

Iraq: UN demining agency rejects desecration accusations, involving historic Mosul churches

The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) in Iraq issued a [statement](#) on Thursday rejecting allegations made earlier this week by a non-profit organization there, alleging that personnel had carried out explosive hazard clearance inside two historic churches in Mosul “in a barbaric and arbitrary manner.”

The allegations, published earlier this week on the website of the Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (HHRO), the Iraqi non-governmental organization in question, accused UNMAS of “crimes no less grievous and insolent than the crimes of Daesh,” and claimed that the clearance was conducted without church authorization, “in a barbaric and arbitrary manner with utter disregard for the holy and religious sanctity” of the two churches, located in the Hosh al-Khan area of the Al Maedan district, in Mosul.

Although UNMAS – and its partner for the clearance project, G4S – were not directly named, UNMAS Iraq said in a statement that it was taking the allegations seriously, open to further investigation of the allegations, and continuing to work closely with the Iraqi Government.

The agency has invited HHRO and officials of the Syriac Catholic Archbishopric in the Nineveh Plains, “as well as other relevant Iraqi authorities, to meet in person to carefully consider the facts relative to their statements and hope they will offer to correct the record when known.”

UNMAS said it was “keen on safeguarding all archeological, religious and historical sites”, from the assessment phase of de-mining and other clearance operations, working “closely with the Iraqi State and religious authorities to ensure this national treasure is secure and safe, to prevent any additional damage to that inflicted by the terrorists and the conflict”.

To date, UNMAS Iraq and G4S teams have cleared and safely removed 53 suicide belts from the church sites, 74 munitions of various types, seven improvised bombs, and assorted ammunition and materials such as home-made explosives. According to the agency, the site and the accumulated debris remain heavily contaminated with explosives and will require further clearance.

The UN’s demining agency further explained that, since it started operating in Mosul in November 2017, over 1,500 clearance tasks have been carried out, resulting in the removal of approximately 48,000 explosive hazards of all types, heretofore without any complaints.

In 2014, the jihadist terrorist group ISIL, known in Arabic as Da’esh, occupied Iraq’s second city of Mosul, an historic centre of Christianity in

the Middle East for centuries, demanding that they convert to Islam, pay tribute, or face execution. More than 100 churches and other religious sites were destroyed or demolished.

Many other Christian enclaves across northern Iraq, and those of other religious minorities, were overrun and destroyed by Da'esh fighters during more than three years of occupation.

[Sudan: UN rights chief alarmed over 'excessive force', alleged use of live fire against protestors](#)

The reported use of "excessive force" against demonstrators across Sudan over food and fuel shortages that has led to the deaths of at least 24 people is "deeply worrying", the UN's top human rights official, Michelle Bachelet, [said on Thursday](#).

In a call for the authorities to refrain from further violence, amid reports that security forces fired live rounds and tear gas into hospital premises, where protesters were sheltering, the [High Commissioner](#) said that the official toll "may be nearly twice as high", citing "credible" reports.

"A repressive response can only worsen grievances," Ms. Bachelet said in a statement, before urging the Government of President Omar Al Bashir to investigate the allegations "in a prompt, thorough and transparent" way.

A repressive response can only worsen grievances – UN human rights chief, Michelle Bachelet

"I am very concerned about reports of excessive use of force, including live ammunition, by Sudanese State Security Forces during large-scale demonstrations in various parts of the country since 19 December," Ms. Bachelet insisted.

At least 816 people have also been arrested in connection with the demonstrations in more than a dozen cities across Sudan, Ms. Bachelet's statement noted, adding that those targeted included journalists, opposition leaders and civil society representatives.

All those arbitrarily detained for the exercise of their rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and expression" should be "promptly released" and their rights "fully protected", the High Commissioner said.

“The Government needs to ensure that security forces handle protests in line with the country’s international human rights obligations by facilitating and protecting the right to peaceful assembly”, Ms. Bachelet maintained, before urging the authorities “to work to resolve this tense situation through dialogue and call on all sides to refrain from the use of violence”.

Sudan’s obligations under human rights law

Sudan, which until 2017 was subject to longstanding international sanctions affecting the country, cooperates with several UN human rights mechanisms, most recently the [Human Rights Committee](#), which [last reviewed the country in December 2018](#), as a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, since 1986.

Under the Covenant, Sudan “is obliged to take all necessary measures intended to prevent arbitrary deprivations of life by their law enforcement officials”, according to the statement, issued by the High Commissioner’s office, [OHCHR](#).

Law enforcement officials should also “comply with relevant international standards” relating to the use of firearms, the statement added, noting also that Ms. Bachelet stressed the readiness of her office to deploy a team to Sudan, to provide advice to the authorities and “help ensure they act in accordance with the country’s international human rights obligations”.

[Iran: women hunger strikers entitled to medical care, UN rights experts urge](#)

A group of six independent United Nations rights experts [called](#) on Iran Wednesday to urgently provide Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Narges Mohammadi access to appropriate health care, and reiterated calls for their immediate release, as they continue a hunger strike in protest.

“We urge the Government to immediately and unconditionally provide Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Narges Mohammadi with access to the appropriate treatment and care they have repeatedly requested in light of their serious health concerns,” the experts said in a statement.

According to the human rights experts, Ms. Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a dual UK-Iranian national, has been denied appropriate health care by the Iranian authorities, after finding lumps in her breasts, enduring severe neck pain, and numbness in her arms and legs. She has also been denied an appropriate mental health evaluation from a doctor outside Evin Prison where she is being

held.

The statement explains that Ms. Mohammadi, an Iranian human rights defender, has been also denied appropriate health care for over a year despite suffering from a pulmonary embolism, related blood clots, bleeding and repeated seizures. She also requires follow-up treatment for a gall-bladder operation.

