

Sweden says tourist traveling with group detained in Iran

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STOCKHOLM: Sweden said Friday that one of its citizens traveling as a tourist has been detained in Iran, in the latest incident to worsen relations between the two countries.

In a brief comment by email, the Foreign Ministry said that the man was in his 30s, and that the embassy in Tehran was "seeking information and is in contact with local authorities."

Iranian authorities did not immediately acknowledge the arrest. Neither Iran's judiciary nor its mission to the UN responded immediately to requests for comment.

Sweden's Aftonbladet tabloid wrote late on Thursday that the man was arrested as he was about to leave Iran, where he was traveling with other Swedes. No date was given.

BACKGROUND

Swedish prosecutors have sought life imprisonment for Hamid Nouri, who has been held in custody in Sweden since he was arrested in Stockholm in November 2019.

The newspaper linked the arrest with the trial in Sweden of an Iranian accused of genocide. The verdict in that case is due on July 14.

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The Stockholm District Court said this week that Nouri will "remain in custody until the verdict is announced or otherwise is decided."

Iran also is planning to execute an Iranian-Swedish researcher imprisoned since 2016, according to an Iranian media report.

The report semi-official ISNA news agency quoted informed Iranian officials as saying that Iran will implement the death penalty against Ahmad Reza Jalali by May 21 at the latest.



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Iran to execute Swedish-Iranian national Djalali by May 21 Iranian regime under pressure to release teachers held after wage protests

[10,000 people fled northern Iraq fighting, says Kurdish official](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-05-06 23:40

DOHUK: More than 10,000 people have fled fighting between the Iraqi army and Yazidi fighters affiliated with Turkey's banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an official from Iraq's Kurdistan region said.

The latest figure is more than double the 4,000 which an official from the

region reported on Tuesday had arrived.

The Yazidis are a Kurdish-speaking non-Arab, non-Muslim minority who were massacred by Daesh in 2014.

Clashes left one Iraqi soldier dead on Monday in the northern region of Sinjar, the Yazidi minority's heartland which is the site of frequent confrontations between security forces and local fighters allied with the separatist PKK.

The latest fighting "has driven families to flee to the Kurdistan region," with many heading to Dohuk province, said Dayane Hamo, an official in charge of crisis response.

"In three days, their number reached 1,711 families and 10,261 people," Hamo said, adding they had been given food and other supplies to last a week.

The latest fighting began Sunday, with each side blaming the other for starting it. A senior Iraqi army official said the clashes cost the lives of a dozen Yazidi fighters.

The army is seeking to apply an agreement reached between Baghdad and the Kurdistan region for the withdrawal of Yazidi and PKK fighters.

The Sinjar region has also been a target of Turkish air strikes on rear bases of the PKK. Turkey considers the PKK a terrorist organization.



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Turkey begins large-scale operation in northern Iraq against Kurdish militants
Years after Daesh defeat, northern Iraq struggles to rebuild

Turkey loses westward outreach after philanthropist Kavala's jailing

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-05 23:44

ANKARA: Before traveling to Moscow last week, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stopped over in Ankara to meet Recep Tayyip Erdogan and praise the Turkish leader's diplomatic efforts to end the war in Ukraine.

Less than two hours after the two shook hands, a big part of the goodwill that Ankara has engendered in the West through its unique role as mediator between warring parties was undone, undermining Turkey's chances of capitalizing on thawing ties.

The turning point came when an Istanbul court sentenced a philanthropist, Osman Kavala, to life in jail for his role in anti-government protests in 2013, in defiance of Western calls to free him in a closely watched case many see as politically motivated.

One Western diplomat who watched with surprise as the headlines landed on his phone on April 25 said the ruling underscored how Erdogan's government "cannot be trusted on some issues," despite having scored political points over Ukraine.

Another envoy called the verdict the "worst-case scenario."

Eight diplomats told Reuters that the ruling was a blow to Turkey's ambitions to heal frayed economic and political ties with Western countries while also remaining close to Moscow – Erdogan opposes the sanctions against it.

It also chilled Western hopes of rapprochement, they said.

It is a reversal for Turkey, which is alone in having hosted wartime talks between Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers and peace negotiators. Ankara wants the West to prepare for the end of the war, including the gradual lifting of sanctions, and for restrictions on its own defense industry to be lifted.

It also wants more cooperation with its NATO allies, including the US, France and Italy, and to alleviate existing tensions with the West in the run-up to

elections amid mounting economic woes.

Wariness of boosting Erdogan ahead of 2023 elections that recent polls suggest he could lose have also undermined chances of meaningful trade or investment deals, including progress updating a European Union customs union, several of the diplomats said.

