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War Crimes Prosecution
Watch

PILPG
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Volume 14 - Issue 19
October 26, 2019

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War Crimes Prosecution Watch is a bi-weekly e-newsletter that compiles official documents and articles from major news sources detailing and analyzing salient issues pertaining to the investigation and prosecution of war crimes throughout the world. To subscribe, please email warcrimewatch@pilpg.org and type "subscribe" in the subject line.

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AFRICA

NORTH AFRICA

Libya

Libya official: Gunmen kill 2 women, 3 kids near capital (ABC News) By Noha Elhennawy

October 17, 2019

Gunmen killed two women and three children of the same family while they were driving on a highway near the capital, Tripoli, less than a week after an airstrike slammed into a house killing at least three civilians, a health official said Thursday.

The city has been the scene of fighting between rival militias since April. A U.N.-supported but weak government holds the capital, but the self-styled Libyan National Army — which is associated with a rival government in the country's east — is trying to seize it.

Abdel Rahman al-Tamimi, his wife, sister and three children were traveling Wednesday evening to the capital from their hometown of Aziziya, south of the city, when unknown militants opened fire on their car, Malek Merset, a health spokesman with the U.N.-backed government told The Associated Press. The family was headed to the capital, where the children, ages 3 to 6, were expected to receive vaccination shots, Merset said.

It wasn't immediately clear who was behind the attack. However, LNA spokesman Ahmed al-Mesmari blamed the attack on militias allied with the Tripoli-based internationally recognized government. "This is one of the systematic crimes carried out by militias against civilians," he wrote on his official Facebook page. "In order to eradicate them and avenge the murdered, the battle shall continue."

Earlier this week, the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord held the LNA responsible for the shelling of a civilian residence that killed at least three civilians and the wounding of two, including children. The LNA denied the accusation saying that it targeted a military camp that the Tripoli militias used as an "operations room."

The battle for Tripoli has stalled in recent weeks, with both sides dug in and shelling one another along the city's southern

reaches. The months of combat have killed hundreds of people and displaced thousands.

The fighting threatens to plunge Libya into another bout of violence on the scale of the 2011 conflict that ousted and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

Separately, Libya's coast guard said that it has rescued 82 Europe-bound migrants, including 11 women and eight children off the country's Mediterranean coast.

The rubber boat carrying migrants from Syria, Bangladesh, Sudan and many other African countries was stopped on Wednesday 40 miles (64 kilometers) to the north of the western town of Zawiya, according to a statement released on Thursday by Libya's navy.

Libya has emerged as a major transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe. In recent years, the European Union has partnered with the coast guard and other Libyan forces to try to stop the dangerous sea crossings.

Rights groups, however, have criticized those efforts, saying they've left migrants at the mercy of armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuses.

Also on Thursday, the U.N. Support Mission in Libya called for the immediate release of lawmaker Seham Sergiwa, who was abducted in mid-July by gunmen from her house in the eastern city of Benghazi — the Libyan National Army stronghold.

"We will continue to lift our voices to demand her release and that those responsible for her violent abduction be held accountable," the UNSMIL statement said.

Since her kidnapping, Libya's eastern authorities have failed to reveal her whereabouts.

The Tripoli-based government, as well as some members of her family, accused forces loyal to Khalifa Hifter, the LNA commander, of being behind the 56-year-old parliamentarian's disappearance.

Although a member of the east-based parliament known for its loyalty to Hifter, Sergiwa was a vocal critic of the Libyan National Army offensive on Tripoli.

In Thursday's statement, the UNSMIL condemned Sergiwa's kidnapping as an attempt "to silence one of Libya's prominent female voices and to intimidate other women seeking to participate in the country's political life."

Several rights groups have previously said that Libyan militias on all sides of the conflict have committed human rights abuses, including abducting activists, journalists and rights activists.

Libya: Deadly Airstrike Apparently Unlawful (Human Rights Watch)

October 19, 2019

(Beirut) – An airstrike by the Libyan National Army (LNA), on a home in a residential area of Tripoli on October 14, 2019 that killed three girls and wounded their mother and another sister, is an apparent violation of the laws of war, Human Rights Watch said today. This attack on civilians is one of many that require an impartial and independent investigation to attribute responsibility and hold those responsible to account.

Under the command of General Khalifa Hiftar, the armed group LNA and affiliated forces have conducted a series of air strikes that resulted in civilian casualties. They began a military campaign in April to conquer the capital, Tripoli, from forces affiliated with the Tripoli-based and internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

"General Hiftar and his forces have repeatedly shown their disregard for civilians' lives with disproportionate or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian structures," said Eric Goldstein, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch. "There is a dire need for an independent UN investigation to attribute responsibility for these airstrikes and ensure justice for war crimes and compensation for the victims' families."

