

UNICEF warns of 'dire' winter risks for 1 million children in Middle East and North Africa

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AMMAN: The UN children's fund warned Tuesday that a funding gap and the start of winter could leave nearly one million children "out in the cold" in the Middle East and North Africa.

"Years of conflict, displacement and unemployment have reduced families' financial resources to almost nothing. Staying warm has simply become unaffordable," said Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

The UN agency said it was facing a \$33-million funding gap -- two thirds of its total allocation -- for assistance to children across the region this winter.

Cold and rainy weather would hit those living in extremely basic conditions, especially camps or crowded shelters with little protection.

"With cold and rainy weather sweeping across the Middle East and North Africa, nearly one million children affected by crises in the region risk being left out in the cold," Cappelaere said in a statement.

"With little nutritious food and health care, children have grown weak, becoming prone to hypothermia and dangerous respiratory diseases," he said. UNICEF said it aims this winter to reach 1.3 million children in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt, providing them with warm clothes, thermal blankets, clean water and other hygiene support.



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[winter](#)

[children](#)

[British radio presenter found dead in Lebanon](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2018-11-27 13:38

BEIRUT: A well-known British radio presenter who had been living in Lebanon for years was found dead in his apartment in a mountain town near Beirut on Tuesday after being apparently murdered, Lebanese officials said.

Gavin Ford, who joined the Lebanese station Radio One in 1995, was found dead on Tuesday at his home in the town of Beit Meri, east of Beirut.

Local broadcaster LBC TV reported that Ford had been murdered by strangulation and blows to the head.

Radio One announced Ford's death on its Facebook page on Tuesday.

Ford's daily breakfast show turned him into one of the station's most popular broadcasters.

"We are heartbroken to announce the passing of our dear Gavin Ford, a member of our team for many joyful years," Radio One said.

I am shocked and deeply saddened by the death of Gavin Ford, one of Lebanon's most popular morning breakfast hosts. The thoughts of all at the Embassy are with his family, friends and colleagues at this terribly difficult time. pic.twitter.com/BRzbyPoYUV

– Chris Rampling (@crampling) [November 27, 2018](#)

Tributes poured in on social media for Ford, one of Lebanon's most-loved radio hosts for years.

Ford had been living in Lebanon for 22 years in a house in Beit Meri, close to the radio station where he worked. The town, 17 km from Beirut, is in a mountainous area with a Christian majority and is popular with visitors in summer.

As Radio One's management expressed its condolences to Ford's family, a British Embassy spokeswoman told Arab News that "the embassy is in contact with the Lebanese authorities. We are examining the reports related to the British citizen and our staff are providing help to his family."

Lebanon's National News Agency (NNA) said that a forensic doctor had examined Ford's body as part of a police investigation.

Britain's Ambassador to Lebanon, Chris Rampling, tweeted: "I am shocked and deeply saddened by the death of Gavin Ford, one of Lebanon's most popular morning breakfast hosts."

"The thoughts of all at the Embassy are with his family, friends and colleagues at this terribly difficult time," Rampling said.

In December, British Embassy worker Rebecca Dykes was found murdered on the side of a road near Beirut. The suspected killer, an Uber driver, was later detained and is expected to stand trial.



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Hariri office denies Lebanon turned down Russian aid
Governor attends Lebanon Independence Day celebration in Riyadh

[Briton Matthew Hedges returns to London after UAE spying pardon](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2018-11-27 08:22

LONDON: British academic Matthew Hedges returned to London on Tuesday a day after the UAE pardoned his life sentence for spying.

Britain on Monday thanked the UAE after he was among more than 700 prisoners pardoned by UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed for next month's National

Day.

"After almost seven months of detention, including six months in solitary confinement, British PhD researcher Matthew Hedges has returned safely back to London," his family said in a statement.

He was welcomed back to Britain by his wife Daniela Tejada and other members of his family.

"I don't know where to begin with thanking people for securing my release," Hedges said in the statement.

"I have not seen or read much of what has been written over the past few days but Dani tells me the support has been incredible."

