

UN postpones conference on torture after rights groups' criticism

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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CAIRO: The United Nations has postponed a conference in Cairo on torture that was to take place in September following criticism from rights groups that say torture is rampant in Egypt.

"We are well aware of the growing unease in some parts of the NGO community with the choice of location," UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville said. "As a result we have decided to postpone the conference and reopen the process of consultation with all relevant actors," Colville added.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights was to co-host the regional conference on defining and criminalizing torture with the government's National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) on Sept. 4 and 5. Rights activists were outraged by the UN decision to hold the conference in Egypt and say that President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi has presided over the worst crackdown on freedoms in Egypt's modern history.

"Egypt was found to carry out 'systematic torture' by the UN's principal treaty body dealing with combating torture in 2017, under both (President Mohamed) Mursi and El-Sisi," Felice Gaer, a member of the UN committee against torture, told Reuters by email on Tuesday.

Cairo has frequently dismissed reports by human rights organizations on torture, saying they lack credibility and are politically motivated.

Authorities say Egypt is a law-abiding state and that any rights violations are merely individual cases whose perpetrators are held accountable.

In February, the UN Human Rights office voiced concern over trials that led to the executions of 15 people in Egypt that month may have been unfair. It said torture may have been used to obtain confessions.

A Reuters report last month found that at least 179 people were executed in Egypt from 2014 to May 2019, up from only 10 in the previous six years.

"The decision to host the conference in Egypt is peculiar, it is as if they are rewarding Egypt for the amount of torture that takes place in it," said Aida Seif el-Dawla, director of the Nadeem Center, which documented alleged human rights abuses and treated torture victims.

The center was raided in 2017 and shut down.



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[How one man plans to tow an iceberg to the Arabian Gulf](#)

Tue, 2019-08-20 22:39

DUBAI: On the face of it, the idea of tugging an iceberg from Antarctica to replenish the UAE's freshwater supplies might sound sensational. Abdulla Alshehi, the Emirati businessman who was the subject of recent media reports about such a proposal, probably doesn't mind the positive publicity. But a plan to transport icebergs to Saudi Arabia was one of the many bold initiatives from the dynamic 1970s that remain etched into the Kingdom's collective memory.

Utilizing icebergs as a potential new water resource for the arid Gulf region and other parched parts of the world was one of several projects Alshehi, a

specialist in saving water, outlined in a book he wrote in 2013 titled "Filling the Empty Quarter."

He says the idea of using icebergs as a source of water is no longer far-fetched. "What's currently happening is that many icebergs are disintegrating from Antarctica," Alshehi said. "Once they do, they float in the ocean and melt, wasting billions of gallons of fresh water. So we thought why not utilize it?"

IN NUMBERS

- 1.2 BILLION – People worldwide without access to clean drinking water.
- \$80 MILLION – Maximum estimated cost of the iceberg pilot scheme.
- 70% – Iceberg mass expected to survive journey from Antarctica.
- 11 BILLION – Tons of ice lost by Greenland on July 31.
- 80 BILLION – Gallons of water discharged by Pakistan's Indus River into Arabian Sea annually.

According to a recent National Geographic report, "the towering glaciers" of west Antarctica "are crumbling and melting, the rate speeding up over the decades and imperiling the stability of the entire ice sheet." Greenland is also reported to be losing its ice sheet at an alarming rate. With Europe's heatwave reaching the Arctic, 11 billion tons of Greenland's surface ice was lost to the sea in the biggest melt of the summer.

Alshehi's hope is that one region's inevitable loss will be another's gain. A pilot costing between \$60 million (SR225m) and \$80 million involving an Antarctic iceberg 1 km long and 500 meters wide will soon run, ending either in Perth, Australia, or Cape Town, South Africa.

"They are the best cities for conducting a trial because of their need for water and their proximity to the project location – around 3,000 to 4,000 km away from where we intend to conduct the operations," he said. "We need to perfect the operation and ensure all possible safety and environmental issues are taken into consideration." If all goes to plan and the trials are successful, then an iceberg could be headed to the Gulf coast by the first quarter of 2021. The frozen behemoth will be 2 km long, 500 meters wide and 200 meters deep and will cost up to \$200 million to transport, according to preliminary calculations.