In the October 14 airstrike, the LNA destroyed a home in the al-Fernaj residential neighborhood of Tripoli, and killed three sisters, ages 4, 5, and 7 and injured another sister, age 3, and the girls' mother, said a statement by the GNA-aligned Tripoli military operations coalition Volcano of Rage, which is fighting the LNA. The statement identified the casualties by name. An LNA spokesman, Ahmed al-Mismari, said that the airstrike targeted a "terrorist operations room" and denied targeting civilians.

The LNA that is supported by the Interim Government in eastern Libya has consistently denied causing civilian deaths despite

mounting evidence of their responsibility.

The UN has said that fighting between the two groups in and around Tripoli has, since April, killed at least 100 civilians and displaced 120,000.

The GNA in a statement blamed the LNA for the attack, as did the United Nations Mission in Libya, while the United States embassy attributed it to the “forces laying siege” to Tripoli.

Human Rights Watch spoke by phone with Husam Alter, a Tripoli resident who witnessed the airstrike and who was among the first responders to the incident, and with Osama Ali, the spokesman for the Tripoli Ambulance and Emergency services. Alter, who was on private business in the area, said he noticed at around noon a fighter jet circling for several minutes above the area, then dropping a bomb on a private house in a busy residential area. He said he ran toward the home and saw a large plume of smoke rising.

“As I arrived at the house, which consisted of two floors and a small annex, I saw that it had been completely destroyed,” he said. People had just started to clamber onto the debris to check for survivors. The father was outside with one of the girls, who was covered in gray dust, but he left quickly to take her to hospital. One of the neighbors said there were three more children in the house and other people and I started to remove the stones and debris with our hands until the ambulance and security services arrived.”

He said he left when relief services with a digger to came to search for the survivors as he could no longer see because of dust in his eyes.

Ali said that the Ambulance and Emergency Services recovered the bodies of the three sisters from the debris. He said that the family had been renting the house temporarily after being displaced from their own home in the Khila area in the southern suburbs of Tripoli due to the ongoing fighting.

Both men said that a fighter jet struck the house. Photographs and videos of the scene that Human Rights Watch reviewed showed damage consistent with an air-delivered munition.

The targeted house was about 20 meters from a compound belonging to Military Intelligence, Alter and Ali said. Some local sources said the compound, which seemed not to have been damaged, was not in use.

Mustafa al-Majae, spokesperson for the Tripoli military operations command, told Human Rights Watch that the compound adjacent to the house that was struck had been an administrative building for the military command, which owns it. He said that the compound was currently not in use and had no role in the military counteroffensive against the LNA. The LNA has produced no evidence showing that it was a military target justifying it being targeted despite being in a civilian neighborhood.

Both Alter and Ali said they did not see any military equipment in or around the house that was struck. Photos and videos of the attack reviewed by Human Rights Watch appear consistent with these statements.

Under the laws of war, civilians and civilian objects may never be the object of attacks. Warring parties are required to take all feasible precautions to minimize harm to civilians and civilian objects and to refrain from attacks that would disproportionately harm the civilian population or fail to discriminate between combatants and civilians.

The laws of war also prohibit disproportionate attacks, attacks that cause loss of civilian life or damage to civilian objects that would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated from the attack.

While Human Rights Watch could not confirm the status of the compound next to the targeted house, the GNA is obligated as a matter of principle to ensure that no civilians are adjacent to operational military facilities, given the heightened risk of their being in the line of fire.

Since April 4, Human Rights Watch has documented other LNA strikes that resulted in killing or injuring civilians and destroying homes and civilian structures with apparently no measures taken against those responsible and no compensation or payments to civilians. These attacks included a strike against a migrant detention center in Tajoura in July that killed 46 civilians.

On October 6, the LNA attacked the Janzour Equestrian Club in the Janzour area of Tripoli, injuring six children and killing several horses. UN staff conducted an assessment to identify the targeted site and the nature of the attack and, blaming the LNA, found that “a fighter jet had dropped four unguided bombs on the Equestrian Club, a civilian facility, and that neither military assets nor military infrastructure were observed at the targeted site.”

Fighters affiliated with the LNA have a well-documented record of summarily executing civilians and fighters; forcibly

displacing, torturing, and disappearing people; and carrying out indiscriminate or disproportionate attacks that have harmed civilians. Armed groups affiliated with the GNA also have a record of abuses including summary killings of captured fighters, arbitrary detention, forced displacement, torture, and disappearances.

Due to the partial collapse of the domestic criminal justice system, Libyan authorities have failed to investigate or prosecute those responsible for grave abuses. The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) has a mandate to investigate war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Libya, since 2011. The court has recently issued two arrest warrants for Mahmoud el-Werfalli, a commander linked to the LNA, for the war crime of murder related to incidents between June 2016 and January 2018.

