

Russia unmoved as Security Council again warned of Syrian children's plight

Author:

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NEW YORK: In what might be his final briefing on Syria to the Security Council, the UN's humanitarian chief on Thursday once again warned of the dire situation in the country, and the terrible toll it is taking on children in particular.

Mark Lowcock, who this month said that after four years in the role he is stepping down to spend more time with his family in the UK, sounded the alarm about a humanitarian crisis which, 10 years into the civil war, is only getting worse. A fragile economy is suffering shock after shock, the currency is in free fall, food prices have spiked by 200 percent, unemployment is rising, and 60 percent of the population lacks access to safe and nutritious food, he said.

Millions are forced to resort to "desperate measures" to survive, he added. Parents are going without food so that they can feed their children, who are having to find work instead of going to school. More than half a million under-fives are affected by stunting, which is impaired growth and development as a result of chronic malnutrition.

Although this crisis is affecting people throughout Syria, it is particularly bad in the northwest and northeast, where Lowcock said one in three children is suffering from the irreversible effects of stunting. He said malnutrition is so common that parents no longer even notice the signs in their children.

"The effects this will have on their development and learning will be lifelong and irreversible," he added.

Sonia Khush, Save the Children's Syria response director, told the council that about half of Syrian children are growing up "having known nothing but conflict, which has permeated all aspects of their lives and robbed them of their childhoods."

She added: "Children today are facing a graver reality than at any other point in the 10-year conflict. They are more likely to be in need of humanitarian assistance, to go hungry, to die from preventable diseases, to miss out on school and face protection risks."

Khush said the combined effects of the conflict, during which thousands of children have been killed, displacement, poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic have created conditions in which millions of Syrian young people are missing out on an education, girls are being married off to support their families, boys are being sent to war, and child labor is becoming more prevalent.

Schools are supposed to be safe places for children to learn and thrive, she added, but instead they have been attacked, used by armed groups and are littered with unexploded ordinance.

Of the five million people across northern Syria in need of cross-border assistance, two million are children and half of them have been displaced, in some cases more than 10 times, Khush said.

Lack of access to adequate supplies of food and water has resulted in an alarming nutritional crisis.

"This means they have gone for months without eating nutritious food that is vital to their survival and development, and the number of children who go to bed hungry every day is in the millions," Khush said.

In the past year, the UN has lost access to three of four border crossings through which it delivered humanitarian aid to Syria from neighboring countries. Under pressure from Russia and China, on behalf of the Assad regime, closed crossings have not been reopened. In the northwest, the entire humanitarian aid effort to help 2.4 million people has to pass through a single checkpoint on the border with Turkey.

"Without the cross-border operation, doctors in northwest Syria, like some of those I spoke to, would not be able to provide those children with the care that they need to survive," Lowcock said. "They would not have the resources and supplies to carry on, within quite a short period of time, they said. The situation would go from terrible to catastrophic."

Lowcock, who is also the emergency relief coordinator, reiterated the stance of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres that "when it comes to delivering life-saving aid to people in need, all channels should be made, and should be kept, available."

Should the Security Council again fail to extend its authorization for cross-border assistance, Lowcock warned that it would "trigger suffering and loss of life potentially on a very large scale."

Despite the dire warnings, the Russian stance on the issue of cross-border assistance remained the same.

"There is no doubt that keeping the cross-border mechanism will also mean keeping supporting terrorists, who are living on what they have extorted and also on how they are controlling smuggling," said Vassily Nebenzya, Russia's permanent representative to the UN.

"If we all had to make a decision on the extension of the cross-border mechanism tomorrow, I fear that we would not have any convincing grounds to do so."



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Fri, 2021-02-26 02:41

WASHINGTON: The United States launched airstrikes in Syria on Thursday, targeting facilities near the Iraqi border used by Iranian-backed militia groups. The Pentagon said the strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a US service member and other coalition troops.

The airstrike was the first military action undertaken by the Biden administration, which in its first weeks has emphasized its intent to put more focus on the challenges posed by China, even as Mideast threats persist. "This proportionate military response was conducted together with diplomatic

measures, including consultation with coalition partners," the Pentagon's chief spokesperson, John Kirby, said in announcing the strikes.

"The operation sends an unambiguous message: President Biden will act to protect American and coalition personnel. At the same time, we have acted in a deliberate manner that aims to deescalate the overall situation in eastern Syria and Iraq."

Kirby said the US airstrikes "destroyed multiple facilities at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militant groups."

Further details were not immediately available.

Biden administration officials condemned the Feb. 15 rocket attack near the city of Irbil in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdish-run region, but as recently as this week officials indicated they had not determined for certain who carried it out. Officials have noted that in the past, Iranian-backed Shiite militia groups have been responsible for numerous rocket attacks that targeted US personnel or facilities in Iraq.

