

Gibraltar police arrest two more officers of detained Iranian tanker

Fri, 2019-07-12 16:20

GIBRALTAR: Gibraltar police said Friday they have arrested two more officers from a seized Iranian tanker suspected of breaching EU sanctions by shipping oil to Syria, a day after detaining the captain and chief officer. All four men are Indian nationals and are being questioned in connection with an “investigation of the suspected export of crude oil to the Banyas refinery in Syria”, the Royal Gibraltar Police said in a statement.



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Gibraltar police arrest captain, officer of detained Iran tanker Grace 1
Iran threatens British shipping in retaliation for tanker seizure off Gibraltar

UN urges Yemen Houthi court to review 30 death sentences

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Fri, 2019-07-12 10:36

GENEVA: Thirty men were sentenced to death by Houthi authorities in Yemen this week amid credible allegations that many were tortured during three years of politically-motivated detention, the UN human rights office said on Friday.

It urged the Appellate Court in the Houthi-held capital of Sanaa, which is due to review the ruling, to take into account the serious allegations and violations of their right to a fair trial and due process in the lower court. The specialised first instance criminal court handed down the death sentences on Tuesday, UN human rights spokeswoman Ravina Shamdasani said.

Most of the 30 men are academics, students and politicians "affiliated with the Islah party that has been critical of the Houthis", she told a news briefing. She was referring to an Islamist party that is part of the Saudi-backed government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

"At no point were they given a proper chance to present a defense," Shamdasani said.

Houthi officials did not respond immediately to a Reuters request for comment.

The men were arrested in 2016 and charged in April 2017 with allegedly participating in an organised armed group intending to carry out attacks on or assassinations of security personnel and popular committees affiliated with the Houthis, and providing intelligence to other parties, Shamdasani said.

"There is a high likelihood that many of these charges are politically-motivated. There are very credible allegations of torture and mistreatment, our teams have been able to speak to families," Shamdasani said.

"Any politically-motivated charges should be dismissed and international fair trial standards fully complied with," she said.

Amnesty International, in a statement this week, denounced what it called a "sham trial" where the 30 men faced "trump-up charges including espionage for the Saudi Arabia-led coalition."

Detainees include Youssef Al-Bawab, a linguistics professor and political figure who was held in incommunicado detention amid allegations of torture and lack of access to legal counsel and medical care, the London-based group said.



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US wants military coalition to safeguard waters off Iran, Yemen
Yemen Houthi court condemns 30 to death for 'spying'

[Body count hits 68 since migrant boat sinking off Tunisia](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2019-07-11 23:33

TUNIS: The Red Crescent said 38 more bodies were recovered Thursday from the sea off Tunisia, raising to 68 the number found since an Italy-bound boat filled with migrants sank last week, the worst migrant boat disasters to date.

Thirty-six of the apparent victims were found close to Zarzis in southeast

Tunisia and two off the nearby island of Djerba, the Tunisian Red Crescent's Mongi Slim said.

A Malian survivor, one of only three to have escaped with their lives, has told the UN's International Organization for Migration that 86 people had been on board the dinghy which capsized on July 1.

"Only today, the Coast Guard recovered 38 bodies off the coast of Zarzis, bringing the death toll to 58," said Mongi Slim, an official of the Tunisian Red Crescent.

The boat, filled with mostly African migrants, tipped over shortly after setting out from the Libyan town of Zuwara, west of Tripoli, with the aim of reaching Italy.

Tunisian fishermen rescued four people who were on board the same overcrowded boat but one later died in hospital, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said last week.

Libya has in recent years been a major departure point for migrants seeking to reach Europe in perilous journeys across the Mediterranean.



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[Assad hits a wall in Syrian war as front lines harden](#)

Thu, 2019-07-11 22:32

BEIRUT/AMMAN: The Syrian regime's assault in the northwest has been met with

a painful opposition counterpunch that underlines Turkish resolve to keep the area out of his hands and shows why he will struggle to take back more of Syria by force.

More than two months of Russian-backed operations in and around Idlib province have yielded little or nothing for Bashar Assad's side. It marks a rare case of a military campaign that has not gone his way since Russia intervened in 2015.

While resisting regime attacks, the insurgents have managed to carve out small advances of their own, drawing on ample stocks of guided antitank missiles that opposition and diplomatic sources say have been supplied by Turkey.

"They're even targeting personnel with these missiles ... it means they are comfortably supplied," an opposition source said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was discussing opposition military capabilities. Turkey's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on reports that Ankara has stepped supplies of arms to opposition fighters.

With Turkey committed to the opposition, the battle for the northwest stands in stark contrast to a campaign in the southwest a year ago, when Western and Arab states stood by as Assad and his Russian- and Iranian-backed allies took the area.

Despite Russian backing in the latest fighting, questions have arisen over whether Assad and his allies are entirely on the same page when it comes to the northwest, where Turkey has deployed forces in agreement with Russia and Iran.

Moscow has appeared keen to preserve its ties with Ankara even as its air force bombs in support of Assad: Turkey says Russia has intervened to stop attacks on Turkish forces from Syrian regime-held territory.

And this time there has been no sign of a major role for Iranian backed Shiite forces that have helped Assad to victories in parts of Syria that are of greater interest to Iran, including territory near Iraq, Lebanon and Israel.

The capture of the southwest a year ago remains Assad's last big gain. The prospects of further advances have been obstructed not only by Turkish interests in the northwest but also the presence of US forces in the east and northeast.

