

Pompeo demands Iran release US detainees, urges Libya ceasefire

Wed, 2020-06-10 17:13

LONDON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo demanded on Wednesday that Iran release US detainees.

Last week, Tehran released US Navy veteran Michael White, who had been detained in the country since his arrest in July 2018, and in exchange the Washington released Majid Taheri on Monday, an Iranian-American scientist detained for 16 months for violating US sanctions.

Pompeo thanked US Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook for securing his release and the Swiss government for their assistance.

"The work is not done, Baquer Namazi, Siamak Namazi, and Morad Tahbaz are Americans still wrongfully detained by the Iranian regime. Tehran must release them immediately," Pompeo said during a press conference to discuss an annual state department report on religious freedoms.

Commenting on Libya, Pompeo welcomed the resumption of talks led by the United Nations and called on Libya's warring parties to continue to negotiate in good faith.

He said the agreement between the weak internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army, led by eastern commander Khalifa Haftar, to reenter UN security talks "was a good first step, very positive. Quick and good faith negotiations are now required to implement a cease-fire and relaunch the UN-led intra-Libyan political talks." Egypt called for a cease-fire starting on Monday, as part of an initiative which also proposed an elected leadership council for Libya.

Pompeo's comments come a day after European ministers also urged all parties to stop the fighting, end all military operations, and "engage constructively in the 5+5 negotiations," they said in a joint statement, in reference to a joint military commission that helped broker the cease-fire in Cairo earlier this month.

Pompeo said that "putting Libya on the path to economic recovery means preserving Libyan oil facilities and strong access to the national oil corporation."

Libya has been mired by fighting and chaos since Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi was toppled in 2011.

"It's time, it's time for all Libyans on all sides to act, so neither Russian or any other country can interfere in Libya's sovereignty for its own gain," he added.

Also on Wednesday, Germany's ambassador to Libya, Oliver Owczar, met with Haftar and expressed concern over the ongoing military confrontations and their worrying impact on the civilian population.

In today's meeting with Gen Haftar I expressed concern about ongoing military confrontations and their worrisome impact on civilian population. I encouraged a constructive resumption of 5+5 talks towards a reliable ceasefire, thereby also addressing

structural security concerns. pic.twitter.com/fG46UwPpLA

– Oliver Owczar (@GermanAmbLBY) [June 10, 2020](#)

“I encouraged a constructive resumption of 5+5 talks toward a reliable ceasefire, thereby also addressing structural security concerns,” he said in a tweet.

On Iraq, Pompeo said the government has agreed to a strategic dialogue proposed in April starting from Thursday.

Pompeo said Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, David Hale, will lead the discussion with representatives from the departments of defense, treasury, energy and other agencies along with their Iraqi counterparts, “in keeping with previous dialogues based on our 2008 strategic framework agreement.”

“With new threats on the horizon, including the global coronavirus pandemic, collapsed oil prices and a large budget deficit, it’s imperative that the United States and Iraq meet as strategic partners to plan a way forward for the mutual benefit of each of our two nations,” he said.

Pompeo also spoke with UN Secretary-General António Guterres on Wednesday and “discussed steps to end the conflict and advance a negotiated political solution in Libya, the urgent need to renew the Syria humanitarian cross-border mechanism, and the importance of extending the UN arms embargo on Iran,” the state department said in a statement.



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Pompeo says Iran trying to 'foment terror' during pandemic

[Lebanon to reopen airport in July and send public sector employees back to work](#)

Tue, 2020-06-09 23:09

BEIRUT: Lebanon has announced that it will reopen Rafik Hariri International Airport in Beirut in early July.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab said during a meeting of the tourism sector's

representatives on Tuesday: "We will work to resume flights to the Arabian Gulf region, and we will focus on countries conducting PCR tests to detect coronavirus infections."

The Cabinet Office said on Tuesday that all public-sector employees should return to their workplaces while "taking the necessary measures to prevent coronavirus."

The total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Lebanon reached 1,368 as of Tuesday after 18 new cases were recorded. All of the new cases had been in contact with infected people. The death toll stands at 30.

The government is trying to improve the economic situation, which has worsened with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, by promoting medical tourism, Diab told the heads of tourist establishments, restaurants and hotels.

The leaders of the tourism sector's syndicates complained of the decline in their businesses due to the deterioration of the lira. The president of the Union of Owners of Restaurants, Cafes, Amusements and Patisseries, Tony Al-Rami, said that "80 percent of restaurants, including top restaurants and establishments, have not been able to open."

The president of the Syndicate of Tourist Establishments in South Lebanon, Ali Tabajah, said that "95 percent of the establishments in the south could not open because they were unable to pay rent or even buy goods."

