

Refusal of nations to repatriate children from Syria 'beggars belief,' says UN rights expert

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NEW YORK: A UN human rights expert on Tuesday voiced serious concern for the well-being of more than 700 children incarcerated at Al-Ghuwayran prison, in Al-Hasakeh in northeast Syria, and called on all countries to repatriate their young citizens held in the country.

The prison was the scene of a deadly attempted jailbreak by hundreds of Daesh insurgents last week.

"Boys as young as 12 are living in fear for their lives amid the chaos and carnage in the jail," said Fionnuala Ni Aolain, the UN's special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism. "They are tragically being neglected by their own countries through no fault of their own except they were born to individuals allegedly linked or associated with designated terrorist groups.

"The treatment of hundreds of boys who have been detained in grotesque prison conditions is an affront to the dignity of the child and the right of every child to be treated with dignity."

Almost 300 detainees have been killed during days of fighting at Al-Ghuwayran, which began last Thursday with the detonation of two car bombs. Clashes are continuing at the prison, which holds more than 5,000 alleged Daesh militants from almost 60 countries. The insurgents had seized control of the children's section of the facility.

Fighters from the opposition Syrian Democratic Forces are said to be closing in on the final section of prison still held by Daesh attackers, as the situation becomes increasingly worrying for inmates.

Humanitarian groups have renewed calls for all governments to repatriate their citizens from Syria.

"The abject refusal of states to repatriate their children is a contributory factor in the security and human rights morass that has ignited in Al-Hasakeh in recent days," said Ni Aolain, who last year sent official letters to 57 governments of countries believed to have citizens in Syrian camps. They include France, Germany, the UK, Finland and the US.

The failure of governments to repatriate detained children, who are victims of terrorism and in need of protection under international law, "beggars belief," Ni Aolain said.

"Many of these boys, forcibly separated from their mothers and family members in recent years, have been denied their most fundamental human rights their entire lives," she added.

"They have been held arbitrarily and never participated in any legal process that would justify depriving them of their liberty, and in conditions that

constitute torture, cruel and degrading treatment under international law. "Treating boys as a distinct class, refusing to recognize in practice their rights as children, is a form of gender discrimination that has had horrific consequences for these children now caught up in the violent confrontation at Al-Hasakeh prison."

Ni Aolain called on all states and other entities active in northeastern Syria to ensure that civilians are protected, and for those involved in regaining control of the prison to protect the children held there and prevent further harm coming to them.

Special rapporteurs are independent experts who serve in individual capacities, and on a voluntary basis, on the UN's Human Rights Council. They are not members of UN staff and are not paid for their work.



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'Horror scenes' in Syrian refugee camps amid 'extremely cold winter': UN official
Syria Kurdish forces close in on Daesh-controlled prison wing

[Opposition group estimates 500,000 COVID-19 deaths in Iran](#)

Tue, 2022-01-25 22:12

LONDON: An Iranian opposition group operating within and outside the Islamic republic has released figures claiming nearly half-a-million people have died from COVID-19 in the country.

According to the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran, more than 499,800 virus-related deaths had occurred in Iran, almost four times the latest official toll of 132,274.

In the worst-hit province, Tehran, the PMOI said 116,735 people had lost their lives to COVID-19.

Even by official figures, Iran is the worst-hit country in the Middle East, with deaths and hospitalizations far exceeding those of its neighbors. It was also the first country in the region where the virus was detected.

Official sources have reported that Iran was currently experiencing a fifth wave of COVID-19, with a rising number of cases being linked to the highly transmissible omicron variant.

On Monday, according to the semi-official ISNA news agency, the secretary of Iran's epidemiologist committee said: "If we reimpose all the restrictions today, and if people fully abide by these regulations, the number of our patients will still reach five figures. More than 50 percent of the coronavirus cases are of omicron."

And the spokesman for Isfahan University of Medical Sciences said: "Omicron has become the main variant in (Isfahan) province. During the past week the number of confirmed positive coronavirus cases has reached more than 1,500 cases."

Also on Monday, ISNA reported that the dean of Kerman University of Medical Sciences said: "Expect omicron to flare up in the not-so-distant future. The number of positive coronavirus cases has increased from 30 to 50 percent. Therefore, the alarm bell has sounded."

