media reports.

Yemen’s official news agency SABA said on Thursday that Yemeni army troops had expelled rebels from several mountain locations and villages in Maqbanah district, west of Taiz, and killed, wounded, and captured a number of Houthis.

The latest uptick in fighting in Taiz started earlier this month when the army launched an offensive to push the Houthis from the edges of the city and end the group’s six-year-long siege of Taiz.

In Marib, there were clashes in several mountain areas as the Yemeni army and its allied tribesmen, backed by the Arab coalition, pushed back Houthi attacks.



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Arab coalition destroys eight Houthi drones fired toward Saudi Arabia
Houthi spokesman says they are ready for good relations with Saudi Arabia: Al Arabiya

Blinken and Yemen PM discuss cease-fire after Saudi peace initiative

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LONDON: The US secretary of state called for a nationwide cease-fire in Yemen and a “durable peace agreement” during a phone call with the country’s prime minister on Thursday.

“Secretary (Antony) Blinken welcomed the Republic of Yemen Government’s support for a comprehensive, nationwide cease-fire and UN-led political talks and its continued engagement with UN Special Envoy Griffiths,” the State Department said.

Saudi Arabia announced a new peace initiative on Monday to end the six-year war.

The initiative included a comprehensive cease-fire, the reopening of Sanaa airport, easing restrictions on Hodeidah port and a resumption of political negotiations.

The US welcomed the initiative on Monday and Blinken told Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan that Washington supported efforts to end the conflict, “starting with the need for all parties to commit to a cease-fire and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.”

US envoy to Yemen Tim Lenderking also welcomed Saudi Arabia and the Yemeni government’s commitment to a cease-fire and political process.

During the call on Thursday, Blinken thanked Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalek Saeed for his efforts to ease the suffering of Yemenis, including authorizing the arrival of four fuel ships at Hodeidah port on Wednesday.



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Italy lauds Saudi Arabia's Yemen peace initiative
Malaysia backs Saudi bid to end Yemen war