Welcome home Matt Hedges! The whole country is relieved and delighted to have you home. Thanks to [@PatrickMoodyFCO](#) and the FCO team in UAE for your tireless work behind the scenes to make today possible

– Jeremy Hunt (@Jeremy_Hunt) [November 27, 2018](#)

He thanked the British embassy in the United Arab Emirates, the Foreign Office and especially his wife for their efforts in securing his release.

"She is so brave and strong. Seeing her and my family after this ordeal is the best thing that could have happened," Hedges said.

"I thank you all once again. This is very surreal."

The UAE showed footage at a news conference in the capital Abu Dhabi in which Hedges purportedly confessed to being an MI6 foreign intelligence agent. British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt expressed gratitude to the UAE, a strategic ally.

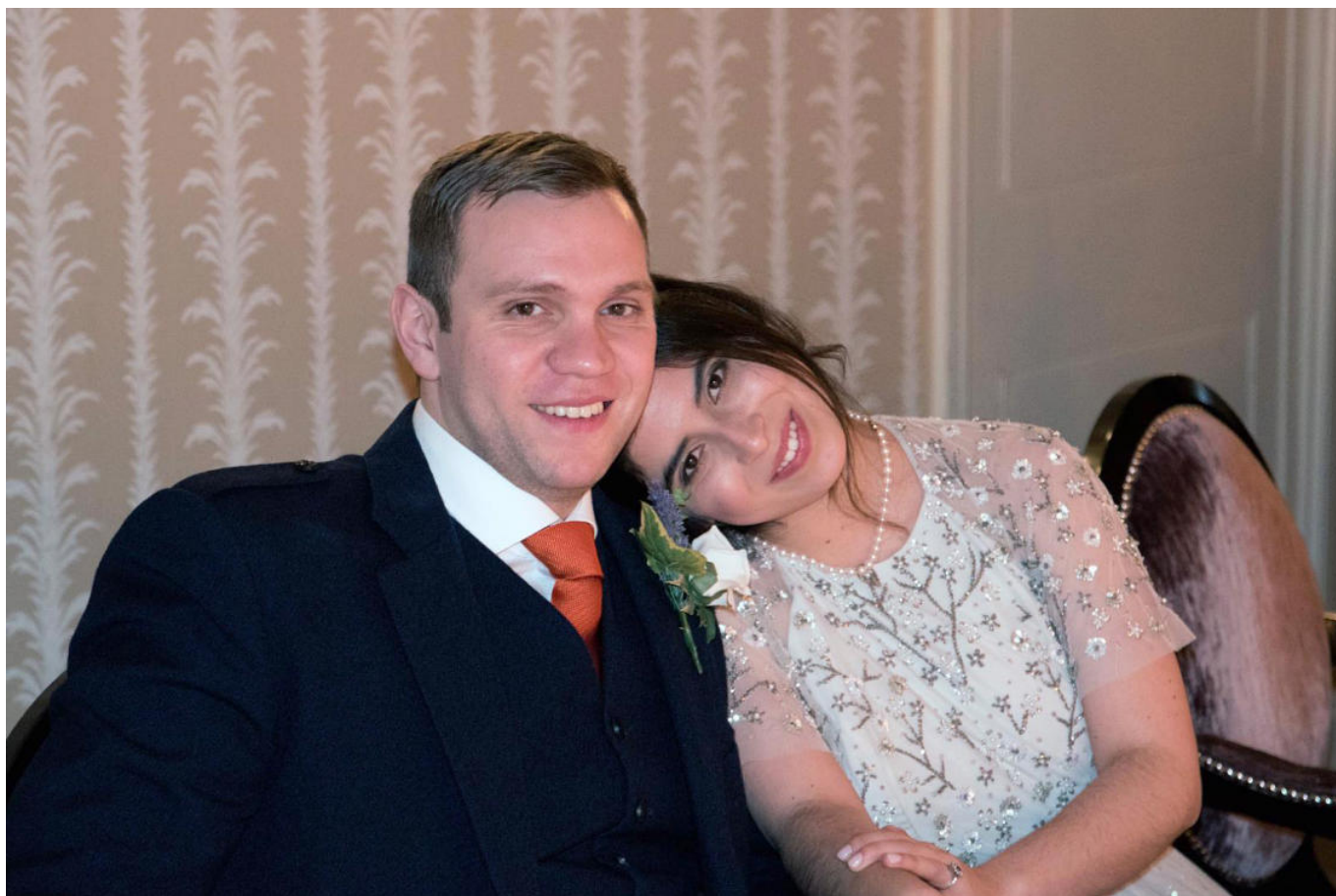
"I am so happy to have my Matt home," Tejada said on Tuesday. "We are overjoyed and exhausted!"

