

US says aware of reports of Iran's detention of US citizen

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WASHINGTON: The US State Department said on Tuesday it was aware of reports of the detention of a US citizen held in Iran for more than six months, amid heightened tensions between the countries following the reimposition of US sanctions.

The New York Times reported on Monday that Michael R. White, a 46-year-old US Navy veteran, was seized while visiting Iran and has been held in jail since July on unspecified charges.

His mother, Joanne White, told the New York Times her son had visited Iran "five or six times" to meet his Iranian girlfriend. He had bought a ticket to return from Iran, but never boarded his flight on July 27.

Asked about the reports, a US State Department spokesman said: "We are aware of reports of the detention of a US citizen in Iran."

The spokesman declined to provide additional information, citing privacy considerations.

Iranian officials have not reacted to the reports, and were not immediately available for comment.

A former detainee in Iran, Ivar Farhadi, told the London-based IranWire website he had spoken to White when they were both at Vakilabad Prison in the city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran.

The New York Times quoted White's mother as saying her son, a California resident, suffers acute asthma and had undergone chemotherapy and radiation treatment for a neck tumor.

Tension between Iran and the United States has risen significantly since last May, when US President Donald Trump withdrew from an international nuclear deal with Tehran and reimposed US sanctions that had been lifted after a 2015 accord.

Several Americans have been detained in Iran in recent years and Trump warned in 2017 that Tehran would face "new and serious consequences" unless all unjustly held US citizens were freed.

Former FBI agent Robert Levinson disappeared while visiting Iran's Kish Island in 2007. US officials believe Levinson, who suffered from diabetes, died in captivity after meeting with an American-born Islamic militant. Iranian officials have repeatedly denied knowledge of his disappearance or whereabouts.

In October 2015, Siamak Namazi, a businessman in his mid-40s with dual US-Iranian citizenship, was detained as he was visiting family in Tehran. His 82-year-old father, Baquer Namazi, was also arrested in February 2016 and later convicted of espionage charges which he denied.

Xiyue Wang, a Chinese-born US citizen and graduate student from Princeton University, was arrested in Iran in 2016. He was sentenced to 10 years in

jail on spying charges that he denied.



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[Sudan town holds rally for 'martyrs' killed in protests](#)

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KHARTOUM: Hundreds of protesters on Tuesday staged a "martyrs' rally" in an eastern Sudanese town to honor those killed in anti-government protests last month, witnesses said.

Deadly protests have rocked Sudan since December 19, when unrest broke out

over the price of bread.

Authorities say at least 19 people including two security personnel have been killed during the demonstrations, but rights groups say around 40 people have died.

Six people were killed in Al-Gadaref, an impoverished agricultural town in eastern Sudan.

On Tuesday, protesters staged what organizers said was a "martyrs' rally" to mark the deaths in Al-Gadaref.

The main market was shut as demonstrators gathered in the downtown area, chanting slogans such as "Peace, justice, freedom" and "Revolution is the choice of the people."

Demonstrators were confronted by riot police who fired tear gas as protesters prepared to march to the provincial council building, witnesses said.

Groups of protesters managed to reach the compound of the council building and one of their representatives read out a petition calling for President Omar Al-Bashir to resign, one witness told AFP by telephone on condition of anonymity.

The protest was organized by the Sudanese Professionals' Association, a group of teachers, doctors and engineers that has spearheaded the ongoing anti-government demonstrations across the country.

Sudanese authorities could not be reached to comment on the rally.

Authorities have launched a crackdown on opposition leaders, activists and journalists to prevent the spread of protests.

More than 800 protesters have been arrested across Sudan since the unrest began, Interior Minister Ahmed Bilal Osman said Monday while describing the current situation as "calm and stable."

Sources said that 118 buildings were destroyed in the protests, including 18 that belonged to police, while 194 vehicles were set on fire including 15 that belonged to international organizations.

Several buildings and offices of Bashir's ruling National Congress Party (NCP) were torched in the initial violence.

Bashir, who has ruled Sudan since 1989, told police last month to use "less force" in their response to demonstrators.

Protests broke out when the government raised the price of a small loaf of bread from 1 Sudanese pound to 3 (from 2 to 6 US cents).

Sudan has been facing a mounting economic crisis over the past year, led by an acute shortage of foreign currency.

Food and fuel shortages have been regularly reported across several cities, including the capital Khartoum, while the cost of food and medicine has more than doubled and inflation has hit 70 percent.



