

Houthis embroiled in aid agency corruption scandal

Author:

Mon, 2019-08-05 13:12

An Associated Press investigation has found that more than a dozen United Nations aid workers deployed to deal with the humanitarian crisis caused by five years of conflict in Yemen are being accused of graft to enrich themselves from an international outpouring of donated food, medicine, fuel and money.

A probe by UN agency, UNICEF, focuses on a staffer who allowed a Houthi militia leader to travel in agency vehicles, shielding him from potential airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition. The individuals who spoke to the AP about the investigations did so on condition of anonymity, fearing reprisals.

According to three people with knowledge of the probe, internal auditors at UNICEF are investigating Khurram Javed, a Pakistani national suspected of letting a senior Houthi official use an agency vehicle.

That effectively gave the Houthi official protection from airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis, since UNICEF clears its vehicles' movements with the coalition to ensure their safety.

Javed was well known for his close ties to Houthi security agencies; he boasted that he used his connection to prevent UNICEF auditors from entering the country, a former co-worker and an aid official said. The Houthi militias even put up a large billboard of him on a Sanaa street, thanking him for his services.

Javed could not be reached for comment. UNICEF officials confirmed that as part of an ongoing probe, an investigative team had traveled to Yemen to look into the allegations. They said Javed has been transferred to another office but did not disclose the location.

A confidential report by a UN panel of experts on Yemen, obtained by the AP, said Houthi authorities constantly pressure aid agencies, forcing them to hire loyalists, intimidating them with threats to revoke visas and aiming to control their movements and project implementation.

An official said the UN's inability or unwillingness to address the alleged corruption in its aid programs harms the agency's efforts to help Yemenis affected by the war.

"This is scandalous to any agency and ruins the impartiality of UN," the aid official said.



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Yemeni forces kill 8 Al-Qaeda militants and retake camp in south
Houthis massacre of Saada market kills 10: Yemeni official

[In post-war areas of Syria, mines upend civilian lives](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-08-05 09:46

DAMASCUS: After the fighting, Syrian farmer Abu Thayer returned to his farm to work. But he stepped on a land mine left behind by militants, changing his life for good.

At a medical charity in Damascus, the 46-year-old from the southern province of Daraa lifts up his black track pants to reveal a prosthetic leg.

"I was clearing out dead weeds and starting to plow when a land mine exploded," said the farmer, sitting upright on his bed.

"My life was turned upside down," said the agricultural worker, who asked for a pseudonym for fear of reprisal, his tanned face wrinkled beyond his years. Abu Thaer is one of thousands of civilians wounded by explosives left behind in fields, by roads or even in buildings by all sides in Syria's eight-year war.

Hundreds more have been killed by the explosives, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says.

In July alone, 15 children were among 30 civilians killed by land mines, explosives or grenades in various parts of the country, it says.

This year, truffle digging saw many people, including women and children, lose their lives in the country's center, northeast and east, state media has said.

Abu Thaer used to plant wheat and tomatoes in his village in the west of Daraa, before the area was overrun by jihadists affiliated to the Islamic State (IS) group.

Regime forces expelled the extremists from the area last summer after weeks of battle, but Abu Thaer says losing his leg has left him severely debilitated.

"I used to plow and cultivate the land, but now I'm no longer strong enough," Abu Thaer.

"I only do simple tasks."

Across Syria, more than 10 million people live in areas contaminated by explosive hazards, the United Nations says.

In areas it has retaken from rebels and jihadists with Russian backing since 2015, Syria's regime is working to clear explosives.

On a near daily basis, the defense ministry announces the detonation of large quantities of explosives left behind by anti-regime forces in areas recaptured by the government.

In the Eastern Ghouta region just outside Damascus, soldiers have been sweeping a hamlet and surrounding fields for hidden explosives, more than a year after rebels were ousted.

After uncovering them with metal detectors and long sticks, they moved mortars, ammunition stockpiles and rusty land mines into a deep pit.

A loud bang resonated and a thick cloud of black smoke rose overhead, after they detonated the stockpile remotely using a long blue fuse, according to an AFP team present at the site.

"It's a big challenge," said a commander with the Syrian army's engineering corps overseeing the mine clearing in Al-Muleha district.

The official, who also asked not to be named, said demining was especially difficult as "there are no maps of the land mines."

As a result, sweeping operations could take "decades," he added.

He accused rebels of having planted land mines in residential buildings, agricultural fields and state institutions before withdrawing.

"This has led to heavy losses," the commander told AFP, warning they pose a long-term threat.

Mayas Mahmud Issa, an army general who presides over clearing operations in Eastern Ghouta, said his teams have swept 21 towns and villages since the April 2018 recapture of the ex-rebel bastion.

"We have detonated 140 tons of ammunition and explosives of different shapes,

sizes and weights, both made locally and abroad,” he told AFP. But authorities still have a long way to go to mitigate the threat. In July 2018, the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) signed a memorandum of understanding with the government to establish a permanent representation in Damascus. The United Nations has trained 70 people and deployed them to areas in Damascus and Hama to raise awareness about explosive hazards, UN spokeswoman Fadwa Abedrabou Baroud said. It is also planning similar awareness campaigns for Syria’s southern provinces, including Daraa, Baroud added. In recent weeks, Syrians have been receiving text messages on their phones warning them of the dangers of unexploded ordnance. “Explosive remnants are dangerous. Do not touch... Immediately alert the nearest authority,” reads one such message. But for Abu Thaer, the land mine threat is still a real one. One year after his leg was amputated, he says he fears more mine explosions.