Kirby had said Tuesday that Iraq is in charge of investigating the Feb. 15 attack.

"Right now, we're not able to give you a certain attribution as to who was behind these attacks, what groups, and I'm not going to get into the tactical details of every bit of weaponry used here," Kirby said. "Let's let the investigations complete and conclude, and then when we have more to say, we will."

A little-known Shiite militant group calling itself Saraya Awliya Al-Dam, Arabic for Guardians of Blood Brigade, claimed responsibility for the Feb. 15 attack. A week later, a rocket attack in Baghdad's Green Zone appeared to target the US Embassy compound, but no one was hurt.

Iran this week said it has no links to the Guardians of Blood Brigade.

The frequency of attacks by Shiite militia groups against US targets in Iraq diminished late last year ahead of President Joe Biden's inauguration, though now Iran is pressing America to return to Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal. The US under the previous Trump administration blamed Iran-backed groups for carrying out the attacks. Tensions soared after a Washington-directed drone strike that killed top Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani and powerful Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis last year.

Trump had said the death of a US contractor would be a red line and provoke US escalation in Iraq. The December 2019 killing of a US civilian contractor in a rocket attack in Kirkuk sparked a tit-for-tat fight on Iraqi soil that brought the country to the brink of a proxy war.

US forces have been significantly reduced in Iraq to 2,500 personnel and no longer partake in combat missions with Iraqi forces in ongoing operations against the Daesh group.



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[ICC must investigate Israeli war crimes, human rights groups say](#)

Fri, 2021-02-26 02:29

Officials representing leading human rights groups on Thursday urged US President Joe Biden to remove sanctions imposed by his predecessor against International Criminal Court (ICC) officials, arguing war crimes committed by Israel against Palestinians must be investigated.

The ICC was created in 2002 based on the principles of the Rome Statute drawn up by the United Nations in 1998, and on legal precedents defined during the Nuremberg Trials after Second World War which prosecuted Nazi war crimes.

Although 123 nations have joined the ICC, more than 40 countries including the US and Israel, which originally supported the Rome Statutes, refuse to join and reject the ICC's authority because of investigations into Israel's military policies.

Katherine Gallagher, a senior staff attorney for the Center for Constitutional Rights, and other human rights activists from around the world took part in a webinar panel on Thursday. The forum was hosted by the Foundation for Middle East Peace and its president, Lara Friedman.

"What we saw (Wednesday) in the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva is the US expressing its intention to rejoin," said Dr. Michael Kearney, a legal researcher for Al-Haq, the Palestinian human rights agency based in Ramallah.

"But it is doing so on the condition that Palestine is removed from the agenda of the Human Rights Council. We have to be cautious about what the US is basing that re-engagement."

Former US President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the council in 2018. Biden's Secretary of State Antony Blinken told the Human Rights Council in Geneva on Wednesday the US would seek re-election to the council in 2022. He said probes into Syria and North Korea along with preserving LGBTQI rights and combating racism should be priorities.

"The Human Rights Council must support those fighting against injustice and tyranny," Blinken said.

"We acknowledge the challenges at the Council as well, including unacceptable bias against Israel and membership rules that allow countries with atrocious human rights records to occupy seats they do not merit."

The sanctions imposed on the ICC by Trump and mixed signals from the Biden administration have not dissuaded the organization from investigating allegations of Israeli war crimes in Palestine.

On Feb. 5, the ICC "pre-trial chamber" found that "the court's territorial jurisdiction in the situation in Palestine, a state party to the ICC Rome Statute, extends to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967, namely Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem."

This ruling opened the door for investigations into alleged war crimes perpetrated by "members of the Israeli Defense Forces, Israeli authorities, Hamas, and Palestinian armed groups," Friedman said.

The panelists agreed that Israel has engaged in political policies to deny Palestine of any protected rights under ICC authority.

The ICC decision to move forward in its investigation came despite threats from the Trump administration, former Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and former US Ambassador to the UN John Bolton. Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions against top ICC officials, along with individuals and corporate entities assisting the ICC probe.

Yael Stein, a research director at the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights (B'Tselem), argued that Israel has created a sophisticated legal system to confuse the international rule of law as it applies to the actions of Israeli soldiers.

"Israel claims that it will investigate itself," Stein said. "But it is not investigating the charges against itself. The Israelis do not investigate the orders. They only address the question, 'Did the soldiers obey the legal orders they were given?'"

She said charges are watered down to "insignificant claims."

"If a soldier kills a civilian, he is charged with not obeying an order so he can avoid a murder charge," she said. "(Israeli authorities) are able to assert that they in fact do investigate cases."