Saif al-Islam Gaddafi also continued to be subject to an ICC arrest warrant for his alleged role in attacks on civilians during the country's 2011 uprising. The ICC also issued an arrest warrant for Al-Tuhamy Mohamed Khaled, a former official in the Gaddafi government, for crimes against humanity and war crimes committed in Libya between February and August 2011. Their whereabouts remain unknown.

The United Nations has imposed a sanctions regime and arms embargo on Libya but has not effectively used them to punish those who commit gross human rights violations.

Given the current state of impunity in Libya, there is a dire need for an international inquiry, such as by an independent commission of inquiry or similar entity, with a mandate to impartially document abuses, identify those responsible for violations, and publicly report on the human rights situation in Libya, Human Rights Watch said. An upcoming opportunity to establish such an investigation will be during the March 2020 session of the UN Human Rights Council. Ghassan Salameh, the UN special representative to Libya; the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights; and several European governments have already endorsed such a move.

"There needs to be a much stronger focus on justice and accountability in Libya to deter further crimes," Goldstein said. "As the attacks continue, civilians – and in this case small children – pay with their lives."

Seven children reported killed and scores injured as violence continues in Libya (Unicef) By Ted Chaiban
October 22, 2019

"In the past two weeks, violence has taken a heavy toll on children in Tripoli./p>

"Last Thursday, three children and two women were reportedly killed while driving on a main highway, 16 kilometres from Tripoli. On 14 October, three sisters were reportedly killed, and their mother and a fourth sister badly injured when their house, south of the capital, came under attack. A day earlier, a 13-year-old child was reportedly killed while in his house and earlier this month, five children were injured when their school in Janzour, 18 kilometres from the capital was hit.

"These recent attacks are a reminder that children in Libya continue to pay first and most as violence continues in a number of areas in the western parts of the country.

"Children are not a target and should be protected at all times wherever they are. Parties to the conflict must refrain from attacks on civilian infrastructure including people's homes, schools, hospitals and medical facilities."

Trapped in Tripoli: The people struck in Libya's civil war (BBC News)
October 23, 2019

Survivors of a deadly air strike on a migrant detention centre in Tripoli in July have told the BBC they feel abandoned by the United Nations, and are desperate to escape Libya.

Fifty-three migrants and refugees were killed in the air strike which was blamed on rebel forces trying to get control of the capital. There was widespread international condemnation of the air strike, which the United Nations said may have been a war crime.

Since the fighting began on the outskirts of Tripoli more than six months ago, the World Health Organization says that at least 1,000 people have been killed, including around 100 civilians, and 120,000 displaced.

Survivors of the air strike remain trapped in a city under attack, where they have been speaking exclusively to our international correspondent Orla Guerin.

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CENTRAL AFRICA

Central African Republic

Official Website of the International Criminal Court
ICC Public Documents - Cases: Central African Republic

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Sudan & South Sudan

Official Website of the International Criminal Court
ICC Public Documents - Situation in Darfur, Sudan

Sudan: Immediate humanitarian access for victims of conflict essential as ceasefire deal agreed (Amnesty International)

October 22, 2019

Responding to a ceasefire agreement signed on 21 October between the Sudanese government and armed opposition groups from Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states to allow humanitarian access into these areas, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for East Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes, Seif Magango said:

“The people in the conflict-torn areas of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, have been denied basic rights like education, health and even adequate food for years through deliberate blocking of humanitarian assistance.

“Our research over the years has shown the terrible extent of the atrocities suffered by the victims of Sudan's internal conflicts – including the use of chemical weapons and scorched earth techniques. It is absolutely crucial that all sides work tirelessly to facilitate immediate, unfettered access to the humanitarian aid needed to end the suffering civilians have endured for many years. Also essential is an end to impunity for war crimes and other serious violations. The rights of victims to justice and reparation must be prioritised.”

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Democratic Republic of the Congo

Official Website of the International Criminal Court
ICC Public Documents - Situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

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Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

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Lake Chad Region – Chad, Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon

Investigate security forces, Boko Haram's atrocities, AI tells ICC again (Punch) By Adelani Adepegba
October 16, 2019

Amnesty International has again asked the International Criminal Court to open investigations into alleged atrocities committed by the Nigerian security forces and Boko Haram in North East.

It accused the Federal Government of frustrating the probe by “dumping information on the ICC in an attempt to delay the inevitable investigation.”

Responding to the statement by the ICC Prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda about the conclusion of her fourth visit to Nigeria on Tuesday, Amnesty International's Advocacy and Research Director, Netsanet Belay said, “There is mounting evidence that the government of Nigeria is willingly unable to bring perpetrators to justice and it is past time that the OTP proceeds with an investigation into crimes committed by both Boko Haram and the Nigerian military.”