The head of the Syndicate of Car Rental Agencies, Mohammed Daqduq, highlighted that "25 percent of car rental companies have closed, and there are 700 unemployed families because this sector depends 76 percent on expatriates and foreign tourists."

The head of the Syndicate of Maritime Firms, Jean Beiruty, said: "Domestic tourism is not possible due to the high exchange rate of the dollar, and 80 percent of maritime firms did not open because their maintenance licenses have not been completed."

Jean Abboud, president of the Association of Travel and Tourist Agents, warned that "the inability to transfer money abroad will lead companies to withdraw from Lebanon."

Ibrahim Al-Zaidi, head of the Syndicate of Restaurants in the Southern Suburbs of Beirut and Mount Lebanon, said that "the main problem lies in the dollar exchange rate."

"The victim is not the restaurant sector alone, but also the employees who lost their salaries," he said.

Following the disturbances during the protests on Saturday former Prime Minister Saad Hariri attended a meeting held on Tuesday by the Supreme Islamic Legislative Council in Dar Al-Fatwa. Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdul Latif Derian presided over the meeting. The council, which includes Sunni figures, called on the government to "impose control on the entire Lebanese territory,

including stopping smuggling through the Lebanese-Syrian border, adjusting the exchange rate of the dollar, and addressing the random price hikes that are burdening citizens."

The council accused "infiltrators, who were among the peaceful protesters last Saturday, of attacking the security forces and carrying out acts of sabotage of public and private property." The council demanded that an investigation be held and the instigators of the riots that took place in Beirut's streets be held accountable.

The council warned against "igniting the fire of sectarian strife in light of the offensive slogans that targeted a religious figure," demanding that the perpetrators be held accountable. It also called on Muslims in Lebanon to "rise above the strife-inciting hate speech and adhere to the spiritual and patriotic values that make Lebanon the country of coexistence."

In the Palace of Justice in Beirut, the head of the Beirut Bar Association, Melhem Khalaf, stressed that "dialogue is the only way to restore what has been destroyed by the crises." He said: "We will not allow our unity to be targeted."



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European powers call for end to military operations in Libya

Tue, 2020-06-09 23:05

BERLIN: The European Union's top diplomat has urged all conflict parties in Libya to immediately stop all military operations and engage constructively in peace negotiations.

As Turkish drones helped drive eastern Libyan forces back from Tripoli this month, Russia was said to be reinforcing the forces with warplanes, raising the stakes in a stalemated civil war that has partitioned the African country.

Recent weeks have marked a turning point in a complex conflict between two uneasy coalitions that are each backed by an array of foreign states whose competing regional agendas make them unwilling to countenance defeat.

In a joint statement with the foreign ministers of Germany, France and Italy issued on Tuesday, the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, called on the conflict parties in Libya to swiftly agree on a cease-fire and withdraw all foreign forces, mercenaries and military equipment.

The joint statement followed increased diplomatic efforts by Germany to push for a political solution to the Libya crisis.

Chancellor Angela Merkel earlier on Tuesday expressed her concern in a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the recent escalation of fighting in Libya.

On Monday, Merkel discussed the situation in conflict-wracked Libya with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi.

Merkel told El-Sisi that United Nations-backed negotiations must remain the key aim of a peace process in Libya, where the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is fighting General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army in the east.

On Saturday, El-Sisi proposed a new cease-fire after the Turkish-backed GNA won a series of rapid victories over Haftar's forces, dashing Haftar's bid to unite the country by force.



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Libya's Tripoli forces press gains despite Egypt truce offer

[Will coronavirus pandemic intensify or defuse Middle East conflicts?](#)

Tue, 2020-06-09 20:21

DUBAI: The coronavirus pandemic has left people living in the Middle East's many conflict zones and hot spots more vulnerable than ever, according to a senior UN official. But there will be an opportunity to "build back better" once the storm blows over.

In a recent online talk titled, "Will COVID-19 exacerbate or defuse conflicts in the Middle East?," organized by the Atlantic Council, Rosemary DiCarlo, UN under-secretary-general for political and peacebuilding affairs, called for a reshuffling of priorities to combat the pandemic, which has placed the

region's long-running conflicts in a different light.

She admitted that there is no good time for a pandemic, but said the outbreak has hit at a difficult moment, with the international community and rules-based order built after World War II under increasing attack.



Libyans wearing protective face masks queue in front of a bank in the centre of the capital Tripoli on April 1, 2020, amidst the novel coronavirus pandemic crisis. (AFP/File Photo)

"Great power rivalry is intensifying," said DiCarlo.