Hassan Jabareen, the founder of the Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel (Adalah), referred to this as "Israel's legal black hole."

"Israel creates a situation in which there is a black hole of legality where they ensure that legality is applied, and as a consequence, no one is charged or held to be responsible," Jabareen said.

"One way they did this was in 2007 when Israel declared that Gaza is an 'enemy.' Therefore, everyone in Gaza is an enemy and even if someone is injured illegally, there will be no consequences against Israeli soldiers."

The victims in Gaza, he said, are legally denied access to Israeli courts because they are all defined as "enemies" of Israel.

Kearney said that the significance of the ICC ruling this month applies directly to the illegal establishment of Jewish-only settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem that were occupied by Israel in 1967.

He said Israel tried to exclude the issue of war crimes in the Rome Statutes

in 1998, specifically to prevent the inclusion of settlements and population transfers.

Gallagher noted that Biden has not yet lifted the Trump administration sanctions on the ICC because Israel is lobbying to keep them in place.



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[Lebanon's top Christian cleric calls for international conference](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-26 02:14

BEIRUT: Lebanon's top Christian cleric on Thursday reiterated his call for the country's politicians to come together to form a new government. Maronite Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai wants an international conference on the issue that would protect Lebanon, the Taif Agreement, "and equality," but his sermons are falling on deaf ears.

The country's lawmakers have failed to agree on a new administration since the last one resigned after the devastating Aug. 4 port explosion in Beirut. There has also been a sharp increase in tension between President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri.

"We have reached a point where it is impossible for us to communicate or reach an agreement," Al-Rai said on Thursday.

"We must diagnose our problem and treat it based on three constants: The Taif Agreement, the constitution, and the Charter. All the country's problems are caused by foreign interventions."

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah rejected Rai's proposition, calling it "the internationalization and cover for a new occupation. Nobody messes with us," he said.

Nasrallah's words sparked criticism from Christian parties on social media, and several Arab and foreign diplomats visited Al-Rai to voice their support for his proposal.

"There is a need to properly implement the Taif Agreement, which guarantees the national unity and civil peace of the country," Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Lebanon Walid bin Abdullah Bukhari said.

Delegations from the Lebanese Forces, the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) and other opposing parties also visited the patriarch.

"We are living in hell as a result of drawing Lebanon into the Iranian-American conflict," Lebanese Forces MP Antoine Habshi said.

"This makes it imperative to resort to the international community as Lebanon is being held as a hostage."

Former Information Minister Ghazi Aridi, a PSP member, said Lebanon's president does not want Hariri as prime minister.

He also dismissed efforts by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), led by Aoun's son-in-law MP Gebran Bassil, to be included in the government's formation.

"Bassil's insistence on having the bloc third in the government is a failed attempt," Aridi said. "There will not be any third."

An FPM delegation also met with Al-Rai on Thursday, while Bassil spoke on the phone with the patriarch.

MP Roger Azar reiterated the FPM's demands and said: "We informed the patriarch of the FPM's readiness to discuss any suggestion within the constitutional norms and terms, and on the basis of a comprehensive national partnership."

Former MP Ahmed Fatfat said any attack against Al-Rai just solidifies his position as an important reference in the country.

"Al-Rai is waging a basic and clear battle and has the support of all political parties and communities in Lebanon," Fatfat said. "Intimidation attempts are useless."



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[Egypt backs Sudanese proposal to mediate GERD negotiations](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-02-26 01:49

CAIRO: The Egyptian Foreign Ministry has announced that Egypt welcomes and supports a Sudanese proposal to form an international quartet committee to mediate stalled negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), made at a meeting of interested parties with the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) African Union (AU) presidency coordinator, Alphonse Ntumba. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry expressed his support toward the proposed committee, which would be convened under the auspices of Felix Tshisekedi, the president of the DRC.

Shoukry expressed hope that the move would push negotiations forward and assist Cairo, Khartoum and Addis Ababa in reaching an agreement as soon as

possible over Ethiopia's filling of the GERD's lake.

Spokesman Ahmed Hafez said that during the meeting, Shoukry expressed his appreciation for the DRC's endeavors during its presidency of the AU, and that he looked forward to the key role Kinshasa can play to help reach a legally binding agreement on the rules of filling and operating the GERD, taking into account the interests of the three countries.

Hafez added that Cairo had confirmed to the Congolese delegation that the proposed committee should include representatives from the US, EU, and the UN.

Mohammed Abdel Atty, Egyptian minister of water resources and irrigation, affirmed Egypt's commitment to safeguarding its water rights, and insisted that a legally binding agreement between the three sides was the only acceptable way to end the dispute.



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Egypt: Ethiopia has delayed reaching agreement on the GERDEgypt urges GERD agreement ahead of reservoir filling