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[Lebanon's winter storm freezes refugees in flooded camps](#)

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Tue, 2019-01-08 14:50

BEIRUT: Storms in Lebanon have flooded Syrian refugee camps, ruining tents, mattresses and food and compounding the misery of people enduring powerful winter winds and biting cold.

More than a million Syrians fled to neighbouring Lebanon since war broke out

at home in 2011, and UN agencies say most live of them live in poverty.

"There is almost half a metre of water on the ground and in the tents ... the war in Syria forced us into this situation," said Hussein Zeidan who came to Lebanon from Homs in Syria in 2011.

He lives in a makeshift camp near a river in north Lebanon's Akkar region. He and some of its other residents said the storm had left them and their children with no clothes, furniture or food.

Families were moving around in search of dryness and warmth.

"Water flooded us in the camp: me and my children. Our situation is bad ... God bless our neighbours, they welcomed us in yesterday night. Today, water flooded them so we came here, as you can see, to this half-built house with no windows or doors," Ghazwan Zeidan, who has three children, said in Akkar. The UN refugee agency said on Tuesday that the storm had completely flooded or collapsed 15 informal settlements out of at least 66 that were "heavily impacted".

In the Bekaa valley in east Lebanon, the cold temperatures have also brought snow.

Abu Shahid, who fled Hasaka in Syria three years ago with his family, stood in flooded water in an informal camp in Bar Elias village. He described how his tent had completely submerged, damaging all his family's belongings.

"The only solution is to leave our things and move, run away with our lives ... Water is everywhere, where do we go?," he said. The previous night, he and his wife and two children had slept in a neighbour's tent that was less damaged by the floods.

For 19-year-old Hamed Haj Abu and his relatives, the night was cold and wet. "We did not sleep all night. Some were sleeping for an hour, others were waking up. Water was coming on us, in the tent, from everywhere," he said in Bar Elias.

"My brother and his family first came to us, they are living nearby. We all did not sleep, we left the tent all together, we can't sit, look, water is flooding, we can't sleep on water."









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[UN warns of 'horrific' human trafficking](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-01-07 23:36

NEW YORK: Human trafficking is becoming more “horrific” in conflict zones, where armed groups keep women as sex slaves and use child soldiers to spread fear, the UN said on Monday, warning of widespread impunity.

From girls forced to wed to boys made to cook and clean, militants are using trafficking as a tool to boost their control in areas where the rule of law is weak, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in a report.

The use of children as soldiers and suicide bombers in nations such as Colombia and Nigeria, and the sexual enslavement of Yazidi women by Daesh in

Iraq and Syria, have grabbed headlines and sparked global anger in recent years.

Yet police and prosecutors are often not equipped to deal with the recruitment and exploitation of children by extremist groups – while global convictions of traffickers remain very low – according to the UNODC’s annual report on human trafficking.

“Trafficking is found in connection with most armed conflicts,” said Yury Fedotov, executive director of the UNODC. “In situations characterized by violence, brutality and coercion, traffickers can operate with even greater impunity.”

“Child soldiers, forced labor, sexual slavery – human trafficking has taken on horrific dimensions as armed groups and terrorists use it to spread fear and gain victims to offer as incentives to recruit new fighters,” he said in a statement.

Fedotov said the award of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize to Nadia Murad – a former Daesh sex slave turned Yazidi activist and UN ambassador – was an “important recognition” and urged the world to stop the use of rape as a weapon of war.

The UNODC’s report said that while countries are finding more victims – mostly women trafficked for sex – and convicting more traffickers, the total number of convictions remained very low in many nations – especially in Africa and the Middle East.

“In some countries ... there appears to be hardly any risk for traffickers to face justice,” the report said.

About 40 million people worldwide are living as slaves – trapped in forced labor or forced marriages – according to a landmark estimate by Australian rights group the Walk Free Foundation and the UN International Labour Organization (ILO).

Yet campaigners say more and better data is needed to track progress in pursuit of a UN target of ending modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030 as many victims around the world – including child soldiers – are going uncounted.

“Sound information and a solid base of evidence for our policies are two of the most important things to fight this disgusting crime in the most efficient way possible,” Karin Kneissl, Austria’s foreign minister, said at the report launch.

“We simply need to know what it actually is we are dealing with,” she added.