The director added, “The delay has gone on for far too long and the OTP needs to do what is right for victims of these horrific crimes who have been waiting for justice for more than a decade. The ICC should proceed to open an investigation into atrocities committed in the North-East of Nigeria.”

AI said since the beginning of the conflict, the Boko Haram insurgents and the Nigerian security forces have committed serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law.

It said Boko Haram had killed thousands of civilians, abducted thousands of women, girls and boys, many of whom were forcibly recruited as child soldiers or subjected to forced marriages and sexual slavery.

” On the other hand, Nigerian security forces have committed extrajudicial killings, mass arbitrary arrests and detentions, torture and other ill-treatment, leading to thousands of deaths in custody, enforced disappearances, and other crimes including rape and sexual violence,” the human rights group noted.

The ICC Office of the Prosecutor had opened a preliminary examination into the situation in Nigeria since 2010.

In December 2018, Amnesty International published its report ‘Willingly Unable: ICC Preliminary Examination And Nigeria's Failure To Address Impunity For International Crimes’ which assessed the ICC-OTP's preliminary examination in Nigeria, and the ability and willingness of the government to ensure accountability for crimes allegedly committed by Boko Haram and Nigerian security forces.

Chad: No Redress for Ex-Dictator's Victims (Human Rights Watch)
October 23, 2019

(Nairobi) – The Chadian government has yet to provide reparations ordered by a court in 2015 to 7,000 victims of grave crimes under the rule of former dictator Hissène Habré, four human rights groups said today.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which is currently reviewing Chad's human rights record in Banjul, Gambia, should press the Chadian government to fulfill its obligations to Habré's victims.

"It's been four years since the court ordered reparations for Habré's victims, yet the Chadian government hasn't even begun to carry out the order," said Jacqueline Moudeïna, lead lawyer for the victims and president of the Chadian Association for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (ATPDH). "This is a slap in the face to the victims and an affront to the rule of law."

On March 25, 2015, a Chadian criminal court convicted 20 Habré-era security agents on charges of murder, torture, kidnapping, and arbitrary detention. The court also awarded 75 billion CFA francs (approximately US\$140 million) in reparations to 7,000 victims, ordering the government to pay half and the convicted agents the other half.

Habré himself was convicted in 2016 of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, including sexual violence and rape, by a special court in Dakar, Senegal and sentenced to life in prison. An appellate court confirmed the conviction in April 2017, awarded 82 billion CFA francs (\$153 million) to 7,396 named victims, and mandated an African Union Trust Fund to raise the money by searching for Habré's assets and soliciting contributions.

Although the African Union has allocated \$5 million to the Trust Fund for reparations, the fund has yet to become operational, 30 months after the Dakar verdict. The groups said that the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights should also press the African Union to speed up the Trust Fund so that the victims could begin to receive reparations.

"Habré's victims fought relentlessly for 25 years to bring the dictator and his henchmen to justice, and were awarded millions of dollars, but they haven't seen one penny in reparations," said Reed Brody, counsel for Human Rights Watch, who has worked with Habré's victims since 1999. "Many of the victims who scored these historic victories are in dire straits and in desperate need."

During the landmark 2015 trial in Chad, about 50 victims described their torture and ill-treatment at the hands of agents of the Documentation and Security Directorate (DDS), Habré's notorious political police. Among those the Chadian court sentenced to life in prison were Saleh Younous, former head of the DDS, and Mahamat Djibrine, described as one of the "most feared torturers in Chad" by a 1992 Chadian Truth Commission. Many of those convicted, including Younous and Djibrine, have apparently since been released without official explanation.

The Chadian court had ordered the government to create a commission to oversee the payment of compensation. But the commission has not been created. The court also ordered the government to erect a monument "in not more than one year" to honor those killed under Habré and to create a museum in the former DDS headquarters, where detainees were tortured. Neither of these projects has been started.

"The Chadian government needs to implement the court's decision so that the victims at long last can receive reparations for what they suffered and so that steps are taken to remember what happened to us," said Clément Abaïfouta, president of the Association of Victims of the Crimes of Hissène Habré (AVCRHH), who as a prisoner under Habré was forced to dig graves for many of his fellow inmates. "We fought for decades for that decision and now the government is making us fight again to get the decision enforced."

Habré's one-party rule from 1982-1990 was marked by widespread atrocities, including targeting certain ethnic groups. DDS files recovered by Human Rights Watch in 2001 reveal the names of 1,208 people who were killed or died in detention and 12,321 victims of human rights violations. Habré was deposed by the current president, Idriss Déby Itno, and fled to Senegal. His victims fought for decades to bring Habré and his associates to trial. In 2012, Senegal agreed on a plan to create the Extraordinary African Chambers to conduct Habré's trial within the Senegalese judicial system.