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Centuries-old bazaar in Syria's Aleppo making slow recovery
Syrian eateries flourish in the heart of Sudan's capital

[Dutch band cancels Lebanon gig in support of local group](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-08-04 23:19

BEIRUT: A Dutch band said on Sunday it had canceled its gig at a top Lebanon festival in solidarity with a Lebanese group pulled from the event after threats over alleged offense to Christians.

Within Temptation joined other activists in protest after festival organizers last week pulled Lebanese indie group Mashrou' Leila from the program over fears of "bloodshed."

The Dutch symphonic-rock outfit had been set to play on Wednesday at the event in the Christian-majority seaside town of Byblos.

"We have decided to cancel our show in Byblos in solidarity with Mashrou' Leila and in support of tolerance, freedom of speech and expression," they said in a statement on Facebook.

They made the decision after learning the festival had withdrawn Mashrou' Leila from the program "due to security reasons after religious fanatics demanded their performance to be canceled followed by violent threats," they said. Lebanese Christian clerics have accused Mashrou' Leila, whose singer is openly gay, of offending Christians in two of their songs titled "Idols" and "Djin."

Critics on social media also threatened to attack the concert if the Lebanese band went ahead with the performance on Aug. 9.

On Sunday, the festival's artistic director said he was saddened to have lost another band but did not regret last week's decision to cancel Mashrou' Leila.

"We have never before canceled a performance ... If we did it this time, albeit with an enraged heart, it's because we absolutely had to."

Naji Baz, Director, music festival

"The security of our artists and audience is our absolute priority," Naji Baz told AFP.

“We have never before canceled a performance ... If we did it this time, albeit with an enraged heart, it’s because we absolutely had to,” he said. Mashrou’ Leila has said it “sincerely regrets causing offense to anyone’s beliefs” but denied that any of its songs were religiously offensive.

Rights groups have denounced an increase in restrictions on freedom of expression, while activists and fans have protested in the street and online.

Religiously diverse Lebanon is one of the Middle East’s more liberal countries, but its myriad of recognized sects still wield major influence over social and cultural affairs.

Mashrou’ Leila has often played in Lebanon since forming in 2008 while its members were still students at the American University of Beirut.

But it has created waves in the religiously conservative Middle East.

After a Mashrou’ Leila concert in Egypt in 2017, at which members of the audience waved a rainbow flag, Egyptian authorities launched a crackdown on the country’s LGBT community.

Its concerts in Jordan were canceled in 2016 and 2017.



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Starting over: Mashrou’ Leila celebrate 10 years in music Mashrou’ Leila to

[Turkey warns of cross-border operation into eastern Syria](#)

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ISTANBUL: Turkey's president has renewed a pledge for a cross-border military operation into northeastern Syria.

In a speech Sunday, Recep Tayyip Erdogan said: "We've entered Afrin, Jarablus, Al-Bab. Now we will enter the east of the Euphrates."

Talks between US and Turkish officials have stalled over creating a safe zone in Syria east of the Euphrates River. The aim is to address Turkey's security concerns about Syrian Kurdish militias in the region.

Turkey views these Kurdish militias – who battled the Daesh group alongside US forces – as terrorists, allied with a Kurdish insurgency inside Turkey.

Erdogan added: "We have shared this with the US and Russia."

Turkey conducted two operations into northern Syria in 2016 and 2018 to clear the areas of IS extremists and US-backed Syrian Kurdish militias.



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[Egypt displays restoration of Tutankhamun gilded coffin](#)

Author:

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CAIRO: Egypt displayed on Sunday the gilded coffin of Tutankhamun, under restoration for the first time since the boy king's tomb was discovered in 1922.

The restoration process began in mid-July after the three-tiered coffin was transferred to the new Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo from the Valley of the Kings in Luxor, southern Egypt.



“We are showing you a unique historical artefact, not just for Egypt but for the world,” Antiquities Minister Khaled el-Enany told a press conference at the new museum, which overlooks the famed Giza Pyramids.

The golden coffin of the boy king will be displayed along with other Tutankhamun artefacts toward the end of next year when Egypt’s new mega-museum is opened to the public.

The restoration is expected to take around eight months.



The outer gilded wood coffin stands at 2.23 meters (7.3 feet) and is decorated with a depiction of the boy king holding the pharaonic symbols the flail and crook, according to the ministry. In the last century, the coffin has “developed cracks in its gilded layers of plaster, especially those of the lid and base.”



Famed British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered the tomb of the 18th dynasty king in Luxor in 1922. Sunday's announcement comes after the controversy the Pharaoh courted in early July when a 3,000-year-old Tutankhamun artefact was sold in London for \$6 million. Furious Egyptian officials condemned the sale and asked the international police agency Interpol to trace the artefact which it deems looted.















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Egypt asks Interpol to trace Tutankhamun mask over ownership docs
Tutankhamun relic sells for \$6 mn in London despite Egyptian outcry