Hedges, a 31-year-old researcher at Durham University, was detained while researching the UAE's foreign and internal security policies after the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011.

He was arrested on May 5 at Dubai airport.

He was sentenced to life in jail by a court in Abu Dhabi last week after he was convicted of spying for a foreign country.

UAE state minister for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash said the pardon allowed the two countries to refocus on developing relations.



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UAE pardons Briton Matthew Hedges after spying life sentence UAE reviewing clemency request in Briton spy case

[Ankara urged to clear Idlib of extremists to uphold truce](#)

Author:

Mon, 2018-11-26 23:34

ANKARA: As the 11th round of the Astana peace talks approaches, the state of the seven-year conflict in Syria is setting off alarm bells.

Experts interviewed by Arab News underlined the need for Ankara to take more responsibility for convincing thousands of the remaining rebels to withdraw from the area and abandon their heavy weapons as agreed with Moscow in September, as the survival of the truce was under threat from escalating

tensions between the warring parties.

Although Moscow and Ankara decided on Sept. 17 to establish a 15-20 kilometer demilitarized buffer zone between regime forces and opposition groups, armed groups are refusing to withdraw and all heavy weapons have not been removed.

Insurgents are blamed by the Syrian regime and Russia for carrying out a suspected toxic gas attack in Aleppo in Syria late on Saturday, injuring more than 100 people. Russian warplanes retaliated by bombing the militants.

Moscow, which said that the attack came from a territory that opposition groups control in the neighboring province of Idlib, announced that it would take up the issue with Turkey, the other guarantor country of the region, which backs some opposition factions.

Russia, Turkey and Iran will convene in the Kazakh capital Astana on Nov. 28-29 to discuss the challenges in Syria, especially the fragile cease-fire in the northern province of Idlib.

Representatives from the Syrian regime and armed opposition groups will also take part in this month's meeting amid escalating violence in the buffer zone around Idlib, the last major stronghold of the opposition in Syria.

BACKGROUND

Moscow and Ankara decided on Sept. 17 to establish a 15-20 kilometer demilitarized buffer zone between regime forces and opposition groups but armed groups are refusing to withdraw and all heavy weapons have not been removed.

As a move to build trust ahead of the Astana peace talks, the Assad regime and opposition groups swapped detainees in northern Syria on Saturday.

Navvar Saban, a military analyst at the Omran Center for Strategic Studies in Istanbul, told Arab News that even before the latest incidents in Idlib, there were several violations from the regime side, with more than 500 attacks since mid-September.

"The Russian reaction was attacking the area and targeting extremist pockets in Idlib, especially Al-Rashideen district, which is part of the Russian-Turkish deal. This is the first time the Russians have interfered since the September cease-fire. But the Turks responded by doing nothing," he said.

According to Saban, Turkey needs to clear the extremist areas in Idlib as soon as possible because not addressing this issue and having an unstable situation in the area is an open invitation to the regime, Russia and even Iranian-backed militia to use it as an excuse for targeting different locations.

"So, in the next phase, Turkey will be facing a very difficult option, which is clearing Idlib from any security threats. Considering the already fragile

security situation in the region, there will be an indirect campaign against all these extremists in the upcoming weeks,” Saban said.

The dominant force among opposition groups in Idlib is Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, an Islamist alliance led by fighters previously linked to Al-Qaeda.

