

Syria Kurds warn of regime pressure, aid shortages after UN vote

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Tue, 2020-01-14 16:08

BEIRUT: Kurdish authorities in northeast Syria warned Tuesday that a UN vote to scrap a key entry point for cross-border aid will lead to medical shortages and expose them to regime control.

"There will be no (UN) aid entering the region except from government-held areas, which will give the regime a greater ability to control aid distribution," said Abdel Kader Mouwahad, director of humanitarian affairs for Kurdish authorities.

The Yaroubiya crossing along the Iraqi border, was a key entry point for UN-funded medical aid reaching a Kurdish-held region where an estimated 1,650,000 people are reliant on humanitarian assistance, according to aid groups.

The UN had used it to deliver medical supplies that the Syrian government had not permitted via Damascus.

But it was scrapped last Friday after the UN Security Council voted to scale back cross-border aid deliveries to Syria, under pressure from regime ally Russia.

This leaves Syria's Kurds with the unofficial Samalka crossing with Iraqi Kurdistan, which is not used for UN aid.

Yaroubiya's closure will cripple at least half of the health care response in an area ravaged by battles against the Daesh group as well as a Turkish offensive in October that displaced 200,000 people.

It will disrupt "60 to 70 percent of medical assistance to Al-Hol," an overcrowded desert camp brimming with tens of thousands of civilians and Daesh families, said Mouwahad.

It will also threaten the delivery of UN-funded medicine and medical equipment to a key hospital in the city of Hassakeh as well as critical medical points established around two towns near the Turkish border hard hit by Turkey's latest incursion, he told AFP.

He said that UN support for the Kurdish Red Crescent may also be slashed. Aggravating the situation, UN-funded aid to northeast Syria must now come either from Turkey or from government-held areas with permission from Damascus, which aims to reintegrate Kurdish-held areas into the state's fold. But Mouwahad said it was "impossible" for aid to enter from Turkey, which views Kurdish forces in Syria as a "terrorist" offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) on its own soil.

Damascus, for its part, will use aid supply lines as a "pressure card" to encourage Kurds to relinquish the semi-autonomy they have achieved during Syria's nine-year-old conflict.

"The aim is to politically intimidate the Kurdish administration," he said. Syrian troops have already deployed in much of the northeast in recent months

as part of deal with the Kurds who are seeking protection from Turkey. Damascus has also called on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces who have fought IS to integrate into its military, a proposal the Kurds rejected. Redur Khalil, a senior SDF official, said the latest UN move was a “dangerous development.”

“Aid will be barred from reaching the region” under the restrictions on entry points, he said on Twitter, urging the United Nations to intervene.

International Crisis Group analyst Sam Heller said the curb on aid entry points “further concentrates power in Damascus, and in Syrian government hands.”

“It’s another instance of Damascus benefiting from its control of the Syrian state’s institutions and international legitimacy... to enforce dependence,” he said.



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Syriac monk in Turkey jailed on terror charges

Influential Iraqi cleric Sadr calls for anti-US demonstrations

Author:

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Tue, 2020-01-14 16:55

BAGHDAD: Populist Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr called on Tuesday for a million Iraqis to march against the US "presence and violations" in Iraq after Washington's killing of an Iranian commander in Baghdad.

Iraq's parliament has called for US and other foreign troops to leave amid growing a backlash against Washington's air strike, which also killed a top Iraqi militia commander.

Iran launched a missile attack on US targets in Iraq in retaliation for the death of General Qassem Soleimani, a move that heightened fears of a wider Middle East conflict.

"Go on soldiers of God, soldiers of the nation, onto a million man march condemning the American presence and its violations," Sadr tweeted.

"Iraqi space, its land and sovereignty are infringed upon by occupying forces."

Sadr has million of followers has been able to summon tens of thousands of people onto the streets of Baghdad for demonstrations in previous years. He gave no details of when he was calling for the protest to take place, or where.

Thousands are of Iraqis still gathering in separate anti-government demonstrations in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in protests that started on Oct. 1 – potentially setting the stage for rival groups to clash.



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Iraqis worry US-Iran tensions are eclipsing their protests

[Kuwait approves budget with deficit for sixth year](#)

Author:

Tue, 2020-01-14 19:50

KUWAIT CITY: Kuwait's cabinet on Tuesday approved the 2020/2021 budget projecting a huge deficit for the sixth year in a row due to low oil prices, the finance minister said.

The Gulf state whose revenues heavily rely on oil prices projected a shortfall of \$25.3 billion for the fiscal year starting in April, up 15 percent on the current year, Mariam Al-Aqeel said.

"The budget deficit is the result of a drop in oil production and prices,"

the minister told a press conference in Kuwait City. She said the government decided to keep spending unchanged from the current fiscal year at around \$74 billion, of which 71 percent are allocated to civil servants wages and public subsidies. Revenues are projected at \$48.7 billion, 6.0 percent lower than the current year's estimates. More than 87 percent of income comes from oil. Aqeel said the government will draw down on the state reserve fund to meet the budget deficit as parliament has refused to pass legislation to allow the government to borrow. The minister said the government will press for parliament's approval of the public debt law because borrowing is cheaper than withdrawal from the sovereign wealth funds. She said the government also wants parliament to approve a law for imposing selective taxes like other Gulf states, describing the law as necessary. The state, with a native population of just 1.5 million, has a sovereign wealth fund worth more than \$600 billion, providing a cushion for state finances. Around 3.3 million foreigners live and work in Kuwait.



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Jerusalem rabbi arrested for slavery after women found

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JERUSALEM: A rabbi has been arrested in Jerusalem on suspicion of holding dozens of women and children in conditions of slavery, Israeli police said Monday.

The 60-year-old suspect was detained on suspicion of running a "closed community" where women and children "worked under conditions of slavery," police said in a statement.

A two-month investigation was launched after officers received reports that the religious leader had for years committed "severe offenses" against those living at the residence, police said.

Some 50 women and a number of children under five were found when police raided the site, where victims were thought to have been isolated from the outside world.

A police video of the raid, in a central ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Jerusalem, showed cramped living quarters with bunk beds as well as piles of cash.

"The suspect also punished the women in different ways and stole money from them," police said.

Eight women accused of aiding the rabbi were also detained and are being held on suspicion of slavery.

The arrests come after ultra-Orthodox women launched a campaign in November urging those in their community to speak up about domestic abuse.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews make up around 10 percent of Israel's population and live in close-knit communities often closed off from wider society.



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Israel releases man convicted of spying for Syria

[Lebanon pays outstanding UN dues after stripped of vote](#)

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Mon, 2020-01-13 17:33

BEIRUT: Lebanon's representative to the UN Monday said the crisis-hit country has paid outstanding dues it owes the international body after it lost voting privileges because it was behind on payments.

"Lebanon paid its dues that were delayed (a) few days... and everything is back to normal," Amal Mudallali, the country's ambassador to the UN, said in a post on Twitter.

"Lebanon is not under article 19 anymore," she added, referring to a UN provision that allows the body to strip a member state of voting privileges if they have fallen behind on financial contributions.

The UN on Friday said that Lebanon was among seven countries which would lose the right to vote in the General Assembly because of a failure to pay dues. This sparked a social media outcry in Lebanon, with many blasting the government for putting the country in such a position.

The small Mediterranean nation is facing its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The World Bank says that Lebanon is in recession, and has warned that the proportion of people living in poverty could increase from a third to half the population.

The economic downturn coincides with an anti-government protest movement that has been active since October 17.

Protesters are demanding the removal of a political class they deem incompetent and corrupt.



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