Survivors filed the charges leading to the Chadian trial of Habré's agents in 2000, but the case languished until after Habré himself was arrested in Dakar in 2013. Many of the accused held key positions in the Déby administration until they were arrested in 2013 and 2014.

In November 2017, Moudeïna and other victims' lawyers submitted a complaint regarding Chad's failure to implement the 2015 reparation award to the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, where it is pending. In August 2017, a team of United Nations experts expressed their concern over the government's failure to carry out reparations.

"It's unconscionable that the Chadian government is choosing to prolong the suffering of these victims, who have already gone through so much," said Rupert Skilbeck, director of REDRESS. "The Chadian government should do the right thing and provide the victims with the reparations that are owed to them without delay, as ordered by the courts."

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Mali

Security Council Press Statement on Mali, 9 October 2019 (reliefweb)

October 9, 2019

The following Security Council press statement was issued today by Council President Jerry Matthews Matjila (South Africa):

The Security Council held a briefing and consultations on Mali on 8 October 2019.

The Security Council noted that some progress has been made by the Government of Mali and the Plateforme and Coordination signatory armed groups (“the parties”) in the implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali (“the Agreement”), in particular the integration of more than 1,000 members of the signatory armed groups in the Malian Defence and Security Forces and some progress towards the socioeconomic development of the north of Mali, which are part of the priority measures set out in resolution 2480 (2019).

The Security Council also welcomed the launch of the inclusive national dialogue (“the dialogue”) that constitutes a step towards the completion of the constitutional reform. It encourages all the stakeholders to conduct the dialogue with broad consensus, which is necessary for this dialogue to succeed.

The Security Council noted that, despite this progress, there is still significant work to be done in the implementation of the Agreement and to meet the other priority measures of resolution 2480 (2019).

The Security Council therefore urged the parties to resume their work through the Comité de suivi de l'accord in order to accelerate the implementation of the Agreement, through significant, meaningful and irreversible measures to be taken on an urgent basis, particularly on the completion of inclusive constitutional reform, following an inclusive consultation with the full involvement of the Malian parties, the political opposition and civil society, the transfer of decentralized State services to local authorities and increased meaningful participation of women in the mechanisms established to advance the Agreement.

The Security Council recalled that engaging in hostilities in violation of the Agreement as well as taking actions that obstruct, or that obstruct by prolonged delay, or that threaten the implementation of the Agreement constitute a basis for sanctions designations pursuant to resolution 2374 (2017), among other designation criteria.

The Security Council expressed increased concerns about the deteriorating security situation in Central Mali. It commended the enhanced actions taken by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to address the situation, while recognizing that the responsibility in this regard lies primarily with the Malian authorities. It welcomed the efforts of the Malian authorities to reinstate State authority in the regions of central Mali and encouraged the implementation of the commitments taken.

The Security Council condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attacks perpetrated on 6 October against two patrols of MINUSMA, in Aguelhoc and Bandiagara, Kidal and Mopti regions, which caused the death of one peacekeeper and injured several others.

The Security Council also condemned in the strongest terms the terrorist attacks perpetrated on 30 September and 1 October against two camps of the Malian Defence and Security Forces in Boulkessi and Mondoro, in the region of Mopti, which resulted in 40 Malian soldiers killed and many others injured.

The Security Council expressed its deepest condolences and sympathy to the families of the victims, as well as to Chad, to Mali and to MINUSMA. It wished a speedy and full recovery to those who were injured.

The Security Council called on the Government of Mali to swiftly investigate these attacks and bring the perpetrators to justice. It underlined that attacks targeting peacekeepers may constitute war crimes under international law.

The Security Council reaffirmed that terrorism in all its forms and manifestations constituted one of the most serious threats to international peace and security. It stressed that those responsible for these killings should be held accountable, and urged all States, in accordance with their obligations under international law and relevant Security Council resolutions, to cooperate actively with all relevant authorities in this regard.

The Security Council reiterated that any acts of terrorism are criminal and unjustifiable, regardless of their motivation, wherever, whenever and by whomsoever committed. It reaffirmed the need for all States to combat by all means, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and other obligations under international law, including international human rights law, international refugee law and international humanitarian law, threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.

The Security Council reiterated its support to the Malian Defence and Security Forces; the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Mali and Head of MINUSMA, Mahamat Saleh Annadif; MINUSMA; and the other security presences in Mali and in the Sahel region, as detailed in resolution 2480 (2019). It underlined that the efforts of the Force Conjointe of the G5 Sahel to counter the activities of terrorist groups and other organized criminal groups will contribute to create a more secure environment in the Sahel region. It encouraged the Force Conjointe of the G5 Sahel to accelerate its efforts to benefit from the logistical support provided by MINUSMA to the Force Conjointe based on resolutions 2391 (2017) and 2480 (2019).