Erdogan and officials say the war has made allies realize Turkey's geopolitical importance and that Ankara's balanced policy on Ukraine was welcomed, even admired. The diplomats interviewed shared that assessment.

The West understands Turkey's position on sanctions and Ankara will not become a haven to evade them, Turkish officials add.

At the weekend, Erdogan's spokesman and chief foreign policy adviser Ibrahim Kalin made a surprise visit to Kyiv to meet President Volodymyr Zelensky. He later said he discussed ways to end the war.

If Russia's attacks on Ukraine last through the summer, Turkey, with the second-biggest military in NATO, will likely come under increasing pressure from Washington and Brussels to boost its support for Ukraine, the diplomats said.

It has already sent armed drones to Kyiv, blocked some Russian naval passage to the Black Sea and barred Russian flights to and from Syria.

Turkey's stance of facilitating negotiations and opposing sanctions on Moscow on principle "can only last so long," said a third diplomat.

A shift toward Ukraine in the conflict could prompt Russia to punish Turkey's economy by cutting heavy tourist and energy flows, or both, the person said, underlining how opportunity could turn to crisis for Ankara.

Soaring energy costs due to the war have already exacerbated Turkey's currency crisis and sent inflation to 61 percent, complicating Erdogan's prospects in the mid-2023 election.

Some analysts said the Kavala ruling, by courts some critics believe are influenced by Erdogan, served to warn the opposition ahead of the vote. The president may have been emboldened by the diplomatic cover the war afforded him, they added.

"Erdogan does not want to be excluded by the West but he wants it to accept him as he is: as a strong man of Turkey," said Birol Baskan, non-resident scholar at the Washington-based Middle East Institute. Throughout the second of Erdogan's two decades in power, Western leaders have criticized Turkey's crackdown on rights and dissent.

Germany summoned Turkey's ambassador to Berlin over the Kavala verdict, which Washington also called "unjust," prompting Ankara to summon the German ambassador in response.

Turkey says its courts are independent and that it is taking steps to improve

rule of law, but also dismisses domestic and international criticism of its judiciary as interference in its internal affairs.

Turkey's stance on the war, including allowing flights from Moscow, has made it a top destination for Russian citizens, funds and even sanctioned assets such as oligarchs' yachts.

Three Western diplomats said this could prompt the US or Europe to adopt "secondary sanctions" against those doing business with Moscow.

"We are asking Ankara to enforce our sanctions. If it becomes clear they are being broken, secondary sanctions would be likely," one of the envoys said.

Another potential strain is Turkey's desire, shared by the UN, to end the fighting in Ukraine immediately and return as much as possible to a world in which Ankara balances its Western and Russian relations.

The US and some other countries instead want the war to end under the right terms. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said last week that Washington wants to see Moscow "weakened" so that it cannot invade again.

Still, Turkey is expected to rethink its relationship with Russia.

Ankara's purchase of Russian S-400 defenses prompted US sanctions on Turkey in 2020 and chilled ties.

Yet its request for 40 US-made F-16 fighters last year combined with cooperation over Ukraine could pave the way for a compromise on Washington's demand that Turkey abandon the S-400s, three diplomats said.



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Turkey says still talking to Russia about missile deliveries
Turkish court jails Erdogan critic Kavala for life

[Iranian regime under pressure to release teachers held after wage protests](#)

Thu, 2022-05-05 23:20

LONDON: Human Rights Watch has called on authorities in Iran to release teachers being held across the country, after at least 38 were detained for organizing peaceful protests that took place on May 1.

The organization said at least 17 of the educators are still in custody, according to reports by the Emtedad News Agency, including Mohammad Habibi, spokesperson for the Iranian Teachers Trade Association.

The coordinating council of the Iranian Cultural Teachers Associations had called for the nationwide protest in response to concerns about low wages over the past two years. The regime in Tehran has responded to the growing discontent among teachers through arrests and interrogations.

A number of unions have been formed in Iran since 2005 by various groups under article 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and article 8 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Tehran is a signatory to both but that has not prevented the regime from applying significant pressure to senior members of unions, including the teachers' organization, as Iran's labor laws do not recognize the right to form unions unless approved by the government.

In April, authorities arrested three prominent members of the ITTA: Rasoul Bodaghi in Tehran, Latif Roozikhah in East Azerbaijan province and Jafar Ebrahimi. Bodaghi was sentenced to five years in jail, and Ebrahimi to four, for "assembly and collusion to act against national security" and "propaganda against the state."

Mahmoud Behesti Langroudi, vice president of the ITTA, and Rasoul Kargar, a member of the union from Fars, have also been arrested and are awaiting trial. Another nine teachers are known to have been referred to prosecutors in Kurdistan province.