The reopening of the main highway in the region after the Turkey-Russia deal hugely benefited the extremist group, which according to press reports is still collecting taxes on traffic at the checkpoints. It has also controlled the Bab Al-Hawa border crossing from Idlib into Turkey since 2017.

“From the very beginning, one of the main objectives of the Astana format was to push Turkey diplomatically to bear responsibility, either in cutting off logistical support to militants or deactivating them on the ground during the Russian-backed regime assaults,” Dr. Kerim Has, a Moscow-based Russia analyst, told Arab News.

According to Has, Turkey will likely have to directly take part in a more violent struggle against those radical groups in Idlib to save the cease-fire deal.

“The 11th Astana summit will be crucial for Turkey in the context of the sustainability of this deal. Though the cease-fire violations will probably persist in the region, a large-scale military operation by regime forces is not welcomed yet by Russia, at least until the end of 2018,” he said.

“After the Astana summit the already fragile Idlib deal will be just more fragile, nothing more,” he said.

The formation of a constitutional committee will also be among the hot topics of the meeting as it was anticipated by Russia, Turkey, France and Germany that it would be formed by the end of this year.

But experts are not optimistic about any concrete outcome for the committee, and do not consider it a magic formula to resolve the conflict in the region.

“The establishment of such a committee seems unrealistic at least until the newly appointed UN’s special envoy for Syria creates its own team,” Has said.

He added that the foundation of a constitutional committee will not solely bring peace to Syria, but the daily changing balance of power may have both constructive and devastating effects on the functioning of the political transition process.

Dr. Has said that the solution lies in addressing the regional and global power dynamics surrounding Syria, rather than being dependent on the 50-150 representatives of the Syrian people on the committee.



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Gunmen kill two activists in Syria's rebel-held Idlib province
Russia: Moscow and Ankara must take swift decisions on Syria's Idlib

[Syria rebels hand 4-year-old to her Belgian mother](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2018-11-26 19:47

BAB A-HAWA, Syria: A rebel administration in Syria's last major insurgent stronghold of Idlib handed over a four-year-old girl to her Belgian mother on Monday after a custody dispute following her father's death.

An AFP journalist saw the tiny girl named Yasmine, dressed in a bright pink coat and clutching a gift-wrapped teddy bear, being led to the Turkish border to meet her mother.

Her handover was overseen by the civilian branch of the powerful Hayat Tahrir

al-Sham (HTS) alliance, which is led by the militants of Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

"Yasmine was handed over today to her Belgian mother Hajer after the dispute was solved between those who were her guardians here and her mother," Fawaz Hilal, head of the administration, told AFP.

"There was communication with the Turkish side to hand over the girl to her mother who was in Turkey," he said.

Ibrahim Shasho, another member of the rebel administration, said the mother "filed a petition for custody of her daughter after her father died".

The father's "friends" had looked after Yasmine since his death and insisted she remain in their care, Shasho said, without providing any further details on their identity.

"The (HTS) judiciary looked into the case and found in favour of the mother," added the bearded man, who brought the wide-eyed child into a press conference to have her photo taken.

The officials did not say whether the child's father was a fighter, or to what armed group he might have belonged.

There was no immediate information from the Belgian or Turkish authorities. HTS controls more than half of the Idlib region, but other militants, including the Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Deen group are also present in the northwestern region bordering Turkey.

Turkey-backed rebels hold most of the rest of the region.

Idlib has since September been protected from a massive regime assault by a fragile truce deal between regime ally Russia and rebel backer Turkey.

Thousands of foreign fighters are present in the region, where they are members of HTS but also other militant groups.

Some of them have banded together to create what is known as the "French battalion", which is close to Hurras al-Deen, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

In February, two Canadians – a man and a woman – were released to Turkish authorities after being held by HTS for several weeks.

Jolly Bimbachi and a male friend had crossed into Syria from Lebanon, searching for her two sons, she told AFP.



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Chemical arms watchdog to 'review security' for Syria gas probe
Syria regime and rebels swap prisoners, Turkey says