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Liberia

Liberia: International Justice Group Submits Petition for The Implementation of TRC Recommendations (Front Page Africa)

October 14, 2019

Washington – The International Justice Group(IJG) has submitted a petition for the full implementation of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly the establishment of a criminal court for war and economic crimes committed during Liberia’s brutal civil war to the Liberian government.

The ICG’s Executive Director, Cllr. Jerome Verdier, chair of the erstwhile TRC in Liberia said the group is currently reviewing the draft legislation with a view to strengthening it, remove the likelihood of corruption and conflicts of interest, to conform to best practices, thus adjusting to current realities.

The petition amongst other things reminded President George Manneh Weah, Vice President Jewel Howard Taylor, President Pro Temp of the Senate, Albert Chie and House Speaker Bhopal Chambers that the Government of Liberia is under mandate, by law, to implement all the recommendations of the TRC Report, also specifically as stated in Article X, Reporting and Recommendations, Section 48, it is provided that : “The Head of State shall report to the National Legislature within three months of receipt of the TRC Report and on a quarterly basis, thereafter as to the implementation of the Commission’s Recommendations. All recommendations shall be implemented. Where the implementation of any Recommendation has not been complied with, the Legislature shall require the Head of State to show cause for such noncompliance”

Massive Human Rights Abuses Unpunished

The petition points to massive abuse of human rights during the Liberian civil war intolerably incensed the sensibilities not only of the Liberian people but also the sympathetic international community that bore the brunt of the material cost leading to the comprehensive restoration of peace and civil governance to Liberia.

The petition reminded the government of the widespread abuse of human rights, the wanton looting of the Liberian economy was noticeably egregious, as was rampant corruption committed on an unprecedented scale during the war, after the war, during the transitional governments and during the two term rule of Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, which corruption continued after her retirement from office, whereby Economic Crime and rampant corruption are continuously committed with impunity in Liberia.

The petition states that without justice, Liberia will never make progress beyond the war experience and the country risks returning to its once pariah status as a nation without the respect for the rule of law and justice.

In this light, the petitioners urged the government to urgently pass into law the statute for the establishment of the court.

The ICG urged President Weah to show leadership on the issue, reminding him of a previous communication set regarding the establishment of the court. “On being elected as President of Liberia, we sent a letter of congratulation to then President -

Elect, George M Weah, congratulating him and reminding him of the national premium attached to the need for justice in Liberia to bring closure to the war era and foster national healing and reconciliation. We certain this plea has fallen on duck's back.”

The petition emphasized that without justice, nothing will go right in Liberia. “Without justice, we would have failed to create the enabling and secured climate or environment for foreign direct investment in our country; without justice we strengthen impunity, lawlessness and deemphasize the rule of law as that guarding safeguard of the rights of all for the institutionalization of a just, equitable and fair society that enhances the rights of our people to equal protection and equal opportunity for all. Without justice, we are going nowhere, and no one is fooled thereby. We are neither fooled, nor impressed and so we think it is with fellow justice advocates or the international community.”

The petition averred that the country is taking a downward spin toward the unknown. “Our country is dying, our people are suffering, our national institutions are in a state of national decline, and with declining living standards we are negatively impacting the stability of the family, undermining the fabric of our society and the sustainability of the future as you preside over a decadent system that serves you and your parochial interest only.

EJS Lapses No Excuse to Pass Buck

The ICG accused the President of presiding over a predatory system that eats all and leaves nothing to the poor and vulnerable. “The President has no intention of instituting justice in Liberia. For us, the charge is great and the pledge to defend and advance justice is unwavering. Anyone who hates justice is evil, ignorant and blind. The President must wake up to the demands of his people and the world. The President is blind!”

The ICG lamented that the failure of former President Ellen Johnson- Sirleaf, to perform her constitutional duties cannot serve as an excuse or justification for President Weah's nonperformance or failure to act in his capacity as President where warranted like in the implementation of All the Recommendations of the TRC, including the Establishment of the Extraordinary Criminal Tribunal for Liberia. Such noncompliance by The President is a violation of the TRC Law which calls for the full implementation of all the recommendations of the TRC. It is a settled law – it is fait accompli – it can never be changed, modified or amended. The President, the National legislature and courts must accept it, there is no other alternative but to accept it; it is the established law of the land.

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EAST AFRICA

Uganda

**Official Website of the International Criminal Court
ICC Public Documents - Situation in Uganda**

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Kenya

**Official Website of the International Criminal Court
ICC Public Documents - Situation in the Republic of Kenya**

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Rwanda (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda)

Official Website of the ICTR

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Somalia

Mortar bombs strike Somalia's Mogadishu airport, six injured: source (Reuters)

October 13, 2019

At least three mortar bombs were fired on Sunday at Mogadishu's international airport, injuring at least six people in the compound where several embassies are located, a diplomatic source said.

The missions of the United Nations and African Union, as well as several embassies, are based inside the perimeter fence.