Iran's COVID-19 outbreak has been blamed in some quarters on regime incompetence and Tehran prioritizing ideology over effective response.

Last year, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei banned the import of British and American-made vaccines, significantly hindering the country's vaccination drive and, critics have said, causing more deaths.

In August, Dr. Mohammed-Reza Zafarghandi, chairman of Iran's non-governmental licensing and regulatory Medical Council, criticized the vaccine ban, and said: "Mortality has significantly dropped in countries where they vaccinated the population without any limits and setting (political) borders.

"Will those who said vaccine imports should be restricted be accountable today?"



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Iran COVID-19 deaths set new daily record as curbs lifted Official Iranian coronavirus numbers probably underestimated: Radio Farda

[Iran nuclear talks approaching dangerous impasse – UK's Truss](#)

Author:

Tue, 2022-01-25 22:07

LONDON: Talks to revive a 2015 nuclear deal between Western powers and Iran are approaching a dangerous impasse, British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said on Tuesday.

"This negotiation is urgent and progress has not been fast enough. We continue to work in close partnership with our allies but the negotiations are reaching a dangerous impasse," Truss told parliament.

“Iran must now choose whether it wants to conclude a deal or be responsible for the collapse of the JCPOA (nuclear deal). And if the JCPOA collapses, all options are on the table.”

Truss also held a phone call with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss how to reach a successful conclusion on talks with Iran on mutual return to implementation of the nuclear deal, the US State Department said. Her comments come a day after a senior member of the US team negotiating with Iran has left the role amid a report of differences of opinion on the way forward, as the urgency to salvage the 2015 Iran nuclear deal intensifies. A State Department official confirmed on Monday that Richard Nephew, US Deputy Special Envoy for Iran, is no longer on the negotiating team, but was still a State Department employee. The official did not give a reason for the change but said personnel moves were ‘very common’ a year into an administration.

The Wall Street Journal earlier reported that Nephew left after differences of opinion within the US negotiating team on Iran. The paper said he had advocated a tougher posture in the current negotiations.

Iran for the first time Monday said it was open to direct nuclear negotiations with the United States, which declared itself ready to hold talks “urgently” – in a possible turning point in efforts to salvage the 2015 nuclear accord.

Tehran has been engaged since last year in talks with the five other world powers still part of the agreement, which offered sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

After unilaterally withdrawing in 2018 under then-president Donald Trump, Washington has been taking part indirectly in the Vienna negotiations, which seek to bring the United States back into the nuclear accord and ensure Iran returns to its commitments.

But Washington has said on multiple occasions it would prefer to hold direct talks, and on Monday Iran’s foreign minister said his country would consider doing so if it proved the key to a “good agreement” to salvage the floundering deal.

“If during the negotiation process we get to a point that reaching a good agreement with solid guarantees requires a level of talks with the US, we will not ignore that in our work schedule,” said Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian.

(With Reuters and AFP)



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US 'prepared to meet directly' and 'urgently' with Iran on nuclear issue
Frenchman gets long jail term in Iran; denies spy charges

[Help build solid basis for Libyan elections and don't fixate on dates, Security Council told](#)

Tue, 2022-01-25 01:17

NEW YORK: Mediators need to take into account the lessons learned in Libya in the past two years and focus on "creating milestones" for the country's political transition, rather than fixating on the time frame involved,

according to Elham Saudi, co-founder and director of Lawyers for Justice in Libya.

These milestones include an electoral law, a code for conducting elections, and a solid constitutional basis “that appropriately sequences presidential and legislative elections in line with the broader road map to complete (the) transition effectively,” he said.

Addressing the UN Security Council on Monday during its regular meeting about developments in Libya, Saudi said that when these steps are implemented, elections will naturally follow and will be “far easier to manage, protect and successfully deliver.”

Stephanie Williams, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’s special adviser on Libya, recently reiterated the importance of holding elections “in the shortest possible time frame.” She said this month that “it is possible, and needed, to have elections before the end of June.”

However, Saudi said that “focusing on the dates for the elections instead of a clear process to facilitate them risks once again compromising due process for the sake of perceived political expediency.”