He added that it will take about nine months for the iceberg to reach the UAE's Fujairah coast. "We will start after a year from the successful trial. We have only a short window to work on the project between November and March," he said. "This will allow for more daylight and calmer seas; we can work safely and in a proper manner. During the rest of the year, the sea and the weather are too rough in the southern hemisphere for this work."

Alshehi's first job will be to locate a tabular-shaped iceberg outside the protected zone of Antarctica. Such a shape is considered more stable during

transit. "Every year, thousands of icebergs disintegrate from Antarctica, float north and melt," he said. "We expect the iceberg to lose 30 percent of its mass during the journey, but 70 percent is still great. That's still billions of gallons of water, so we'd be very lucky."

Once the iceberg is around 12 nautical miles from the UAE shore, the harvesting process – crushing the ice and filling floating tankers with smaller chunks – will commence. The resulting water will then either be directly added to the national grid or stored in wadis and reservoirs, although in the latter case there would be some loss from evaporation.

Alshehi estimates the amount of freshwater in the iceberg to be the equivalent of one year's worth of output of a typical desalination plant, in a region devoid of a permanent water source. He intends to approach government authorities once the first trial succeeds.

The technology was not in place to pull off such an ambitious project in 1975 when Saudi Arabia considered tugging icebergs to the Red Sea coast. "An international water transportation company was established with capital of \$100 million," Alshehi said.

"Unfortunately, after two years of extensive research and scientific studies, the project had to be abandoned due to technical reasons. There was no way to tow an iceberg through the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait, where the sea is in some places as shallow as 70 meters – not deep enough for large ships to tow an iceberg at the time."

But that was then. Today, Alshehi said, state-of-the-art tugboats operating in the deeper waters along the eastern coast of the UAE and of the Gulf have solved the problem that scuttled the 1975 plan.

Water scarcity is a big challenge. Currently, 1.2 billion people around the world don't have access to clean water.

Alshehi says his interest in production and conservation of freshwater grew out of his work on one of his inventions, Al-Maa, a technique for harvesting water in different weather conditions.

"During my research and getting the patent, I got involved in water issues," said Alshehi, whose own company, the Abu Dhabi-based National Advisor Bureau Ltd, specializes in thinking outside the box. "I thought water, along with desertification, is a major challenge for the Gulf. We have to deal with the situation with the available means. You need to combat desertification by finding new sources of water."

The desire to find a solution to the region's perennial scarcity of freshwater has drawn Alshehi into a number of astonishing ideas. One of them would require connecting the Indus River in Pakistan to the UAE by using sub-sea pipelines. He has also explored the idea of channelling water from Narmada, an important river in central India. "We can bring water from there to the UAE because both rivers cause flooding every year," he said.

Alshehi points out that the Indus pumps 60 billion to 80 billion gallons of water to the Arabian Sea every year and that, in 2010, a third of Pakistan was flooded due to heavy monsoon rains in the Indus River basin. "They got rid of this excess water in the ocean, but we are in need of it and this could help us fight desertification in the region," he told Arab News.

Another project Alshehi is researching involves the "great green wall of the UAE," stretching from Al-Sila, a city bordering Saudi Arabia, to Al-Ain. The purpose of the "wall" would be to prevent the Empty Quarter's sand from entering the UAE. "To make the desert in the UAE 'green,' we have to isolate it from the larger desert," he said.

For now, Alshehi is focused on his venture to replenish the UAE's supply of drinkable water from icebergs.

"Water scarcity is a big challenge. Currently, 1.2 billion people around the world don't have access to clean water," he said.



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Tow-an-iceberg plan being floated to ease Cape Town drought

US envoy to visit Qatar, Afghanistan for peace talks

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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WASHINGTON: The US special envoy will travel to Qatar and Afghanistan on Tuesday to resume peace talks with the Taliban and the Afghan government, the State Department said, as the United States seeks a resolution that will enable it to withdraw American troops from the country.