The experts expressed alarm that the denial of appropriate health care has compelled Ms. Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ms. Mohammadi to start a hunger strike in protest.

“The authorities must urgently address the violations that are the basis of their hunger strike protest, including denial of appropriate treatment and care, which may well amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, or even torture,” the experts said.

The experts also pointed to the findings of the [Working Group on Arbitrary Detention](#) and reiterated calls for the immediate release of Ms. Mohammadi and Ms. Zaghari-Ratcliffe. The Working Group found that the two women, placed in custody respectively in May 2015 for charges of spying and in April 2016 for “founding an illegal group”, had been detained arbitrarily.

The experts stated that the situation of Ms. Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Ms. Mohammadi is emblematic of numerous reports received related to the denial of appropriate treatment and care of imprisoned individuals in Iran, and urged the authorities to ensure appropriate treatment and care is afforded to all those in need of it.

The experts said that, as Iran is a party to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Government has an obligation to respect the right of all persons, including prisoners, to have access to health services. As a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Government has an obligation to protect the right to life.

They also recalled the universally recognized ‘Mandela Rules’ on treatment of prisoners, which specify that all prisons must ensure prompt access to appropriate medical attention.

[Nearly 900 reportedly killed following ‘shocking’ intercommunal attacks in DR Congo](#)

The UN Human Rights Office ([OHCHR](#)) said on Wednesday that at least 890

villagers were reportedly killed in the western Democratic Republic of the Congo last month, following brutal inter-communal clashes.

Human rights reports suggest that the apparent massacre took place between 16 and 18 December in four villages in the Yumbi territory, Mai-Ndombe province, in what appear to have been clashes between the Banunu and Batende communities.

Most of the area's population has reportedly been displaced, and voting in the December 30 presidential poll for the Yumbi area, was postponed due to violence and insecurity.

In a [statement](#), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned the "shocking violence" and highlighted the importance of "investigating and bringing the perpetrators to justice".

Michelle Bachelet added that it was essential to "ensure justice for the victims of these horrific attacks, but also to prevent new episodes of intercommunal strife, and to address the anger and feelings of gross injustice that may otherwise lead to repeated cycles of violence between communities."

At least 82 people were also injured in the attacks, according to the "credible" reports received by OHCHR and some 465 houses and buildings were burned down or pillaged, including two primary schools, a health centre, a health facility, a market, and the local office of the independent electoral commission, known by its French acronym, CENI.

Both the OHCHR and national judicial authorities, have launched investigations into the reported attacks.

At the beginning of January the UN Refugee Agency, [UNHCR](#) reported that 16,000 people from DRC had arrived in neighbouring Republic of the Congo – also known as Congo-Brazzaville – after fleeing deadly intercommunal clashes.

According to UNHCR, this represents the largest influx of refugees in over a decade, since 130,000 people were forced to seek shelter amid ethnic clashes in DRC's former Equator Province, in 2009.

[Mali: 'Dire' humanitarian situation, 'grave' security concerns challenge fragile peace](#)

[Bintou Keita](#), Assistant Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations in

Africa, also apprised the Council of the alarming security situation in the central and northern areas of the African State, saying it was “of grave concern,” and provided “a major challenge” to implementing the UN-backed 2015 peace agreement.

The Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali was signed in June 2015 by the *Coordination des Mouvements de l’Azawad* armed group, following its signature in that May by the Government and a third party, the *Plateforme* coalition of armed groups.

The Malian Government has been seeking to restore stability and rebuild following a series of setbacks since early 2012, including a military coup d’état, renewed fighting between Government forces and Tuareg rebels, and the seizure of its northern territory by radical extremists.

She flagged the “very difficult conditions” under which the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali’s ([MINUSMA](#)) peacekeepers and the Malian defense and security forces continue to serve, saying that “far too often, they pay the ultimate price” in support of peace and stability across the country. Mali continues to be the most dangerous place in the world to wear the UN’s blue helmet.

“Asymmetric attacks continue to target peacekeepers, national and international forces, and increasingly civilians”, she asserted.

The UN official recalled the 21 December attack against MINUSMA, which she said, “indicated the determination of extremist groups and spoilers to prevent the Mission from implementing its mandate.”

Ms. Keita also reminded the Council of last year’s “significant increase” in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), saying that mission’s [UNMAS](#) continent (UN Mine Action Service) was supporting the authorities, including with advice, training and specialized equipment to mitigate their risks.

“We remain concerned about the further deterioration of the security situation in the centre where intercommunal violence, instrumentalized by extremist armed groups, has intensified over the past months,” she continued, spotlighting a deadly New Year’s Day attack. She said MINUSMA was working with the Government to respond to the rapidly evolving situation and protect civilians.

UN 2013 map of Mali., by UN Department of Field Support/Cartographic Section

Ms. Keita stressed the importance of the parties to the peace agreement keeping positive momentum going, and making “meaningful progress, without further delay”.

“Addressing the challenges facing Mali must take into account the complex cross-border dynamics and drivers of conflict occurring within the broader regional context,” she stressed, reiterating the Secretary-General’s call on national, regional and international actors “to redouble their efforts to

tackle the multiple threats facing Mali and the Sahel region.”

She assured the Council of MINUSMA’s continued commitment to supporting the parties in implementing the peace agreement.

For her part, Kamissa Camara, Mali’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, highlighted that security measures are not enough when terrorist groups are working “relentlessly” to destroy social cohesion, weaken the State and extend their territorial control.

She said that the Government was currently working to build a national consensus to find “solutions shared by the whole Malian nation.”

Meanwhile, as the Council was meeting, it was reported that gunmen had attacked two villages in the country’s central Menaka region near the border with Niger, killing at least 20 people – further underscoring the country’s volatile security situation.