Growing polarization among political powers in the country and disputes over key aspects of the electoral process – including shortcomings in the legal framework for the elections, contradictory court rulings on candidacies, and political and security concerns as cited by the High National Commission for Elections – resulted in the postponement of the elections, which had been scheduled to take place on Dec. 24 last year.

Saudi reminded members of the Security Council that “accountability is a prerequisite to political progress. Poorly defined and fundamentally weak vetting criteria applied to candidates applying for elections resulted in individuals implicated in corruption or crimes against humanity and human rights violations, including persons who have been indicted by the ICC (International Criminal Court), being accepted as candidates.”

Following the postponement of polling in December, Libya’s House of Representatives established a “road map committee” to develop a new path toward national elections. The committee will present its first report for debate on Tuesday in Tripoli.

Rosemary DiCarlo, the UN’s under-secretary-general for political and peacebuilding affairs, welcomed what she described as renewed efforts by Libya’s Presidency Council to advance national reconciliation but lamented the political uncertainty in the run-up to the elections, which she said has “negatively impacted the overall security situation, including in Tripoli, resulting in shifting alliances among armed groups affiliated with certain presidential candidates.”

She expressed concern about the human rights situation in Libya, citing “incidents of elections-related violence and attacks based on political affiliation, as well as threats and violence against members of the judiciary

involved in proceedings on eligibility of electoral candidates, and against journalists, activists and individuals expressing political views.”

DiCarlo added: “Such incidents are an obstacle to creating a conducive environment for free, fair, peaceful and credible elections.”

Taher El-Sonni, Libya’s permanent representative to the UN, told the Security Council that while some people had been surprised by the postponement of elections, it had been widely expected.

“In light of the crisis of trust and the absence of a constitution for the country, or a consensual constitutional rule as advocated by most political forces now, it will be very difficult to conduct these elections successfully because the elections are supposed to be a means of political participation and not a means of predominance and exclusion, and a means to support stability and not an end in itself that may open the way for a new conflict,” he said.

El-Sonni called on the UN to offer more “serious and effective” support to the electoral process and send teams to assess the requirements on the ground.

“This would be a clear message to all about the seriousness of the international community in achieving elections that everyone aspires to, without questioning it or its results,” he said.

The Libyan envoy invited the council to “actively contribute” to the processes of national reconciliation and transitional justice, “two concomitant and essential tracks that have unfortunately been lost during the past years, although they are the main basis for the success of any political solution that leads to the stability of the country.”

He also once again called on the African Union to support his country’s efforts in this area.

Ambassador Jeffrey DeLaurentis, senior advisor for special political affairs to the US mission at the UN, said it is time for the wishes of the millions of Libyans who have registered to vote to be respected.

“It is time to move beyond backroom deals between a small circle of powerful individuals backed by armed groups, carving up spoils and protecting their positions,” he said “The Libyan people are ready to decide their own future.

“Those vying to lead Libya must see that the Libyan people will only accept leadership empowered by elections and that they will only tolerate so much delay.”

Like many other ambassadors at the meeting, DeLaurentis also addressed the migrant crisis and reports of violence and abuses directed at migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in Libya.

“Libyan authorities must close illicit detention centers, end arbitrary detention practices and permit unhindered humanitarian access to affected

populations,” he said.



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Experts warn upcoming Libyan elections unlikely to heal rifts
Armed groups deploy in Tripoli amid Libyan election postponement decision

[Coalition in Yemen begins military operations in Sanaa](#)

Tue, 2022-01-25 00:55

RIYADH: The Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen said on Monday that it had began “military operations” against “legitimate targets” in the capital, Sanaa, Saudi state TV reported.

The coalition said the operation is in response to threats and out of

military necessity to protect civilians from hostile attacks. The Iran-backed Houthi militia launched missiles toward Saudi Arabia and the UAE earlier on Monday, sparking widespread condemnation from the international community. Meanwhile, the coalition said it carried out 14 operations targeting the Houthi militia in Marib and Al-Bayda during the past 24 hours, killing more than 50 fighters and destroying nine military vehicles.



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Saudi Arabia leads condemnation of Houthi missile attacks on Abu Dhabi, Kingdom