"Violent conflicts have drawn in regional and global powers and actors, displaced millions and collapsed state and local institutions."

Before the pandemic, Antonio Guterres, the UN secretary-general, had underscored the urgent need for effective crisis management systems and lines of communication in the Gulf region, she said.

"That need is greater now than ever before. Any miscalculation and the current atmosphere can lead to consequences that could overwhelm the mechanisms that are currently in place."

DiCarlo drew attention to Guterres' appeal for a global cease-fire so that all efforts could be aimed at fighting the coronavirus.

"His call has resonated around the world: 115 member states have endorsed his appeal, as have regional organizations, civil society, religious leaders and 24 armed groups," she said.

According to DiCarlo, the challenges for conflict prevention and resolution efforts include the economic fallout of the pandemic, which could lead to civil unrest and violence.

"As countries slowly lurch back to life from weeks of lockdown, the demands for economic recovery may grow beyond the capacity of many states," she said.

"The rate of unemployment is skyrocketing, and the decline in oil and gas prices is further straining national finances."

DiCarlo cited the protests and violence in Lebanon and Iraq as reasons for concern given the risk of human-rights violations, adding that the "shrinking civic space" in the region poses an obstacle to fighting the pandemic.

"We've seen discrimination in accessing health services, increased cases of domestic violence, and an overall disproportionate impact on women and on households headed by women," DiCarlo said.

"Refugees and internally displaced persons, as well as detainees and

abductees – many living in crowded and squalid conditions – have been particularly vulnerable. Migrant workers in the Gulf have faced growing pressure to return home.”

DiCarlo said migrant workers were most vulnerable to high prices and food shortages, and faced limited access to health care and crowded living conditions.

To cap it all, there is the continuing threat of terrorism, she said.

In DiCarlo’s view, the pandemic is occupying the attention of governments, giving terrorist groups an opportunity to strike.



Syrian Muslims wearing face masks attend the Friday prayer at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus on May 15, 2020, following the authorities’ decision to allow prayers on Fridays in disinfected mosques with strict social distancing and protection measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic. (AFP/File Photo)

“There are reports that Daesh has tried to exploit the pandemic in Iraq and elsewhere, launching new initiatives and intensifying propaganda,” she said.

“Actors in conflict settings could also exploit the confusion created by the virus to press their advantage, leading to a greater escalation of violence that will further complicate efforts for a peaceful resolution.”

In regard to Yemen, international organizations had been asking for funding

to shore up their operations in the impoverished country after 75 percent of UN programs had to shut their doors or reduce operations because of a lack of funds.

Saudi Arabia answered the humanitarian call by organizing a pledging event on June 2, co-hosted by the UN, where participants included representatives from more than 125 member states.



A Yemeni youth carries a portion of food aid, distributed by Yadon Tabney development foundation, in Yemen's capital Sanaa on May 17, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

At the event, \$1.35 billion was pledged, falling short of the \$2.5 billion that the organizations said they needed to keep their operations going.

In a subsequent interview with Arab News, Abdallah Al-Mouallimi, Saudi Arabia's Permanent Representative to the UN, said: "The conference was a huge success for the United Nations and for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for Saudi diplomacy.

"The fact that you can hold such a conference, with such wide participation, under the current circumstances, virtually, and with the economic clouds hanging in the air over the heads of the participants, and then come up with (actual) results – I think that is a major success."

Al-Mouallimi described the situation in Yemen as "catastrophic, both in terms of the humanitarian situation and in every (other) respect."

DiCarlo likewise said Yemen faces one of the "gravest humanitarian challenges

in the world.”



Yemeni workers wearing protective outfits spray disinfectant on a car in the capital Sanaa, during the ongoing novel coronavirus pandemic crisis, on May 21, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

Noting that Arabia was “very committed” to seeing a peaceful resolution to the conflict, she said the Kingdom did declare a unilateral ceasefire and does “understand that there is not a military solution to the disagreements among the various parties, that it has to be negotiated.”

On Syria, DiCarlo said cease-fire agreements are fragile and humanitarian efforts on the front lines insufficient.

The need for continued and expanded cross-border assistance could not be overstated. “Progress on the UN-led political process remains elusive, despite our efforts,” she said.

Recent developments in war-torn Libya are also doing little to inspire optimism. “When parties have called for humanitarian truces at various times in the past, the conflict has intensified,” DiCarlo said.