The Horn of Africa nation has been plagued by conflict since clan warlords overthrew a dictator in 1991. This was followed by fighting between rival clans and an Islamist insurgency.

Al Qaeda-aligned Al Shabaab, which seeks to topple the U.N.-backed government, often launches attacks in Mogadishu and across the country. It did not immediately claim responsibility for Sunday's attack and could not be reached for comment.

The Somali government could also not be reached for comment.

Over 20 al-Shabaab militants killed in central Somalia (AA) By Mohammed Dhaysane and Magdalene

Mukami

October 19, 2019

Over 20 Somali-based insurgent group al-Shabaab militants were killed and several weapons seized after Somali National Army (SNA) conducted a military operation in central region of Hiran, officials said on Saturday.

Mohamed Nuur Agajoof, Jalalaqsi town mayor, told media that the military operation was carried out between Jalalaqsi and Bula Barde towns in Hiran region, killing over 20 al-Shabaab militants.

"We have killed over 20 al-Shabaab members during the operation and we also seized 18 guns and ammunition from al-Shabaab," Agajoof said.

The operation comes after the group attacked our bases several times and we will continue the military operation against the militant group, he added.

The operation comes days after Hirshabelle State President Mohamed Abdi Ware called on the central government to support his administration in the fight against the al-Shabaab.

On Oct. 07, an operation took place at the vicinity of Abdalla Birole, located some 55 kilometers (34 miles) from the port city of Kismayo, killing over 20 al-Shabaab militants.

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The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, War Crimes Chamber

Official Court Website [English translation]

Bosnian Serb Ex-Soldier Appeals Conviction for Killing Family (Balkan Insight) By Lamija Grebo
October 10, 2019

Sretko Pavic, a former member of the Volarska Company with the Sixth Ljubija Battalion of the Bosnian Serb Army, asked the appeals chamber of the Bosnian state court in Sarajevo on Thursday to quash the sentence convicting him of wartime crimes or order a retrial.

The court found Pavic guilty in June this year of having participated in the murder of five civilians in the village of Rizvanovici in the Prijedor area in the second half of July 1992, and sentenced him to 13 years in prison.

The verdict said that the civilians, all members of the Causevic family, were captured in a forest and then detained in a building next to a checkpoint in Rizvanovici.

A day after they were detained there, Pavic and another Bosnian Serb soldier called Pero Stevandic took them out and killed them in the vicinity of a nearby school building. Stevandic has since died.

Pavic's defence said it was appealing against the verdict because of what it said were substantial violations of the law during the criminal proceedings, and because the verdict had wrongly and incompletely established the facts in the case.

Defence lawyer Ranko Dakic said it was indisputable that members of the Causevic family were killed in the village of Rizvanovici, but that Pavic was not the killer.

Dakic explained that a protected witness codenamed S-1 was the only alleged eyewitness to the killings and accused him of trying to shift the guilt for his own wrongdoing onto Pavic.

"Witness S-1 gave false testimony... Witness S-1 fabricated all this with the aim of avoiding his own responsibility," Dakic said.

He also said that troops from the Ljeskarska Company participated in detaining the Causevics, while Pavic was a member of the Volarska Company.

Pavic also addressed the court, saying he only heard about the case after having been accused of killing the family.

"I know I have nothing to do with this, I know I was convicted unjustly," he said.

The prosecution meanwhile argued that the defence's appeal should be rejected as unfounded and the verdict convicting Pavic upheld.

"The evidence on which the [first-instance] court based the verdict has not been seriously called into question," said prosecutor Sedin Idrizovic.

The appeals chamber will hand down its ruling at a later stage.

Bosnia seeks extradition of Missouri man in war crimes case (AP News)

October 14, 2019

A former military policeman in Bosnia who has been living in Missouri for about 17 years is facing extradition to his native country, where he is accused of raping a pregnant Serbian woman who was being held as a prisoner in 1992.

Adem Kostjerevac, 58, who lives in unincorporated southern St. Louis County, will appear in federal court Tuesday in St. Louis for a hearing on an extradition request from the Bosnian government, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

An extradition request filed by the government alleges that Kostjerevac, who served with the 1st Muslim Brigade of the army of Bosnia and Herzegovina, raped the woman in a small village after she was arrested Sept. 17, 1992, by Muslim forces who surrounded her village. The arrest occurred during the Bosnian war that raged from 1992 until 1995.

The woman, who was a neighbor of Kostjerevac's, said she was later raped several times by a guard at a different location, according to the request. The multiple assaults caused her to miscarry, and when she was released in a prisoner exchange on Feb. 5, 1993, she weighed just 81 pounds, according to the request.

The woman testified before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in 2005.