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UN investigation delves into Daesh's crimes against Yazidis
Yazidi mothers of children by Daesh face heartbreaking choices

[Top US officials visit Ankara amid tensions on Syria](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-01-07 22:38

ANKARA: A delegation of top US officials will visit Turkey on Tuesday to discuss joint plans after the US withdraws from Syria.

US National Security Advisor John Bolton, Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr. and James Jeffrey, a US special representative for Syria and the anti-Daesh coalition, will hold talks with Turkish officials in Ankara.

The latest meeting comes amid rebuke over recent comments made by Secretary

of State Mike Pompeo in which he said that the US hoped to stop Turkey from “slaughtering” Kurds in Syria.

Meanwhile, new remarks made by Bolton revealed that the US would put some conditions on its pullout process, meaning the 2,000 American troops slated to leave the country could remain for months.

During a visit to Israel, Bolton said American forces would stay in Syria until Daesh remnants were defeated and Ankara guaranteed the security of the Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian-Kurdish militia that has spearheaded the US-allied Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against Daesh.

Despite a US pledge to bring American soldiers back home quickly, major disagreements between Turkey and the US over the alliance with the Kurdish militia will likely slow down the process.

“We don’t think the Turks ought to undertake military action that’s not fully coordinated with and agreed to by the US,” Bolton said regarding the concerns that Turkey may launch a military offensive against the YPG once the American forces pull out.

But Ankara insists that Turkey only targets Daesh and the YPG, which it sees as the offshoot of outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Since 2015, Turkey has already launched two military operations in northern Syria against the YPG, while before the US pullout announcement, Turkey was planning a new attack on YPG-held areas in the eastern bank of the Euphrates River.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told US President Donald Trump that Turkey pledged to continue fighting Daesh in Syria.

Turkey reportedly demands US air support for any efforts against Daesh in areas along Syria’s border with Iraq.

Ziya Meral, senior resident fellow at the British Army’s Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research, said the priorities of the US and Turkey over northern Syria are difficult to reconcile, not least because it is not clear what it is that the Trump administration actually want to see in the long term.

“For Turkey, this is a question of national security and risks that are posed by a militant group it has been fighting for decades assuming long term territorial control on its borders,” he told Arab News.

“For the US, it is about Daesh and not leaving behind a vacuum and there is the elusive talk of containing Iranian reach. If taken to its logical outcome, this means indefinite US presence in northern Syria.”

According to Meral, what the US can hope to achieve at best is a short-term commitment from Turkey not to launch a new operation.

"But this would mean a YPG pullout from certain areas, which is not clear, especially given both Turkish talks with Russia, but also YPG talks with Assad regime," he said.

In December, some Syrian Kurdish representatives reportedly met with senior Russian officials to discuss a Russian-mediated political deal with the Syrian Assad regime.

Meral noted that, while it is clear it will never accept a PKK dominated landscape on its borders, Turkey too needs an exit strategy from Syria, at the moment it is deepening its presence to problematic long-term outcomes.

"The US could use this pull-out process creatively for a long-term strategy as it has leverage on both PKK and Turkey, but at the moment Trump administration is wanting on such long-term thinking," he said.

Yusuf Erim, a prominent political expert, expects this visit at least set down in the framework of what Turkish operations will look like, whether the United States is on board with that,

According to Erim, if Turkey doesn't see Bolton's requests as feasible, then it will go back to square one, meaning Turkey will conduct a military operation despite US military presence in Syria.

In this case, there would be complexities to the scope of the military operation, which means it should be better coordinated, he added.

Erim said there were red lines for both parties and that officials would hopefully reach a deal over them.

"The red line for the Americans is obviously Kurdish civilians in the area and the minority groups," he said.

"Turkey's red line is the YPG, which the Americans view as allies. Turkey would not accept any US demand to allow the YPG to freely roam the region."

The US will give a green light to some type of Turkish operation in Syria, just maybe not to the extent that Turkey wants, according to Erim, who reiterated recent debates about a 40-mile buffer zone into Syria.

"This buffer zone will address Turkey's security concerns and it also might be feasible for the Americans as well," he said.

"I'm expecting the buffer zone idea to come to the forefront during these meetings in Ankara. If fighting Daesh is back on the table, we have to realize that it just 300 kilometers away from the Turkish borders, which will totally change the scope of the operation and add new complexities, which the Turkish army can deal with."



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US pullout from Syria to be done in 'prudent' way: TrumpRival powers vying for space to grab in Syria's east