THE NUMBERS

COVID-19 in the Middle East

- Over 16,000 Libyans displaced by recent military movements in Greater Tripoli and Tarhouna.
- 80,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan's Zaatari camp closed off by authorities during a two-month lockdown.
- 15 million Yemenis, or half the country's population, may become infected, resulting in more than 40,000 deaths, says WHO.
- 1 in 5 Syrian refugees in Turkey do not have access to clean water.
- 75% of Lebanese people in need of aid, with the pound losing 60% of its value as of May.
- 115 UN member states have endorsed global cease-fire to fight pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis has prompted many Arab countries to step up humanitarian efforts, with the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar providing much-needed medical equipment and assistance to Iran. However, the pandemic has not proven to be the olive branch for ending the region's divisions.

Despite the seemingly intractable issues, great opportunity awaits, DiCarlo said, adding that the UN is hoping that the region will explore this in the near future.

She said the pandemic has been a catalyst for much-needed cooperation and dialogue.



A Yemeni youth wearing a protective mask sells fruits at a street market in Yemen's third city of Taz, on June 1, 2020 amid the novel coronavirus pandemic crisis. (AFP)

"There are encouraging examples of this in the Middle East," she said, pointing to Israel and the Palestinian government, which are working in tandem with the UN to tackle the common threat posed by the pandemic.

"We continue to strongly urge Israeli and Palestinian leaders to build on recent cooperation," DiCarlo said.

There are other positive developments, she said. In the Gulf, the dangerous escalation of tensions between Iran and Iraq, and the region as a whole, is thought to be tapering off.

"There is this understanding of a number of parties, who have been involved or supporting different sides in this conflict, that there is a time now for negotiation and for finding a resolution to this issue. I find that encouraging," DiCarlo said.



Lebanese protesters run from tear gas fired by riot police amid clashes following a demonstration in central Beirut, on June 6, 2020. (AFP)

She said despite restrictions on face-to-face meetings, the increased use of technology could create new opportunities and enhance the inclusivity of peace processes, including the participation of women and young people.

“The secretary-general and our UN envoys and special representatives continue to exercise good offices, and cajole and support conflict parties in pursuit of dialogue and cooperation,” she said.

“These efforts now rely mostly on the use of secure digital tools and platforms.”



A member of the Kurdish Internal Security Forces of Asayesh stands guard on a deserted street in Syria's northeastern city of Hasakeh on April 30, 2020, following measures taken by the Kurdish-led local authorities there, to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus. (AFP/File Photo)

DiCarlo concluded her briefing on a note of optimism, saying: "I think we will overcome COVID-19. I believe so, but obviously the international community will not be unscathed.

"It will take a lot of vigilance and hard work, at the UN, between individual states or groups of countries, in civil society and among many of you," she said.

"We have a chance to go beyond recovery. We can safeguard the progress achieved over the past 75 years that helped societies prevent, resolve and rebuild from violent conflict. We can do more. We must build back better."

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[Airstrikes again hit Syria's rebel area, displace thousands](#)

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Tue, 2020-06-09 12:26

BEIRUT: Suspected Russian airstrikes pounded villages on the edge of the last rebel enclave in northwestern Syria, sending thousands of civilians fleeing, activists reported Tuesday – scenes unseen in the area since a cease-fire three months ago.

The violence at the edge of Idlib province is the most serious breach of the cease-fire in place since early March, when an agreement between Turkey and

Russia halted the Syrian government's three-month air and ground campaign into rebel-held Idlib.

The Syria Response Coordination Group, a team of aid workers, said the military escalation displaced more than 5,800 civilians in the last 24 hours from areas in southern Idlib and western Hama countryside. Many of the displaced had only recently returned to their villages after the cease-fire, the group said.

On Monday, insurgents launched a limited offensive against government-held positions, briefly seizing a couple of villages. Government troops, backed by Russian air support, responded, repelling the insurgents but also widening their area of operations, targeting 10 villages, according to Mohamed Rasheed, a Syrian media activist documenting the offensive.

Rasheed reported airstrikes, believed to be carried out by Russia's air force, on a number of villages in southern Idlib. He said he documented 45 airstrikes since Monday.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded 15 airstrikes on Tuesday, also saying they were believed to be Russian. The Observatory and other local networks said at least one civilian was killed in Kansafra village.

Meanwhile, Syrian state media said government forces repelled an offensive by the insurgents, and that a soldier was killed.

Russia is a main backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad, while Turkey backs opposition fighters trying to remove him from power. Russia and Turkey have become the main power brokers in the war-torn country.

Rasheed said the insurgent offensive was led by the Al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, now the dominant group in the rebel-held northwest.



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North Syria clashes leaves dozens of fighters deadFirst Russian airstrikes in three months hit northwest Syria