

Syrian victims of chemical strikes file case with French prosecutors

Wed, 2021-03-03 03:04

PARIS: Lawyers representing survivors of a chemical weapons attack in 2013 in Syria have filed a criminal complaint against Syrian officials whom they blame for the deaths of hundreds of civilians in a rebel-held area.

France is home to thousands of Syrian refugees, and its investigating judges have a mandate to determine whether crimes against humanity were committed anywhere in the world.

The case, which about a dozen people have joined, follows a similar one opened in Germany last year. It offers a rare legal avenue for action against the government of President Bashar Assad.

Attempts by Western powers to set up an international tribunal for Syria have been blocked by Russia and China at the UN Security Council.

"This is important so that the victims have the possibility to see those responsible being brought to justice and held accountable," Mazen Darwish, who heads the Paris-based Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM), said.

The SCM filed the complaint along with two other NGOs: the Open Society Foundation's Justice Initiative and Syrian Archive.

BACKGROUND

France is home to thousands of Syrian refugees, and its investigating judges have a mandate to determine whether crimes against humanity were committed anywhere in the world.

France's intelligence services concluded in 2013 that a sarin gas attack on the Eastern Ghouta region just south east of Damascus that killed 1,400 people had been carried out by Syrian government forces.

The complaint is based on what the lawyers say is the most comprehensive body of evidence on the use of substances such as sarin gas in Syria.

"We have compiled extensive evidence establishing exactly who is responsible for these attacks on Douma and Eastern Ghouta, whose horrific effects continue to impact survivors," said Hadi Al-Khatib, founder and director of Syrian Archive.

A UN-commissioned investigation to identify those behind chemical weapons attacks in Syria concluded in 2016 that Syrian government forces had used chlorine and sarin gas.

Darwish said he expected another case to be opened in Sweden in the coming months.



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[Syria chemical attack](#)

US ambassador to UN demands information on Syria detainees
Syrian victims of chemical attacks file case with French prosecutors

[Sahara tension: Moroccan row deepens with Germany](#)

Wed, 2021-03-03 02:52

RABAT: Morocco's Foreign Ministry has suspended ties with the German Embassy because of "deep misunderstandings," notably related to the disputed Western Sahara.

Morocco is angered by German criticism of former US President Donald Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in return for moves by Rabat to normalize its relations with Israel.

A letter leaked online from Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita to the rest of the government orders officials to suspend "all contact, interaction and cooperation" with the German Embassy and embassy-related activities.

A senior Moroccan government official confirmed on Tuesday that the letter was authentic, but said it was not meant to be made public.

The official also noted the appearance of a flag of the pro-independence

Polisario Front outside the state assembly in the northern German city of Bremen. Germany's Foreign Ministry said it was aware of media reports about the letter.

The Algeria-backed Polisario Front fought for independence for Western Sahara after Morocco annexed the former Spanish colony in 1975. UN peacekeepers now monitor a 30-year-old cease-fire between Moroccan forces and Polisario supporters.

The UN has expressed concern that Trump's decision could thwart negotiation efforts in the long-running Western Sahara conflict.



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Pompeo says US has started work to set up consulate in Western Sahara
Morocco cuts contacts with German embassy in WSahara spat

[Iraq starts vaccinations with jabs gifted from China](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-03-03 02:21

BAGHDAD: Iraq began coronavirus vaccinations on Tuesday, inoculating medical staff hours after a military plane brought in 50,000 Sinopharm jabs donated by China.

The campaign was launched as Iraq battles a second wave of COVID-19 infections, with more than 4,600 new cases a day, and ahead of a three-day visit by Pope Francis from Friday.

"The vaccines arrived overnight and we immediately distributed them to health centers and began the vaccinations," Health Minister Hassan Al-Tamimi said at Baghdad's Medical City hospital compound.

"We will be carrying out more vaccinations tomorrow in the provinces and remote areas."

Aside from health workers, security forces and the elderly will be first to receive the free-of-charge vaccine, his ministry said on a citizens' registration platform which, however, was not functional.

The public health infrastructure in Iraq, a country of 40 million, has been severely worn down by decades of war, under-investment and corruption.

The Health Ministry has said it agreed with the Chinese ambassador in Baghdad to purchase another 2 million Sinopharm doses, but provided no details on the cost or the timing. Iraqi authorities said in January they had approved three vaccines for use, but there have been repeated delays and contradictory statements from health authorities.