The US special representative to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, will resume talks with the Taliban in Doha "as part of an overall effort to facilitate a peace process that ends the conflict in Afghanistan," the department said in a statement.

He will consult with leaders of the Afghan government in Kabul and encourage negotiations between the two sides, it said.

Khalilzad briefed President Donald Trump on Friday on the status of negotiations with the Taliban on a US troop pullout from Afghanistan and the potential for a political settlement between the warring sides.

Trump said on Sunday that Washington was having "very good discussions" with both the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Trump, who has repeatedly questioned the billions of dollars spent in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has made no secret of his desire to pull out of Afghanistan after 19 years of war triggered by the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.



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[Iran curbs jailed British-Iranian aid worker's family contacts-BBC](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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DUBAI: Iranian authorities have restricted British-Iranian aid worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe's contacts with her daughter to once a month and banned her from calling her husband, the BBC reported on Tuesday.

"Richard Ratcliffe said new rules mean she cannot make international calls to him in London – and can only see their five-year-old daughter once a month,"

the BBC said on its website.

Britain's Guardian newspaper said Zaghari-Ratcliffe could previously see her daughter, who lives with her grandparents in Iran, every few days in prison. There was no immediate Iranian report or comment on the case.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe, a project manager with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, was arrested in 2016 at a Tehran airport as she headed back to Britain with her daughter after a family visit, and was subsequently sentenced to five years in jail after being convicted of plotting to overthrow Iran's clerical establishment.

Her family and a charity organisation defending her, which operates independently of Thomson Reuters and Reuters News, deny the charge.

Ratcliffe said his wife was returned to prison on Saturday after being discharged from hospital, following a hunger strike, according to the BBC.



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Explosion hits arms depot for Iran-backed faction in IraqUS says it has blocked billions of dollars from reaching Iran and its proxies

Emotions stir in Jerusalem as HBO's 'Our Boys' hits local airwaves

Author:

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JERUSALEM: A new HBO series on the killing of a Palestinian youth after three Israeli teens were murdered in a deadly summer five years ago is stirring up painful memories for bereaved families on both sides of the conflict.

"Our Boys," which premiered in Israel and the US last week, centers on Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a 16-year-old Palestinian who was abducted near his East Jerusalem home and burned to death by three Israelis, two of them also teenagers, in July 2014.

"I wish I could reach into the screen and grab hold of my son," Abu Khdeir's mother, Suha, told Reuters, her voice breaking, soon after watching the first two episodes of the series, a co-production of HBO and Israel's Keshet International and produced by Movie Plus.

"The show brought me right back to the pain, to the day he was kidnapped," she said.

Prosecutors said Abu Khdeir's convicted killers were avenging the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens – Naftali Frankel, Gilad Sha'er and Eyal Yifrach – in the occupied West Bank two weeks earlier by members of Hamas.

The deaths of the four youths spiraled into a seven-week war between Israel and Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip.

HBO's 10-episode dramatization dissects Israel's internal investigation into the three ultra-Orthodox Jews eventually convicted of Abu Khdeir's murder and the frantic initial days after his parents learned of his disappearance and death.

The Hebrew- and Arabic-language series was written, directed and produced by two Jewish Israelis and an Arab Israeli, who mix documentary footage with live production to delve into the micro details they say drive the conflict.

"We live in an extremely nuanced world where wars erupt because of tiny things," co-director Joseph Cedar, 50, said in an interview alongside collaborators Hagai Levi and Tawfik Abu Wael. "We tried to peel back the layers of this hate crime," he said.

But some bereaved Israeli families have said the show largely glosses over the murder of the three Israeli teens, who are referenced throughout the series but not included as characters.

Two Hamas suspects in the murders were killed in a 2014 shootout and in 2015 an Israeli court sentenced a third Hamas member to three life terms for the teens' abduction and murder.

Levi said the creators felt they had portrayed the context of Abu Khdeir's killing. "But the crime is the story," he said.



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Israeli bid to deport Jerusalem father 'illegal and immoral' Palestinian shot dead by Israel police in Jerusalem