American troops are still supporting Kurdish-led fighters following a reversal of President Donald Trump's decision last December to pull them all out.

After more than eight years of war, this leaves Syria carved up into areas of US, Russian, Turkish and Iranian influence that seem unlikely to be stitched back together any time soon.

"We could see the front lines harden and remain like that for some time, where either the appetite or capability to fight through them is not there on the part of the regime or its allies," said a Western diplomat speaking anonymously in order to offer a candid assessment.

'Bone-breaking battle'

The Idlib area is dominated by Tahrir Al-Sham, formerly known as the Nusra Front. Proscribed as a terrorist group by the UN Security Council, the group has set aside past conflict with Turkish backed opposition to defend the northwest.

Col. Mustafa Bakour, a commander in the Jaish Al-Izza fighter group, said coordination among opposition was a major factor in foiling regime attacks.

"I expect the battles to continue for a time because it has become a bone-breaking battle," he said in written answers to questions from Reuters.

The regime campaign of airstrikes and barrel bombing that began in late April was followed by the capture of around 20 villages. This led to an opposition counterattack in early June that seized ground the regime has been unable to recover.

The Syrian regime has described its operations as a response to militant violations of cease-fire agreements.

Russia says action was needed to stop attacks from being launched from Idlib, including drone strikes on its nearby air base. President Vladimir Putin said in April a full-scale operation in Idlib was impractical for now.

Though the regime has not declared the goals of the campaign, opposition sources believe it was to capture two highways that pass through opposition-held territory.

Some 300,000 people fleeing bombardment have moved toward the Turkish border since April, prompting the UN to warn that Idlib was on the brink of a "humanitarian nightmare."

For Ankara, the Syrian opposition's last major state sponsor, preventing another major influx of Syrian refugees is of paramount importance: Turkey already hosts 3.6 million of them.

While accusing the Syrian regime of targeting civilians and its military observation posts in the Idlib area, Turkey has stopped short of blaming Russia, instead saying it would continue to cooperate with Moscow over the northwest.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry, in a written response to questions from Reuters, also said "necessary messages have been sent to Russian officials to end the attacks on our observation points and civilians" in the Idlib area.

Hundreds of civilians have been killed, as have many fighters on both sides, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Observatory Director Rami Abdulrahman described the operation as “a failure on all levels” for Russia and Damascus.

A Russian private military contractor who was based near Idlib province told Reuters that opposition fighters there are far more professional and motivated than their adversary. Pro-regime forces cannot win the battle for Idlib unless Moscow helps them on the ground, he said.

A second Western diplomat said the regime had suffered heavy casualties for minimal gains, which was “deeply embarrassing.” “Turkey is trying to tell them ‘you cannot take this militarily. You have to negotiate’,” the diplomat said.

A regional source close to Damascus described the escalation since April as a limited confrontation, saying Russia’s ties with Turkey were the main brake on any full-scale assault to take the entire northwest.

“Of course the regime has the desire to recover Idlib by force, but ... without the Russians it can’t, because there are many militants and the Russians are completely committed to the Turks,” the source said. “It is expected that the situation in Idlib will stay as it is for a long time.”



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Car bomb at rebel checkpoint in Syria's Afrin kills 13: monitor
clashes, car blast in northwest Syria leave 84 dead

[Palestinians reject US charge of increased prisoner stipends](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-07-11 22:11

JERUSALEM: The cash-strapped Palestinian Authority (PA) denied on Thursday US allegations it had increased payments to families of militants in Israeli jails, and said the main obstacle to peace was Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

US officials have criticised the PA's prisoner stipends as fanning Palestinian violence, and US President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt said the PA had increased those payments by some 11 percent in the first months of 2019.

"PA increased pay to murderers by over 11% at the same time as they slash pay to their government workers and police," Greenblatt tweeted on Wednesday. "More harm to Palestinians & to peace!"

The Palestinian Finance Ministry rejected the accusation as "absolutely false and hypocritical" and said Washington was lending financial support to Israel's occupation of the West Bank.

"It is known to everyone that Israel's illegal colonial settlements, funded by American taxpayer money, continue to be the obstacle to peace," a ministry spokesman told Reuters.

PA fiscal records reviewed by Reuters show no marked increase in what they refer to as "assistance for prisoners and detainees". Monthly payments were around 42 million shekels (\$11.85 million) in December 2018, decreasing to 38.4 million shekels (\$10.83 million) in April 2019.

Payments spiked to 75 million shekels (\$21.15 million) in May 2019, which a ministry spokesman attributed to arrears payments and a bonus for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Civil servant salaries also spiked in May. Later data was not available.

The PA, which exercises limited self-rule in the West Bank, has been grappling with a financial crisis since it refused in February to accept tax transfers from Israel after Israeli authorities cut the portion designated for prisoners' families.

Under interim peace accords, Israel collects taxes on imports into the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, an enclave under Palestinian Islamist rule since 2007, and makes monthly transfers of the proceeds to the PA.

The tax transfers of around 700 million (\$197 million) shekels per month make up about half of the PA's budget, and the government has slashed civil servant salaries since March to weather the crisis.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has refused to accept the partial tax remittances from Israel, saying the PA is entitled to all the money under

interim peace deals.

The mounting financial pressures on the PA have sent its debt soaring to \$3 billion, and led to a severe contraction in its estimated \$13 billion GDP economy, according to the PA's top central banker.



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Palestinian militant killed by Israeli fire near Gaza border: HamasIsrael says it shot down drone that crossed from Gaza