The ministry said it was expecting to receive a total of 16 million jabs through the global Covax scheme, through which wealthy nations are meant to allocate vaccines for poorer countries.

SPEEDREAD

The ministry said it was expecting to receive a total of 16 million jabs through the global Covax scheme, through which wealthy nations are meant to allocate vaccines for poorer countries.

That figure appeared to be based on Covax's pledge that, subject to funding, it could help poorer countries vaccinate 20 percent of their populations – or 8 million people in Iraq.

The ministry has also said it would receive 3 million AstraZeneca jabs, but the World Health Organization has only approved the distribution of 2 million of those doses to Iraq through Covax.

The ministry also says it has secured funding from the World Bank for 1.5 million jabs from Pfizer/BioNTech, but the deal requires a parliamentary vote which has yet to be held.

Sinopharm affiliate the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products says its vaccine has an efficacy rate of 72.51 percent, behind rival jabs by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, which have 95 percent and 94.5 percent rates respectively.



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Saudi Arabia, Iraq hold talks to boost tiesLand route to link Egypt, Iraq, Jordan

[Hezbollah gunmen fight off bid to arrest Rafik Hariri's killer](#)

Author:

Wed, 2021-03-03 01:56

BEIRUT: Gunfire broke out in south Beirut on Tuesday night when Hezbollah fought off an apparent attempt by Lebanese security forces to arrest the man convicted of assassinating former prime minister Rafik a.

Information circulating on social media said officers tried to raid a house thought to be the hideout of Salim Ayyash, 57, who is wanted by the Lebanese state at the request of the International Tribunal for Lebanon. Hezbollah fighters opened fire, surrounded the security patrol, and detained its members and their vehicles.

Amateur video footage on social media shows shots being fired and a Hezbollah fighter shouting: "Attack them and disarm them."

An activist close to Hezbollah told Arab News: “The security patrol wanted to arrest wanted suspects accused of a crime, it is not true that there was a clash with Hezbollah.”

Rafik Hariri died in a suicide bombing of his car in Beirut in February 2005. The Special Tribunal tried Ayyash in his absence, and sentenced him to life imprisonment in August 2020 for conspiracy to commit a terrorist act. Hezbollah has said it will never hand him over.



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Hezbollah should have no role in Lebanon's future, says Bahaa Hariri, son of Rafik Hariri

[**Saudi Arabia urges UN Security Council to hold Houthis accountable for threat**](#)

posed to global peace, security

Wed, 2021-03-03 01:45

NEW YORK: Saudi Arabia urged the UN Security Council (UNSC) on Tuesday to shoulder its responsibility and hold the Iran-backed Houthi militias in Yemen accountable for the threats they pose to international peace and security. The Houthis' terror activities continue to jeopardize UN efforts to reach a comprehensive solution in Yemen, and undermine the credibility of UNSC resolutions, Abdallah Al-Mouallimi, Saudi Arabia's permanent representative to the UN, wrote in a letter seen by Arab News.

He alerted the council to the continued military hostilities committed by the Houthis against the Kingdom. "Among these hostilities towards civilians and civilian objects, some of the scattered debris of a ballistic missile launched by these militias resulted in material damage to one house in Riyadh on February 27th 2021, after being intercepted and destroyed," Al-Mouallimi wrote.

"Moreover, the fall of a military projectile (on Monday) launched by these militias towards one of the border villages in Jazan Region injured five civilians as a result of flying shrapnel. It also damaged two houses, a grocery store and three civilian vehicles."

The letter was addressed to US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, who is assuming the rotating presidency of the UNSC this month. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was copied in.

"Although the Security Council strongly condemned the continuation of Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia and called for an immediate cessation of attacks without preconditions in its resolution 2564 (2021) that was adopted on 25 February 2021, the Houthi militias continue their behavior in ignoring and violating Security Council resolutions and International Humanitarian Law," the top Saudi envoy wrote.

"It is an obvious response of the Houthi militias to the ... calls and appeals (of the UNSC and international community) for a political solution to the crisis in Yemen, and it proves once again that these militias only believe in terrorist behavior to reach their narrow political aims."

Al-Mouallimi reiterated that Saudi Arabia reserves its full rights "to safeguard its citizens, residents and territories in accordance with its commitments under international law." He asked Thomas-Greenfield to circulate the letter as an official document.



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Arab coalition intercepts Houthi drone targeting Saudi Arabia
US sanctions two Houthi leaders over attacks on Saudi Arabia