In 2016, the regime targeted ITTA Secretary-General Ismael Abdi after he organized protests, accusing him of "spreading propaganda against the state" and "assembly and collusion against national security." He was jailed for six years and also given a 10-year suspended sentence. He was released in 2020 but arrested a month later after authorities activated the suspended sentence. He is currently on hunger strike, according to the organization Human Rights Activists in Iran.

Tara Sepehri Far, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, said: "Iranian authorities have yet again decided to lock up people for seeking to organize to assert their collective rights instead of working with independent associations to ensure respect for Iranians' economic and social rights.

"Attempting to silence peaceful mobilization and protests won't make Iran's dismal economic reality go away."



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Iranian authorities urged to respect workers' rights amid protests
Iranian Americans urge Biden to keep IRGC on terror list

[Mikati urges Lebanese expats to have their voices heard in elections](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-05 22:33

BEIRUT: Prime Minister Najib Mikati has urged expats to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections to ensure their voices are heard and they can achieve the changes they want.

Mikati's appeal came as he inaugurated the operations room for managing and monitoring parliamentary elections abroad.

"It is a key moment during this round of elections," he said.

The parliamentary elections, which will be held on May 6 and 8 abroad, and on May 15 at home, are the first since the economic collapse began in late 2019.

The authorities have permitted 225,114 Lebanese expats to vote after 244,442 overseas registered voters were reviewed. They will vote at 205 polling stations in 59 countries around the world, except in Ukraine.

Overseas voters constitute a significant proportion of the 3,967,507 total Lebanese voters.

The political movements seeking changes in the crisis-hit country are relying heavily on expat voting to make a difference.

The government, mired by a political impasse, has taken limited steps to address the national collapse, leaving the Lebanese to struggle with the crisis on their own while plunging into poverty, without electricity or medicines.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the election arrangements as “the largest logistical operation in Lebanon’s modern history.”

A total of 103 lists made up of 1,044 candidates are competing in the elections, some of whom withdrew after the deadline.

Political groups seeking radical change and some opposition parties believe the majority of expat voters resent the ruling authority and are victims of its corruption, and their presence abroad makes them immune to the pressures that internal voters are subjected to and the pressure to re-elect the same faces.

These groups are hoping for a strong turnout from the Lebanese who left after the Beirut port explosion in 2020 and the popular protests in 2019.

As of Thursday, all candidates and political parties are no longer allowed to address voters and media outlets can no longer interview them until polling stations close on Sunday night.

The Supervisory Commission for Elections prohibits electoral teams from sharing their estimations on the number of votes.

Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib said Lebanon “has made all possible efforts, within our modest capabilities, to facilitate the voting process, and set up the largest possible number of polling stations, as allowed by the laws governing the countries in which the Lebanese abroad reside.”

He added: “We insist on organizing the voting process abroad professionally while steering clear of political agendas.”

Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said that the government is committed to its ministerial statement and will indeed hold the elections.

He added: “To those who took to the streets to demand that elections are held, I tell you this is your chance to voice your opinion.”

He stressed: “Failing to vote serves no one, especially not the country.”

Mawlawi added that all logistical and security preparations had been secured.

“Grants to the military forces participating in the elections, and compensation to employees, professors, and judges who will participate in the elections will be sufficient and appropriate,” he added.

He said: “The elections will be held successfully, there is no reason for them not to. We are attentive to all details.”

While the UN has been following up on all the election arrangements, UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Joanna Wronecka met with Mikati on Thursday.

“It seems that all measures have been taken from an administrative and security point of view, and this is an important matter,” Wronecka said.

She added: “I asked the prime minister what can be expected before and even after the elections, and I sensed the seriousness and interest on his part to follow up on every detail.”

In a new report to the Security Council, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has called for “free, fair, transparent and inclusive parliamentary elections in Lebanon.”

He further urged “the quick formation of a government afterward that gives priority to implementing reforms addressing the country’s multiple crises.”

Guterres said that the political polarization in the country has deepened and the Lebanese “are struggling daily to meet basic needs,” pointing out the frequent protests across the country sparked by “public frustration with the political situation and the economic and financial crisis.”

He noted that proposals submitted in the past two years for a women’s quota were still pending in parliament, and he urged that the new government be quickly formed “with full participation of women and young people.”

Guterres said Hezbollah’s maintenance “of sizeable and sophisticated military capabilities outside the control of the Lebanese government remains a matter of grave concern.”



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UN chief urges free, transparent elections in Lebanon May 15
Expats prepare to vote, marking the start of Lebanon elections