Kostjerevac told FBI agents in St. Louis in 2014 that he saw the woman — who had been his neighbor and the wife of a former classmate — in custody but rather than raping her, he sent her food and protected her when others tried to kill her, according to the request. He also said he saw the woman only once.

Kostjerevac, who came to the U.S. with his wife and who has five adult children, was indicted in Bosnia in 2015. Court documents say he suffers from PTSD, memory lapses, diabetes, high blood pressure and has had a heart attack. He cited his health problems as the reason he failed to voluntarily appear in Bosnian court.

The extradition request was filed on Aug. 14 of this year but remained sealed until after Kostjerevac was arrested on Aug. 23.

Bosnian Wartime Killer Extradited After 24 Years in Switzerland (Balkan Insight) By Milica Stojanovic
October 22, 2019

Zoran Pantic, who participated in killing six members of a family in 1993 and then escaped from prison and went to live in Switzerland under a false name, was extradited to Bosnia and Herzegovina and has been back behind bars in Bijeljina since Monday evening, local media reported on Tuesday.

Mirna Miljanovic, the head of the Republika Srpska Interior Ministry's public relations department told Srna news agency that police located Pantic in Switzerland "after a couple of years of intensive work".

Pantic was sentenced to 12 years and 10 months in prison for his role in the killings of the Isic family in the Bijeljina area in October 1993.

Pantic and others first promised the Isic family that they would transfer them to Serbia for a fee.

They left with the family in a truck, but during the journey, Pantic and his accomplices made a deal with each other to kill the family and steal their money and belongings.

They took the family to a village called Medjasi, where one of the accomplices had a weekend cottage. He killed two women and a child with a semi-automatic rifle and then gave it to Pantic, who killed a male, female and a child.

They threw the corpses into the River Drina, returned to Bijeljina and split the money and belongings they stole among themselves.

After he was sentenced, Pantic then escaped the county prison in Bijeljina in October 1995.

He went to Switzerland and took on his brother's identity, calling himself Dalibor Pantic and claiming he was a Serbian citizen.

He then married a Swiss citizen, took her last name and applied for citizenship.

Prior to his extradition, Pantic contacted lawyer Miodrag Stojanovic, who was one of the judges in Pantic's trial in the mid-1990s, and told him that he would ask for a review of the judgment.

Pantic, who confessed to the murders at the time, now claims that his confession was made under duress.

Stojanovic said however that he knew nothing about that.

"He confessed his participation in committing that criminal act and based on that information and other evidence 25 years ago, we judged and found him guilty and sentenced him," Stojanovic told BIRN.

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International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

Official Website of the ICTY

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Domestic Prosecutions In The Former Yugoslavia

Kosovo Court Upholds Serb's War Crimes Acquittal (Balkan Insight) By BIRN

October 21, 2019

The appeals court in Pristina confirmed the acquittal of Milorad Zajic, clearing him of involvement in killing two people and expelling ethnic Albanians from a village during the Kosovo war in 1998.

The appeals court in Pristina has upheld the verdict that found Milorad Zajic not guilty of committing war crimes against the civilian population and violations of the Geneva Conventions.

Zajic was originally found not guilty in March this year of taking part in the killing of two people – one with disabilities – and of forcing ethnic Albanians out of a village in 1998 during the war in Kosovo.

The judge said the reason for the acquittal was the witnesses' "contradictory" testimonies.

The indictment had claimed that during June and July 1998, Zajic took an active role in organised attacks by Serbian forces on the ethnic Albanian-populated village of Dush, near Klina, around 60 kilometres west of Pristina.

But the court found that he had not participated in the attacks and was not part of a Serb paramilitary group.

The appeals court made its decision to uphold the acquittal on October 1 but it only became public on Monday.

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Turkey

Evidence found of war crimes during Turkish offensive in Syria, says U.S. official (Reuters) By

Patricia Zengerle

October 23, 2019

President Donald Trump's special envoy for Syria said on Wednesday that U.S. forces had seen evidence of war crimes during Turkey's offensive against the Kurds in Syria, and had demanded an explanation from Ankara.

"We haven't seen widespread evidence of ethnic cleansing," said James Jeffrey, special representative for Syria, at a House of Representatives hearing.

"Many people fled because they're very concerned about these Turkish-supported Syrian opposition forces, as we are. We've

seen several incidents which we consider war crimes,” Jeffrey said.

He said U.S. officials were looking into those reports and at “a high-level” had demanded an explanation from Turkey’s government. He also said U.S. officials were investigating a report that the restricted burning white phosphorus had been used during the Turkish offensive.

Jeffrey and Matthew Palmer, a deputy assistant secretary of state who handles issues including relations with Turkey, spent a second straight day testifying in the U.S. Congress.

Many lawmakers, including Trump’s fellow Republicans as well as Democrats, disagree with Trump’s decision to withdraw troops from Syria, which cleared the way for Turkish troops to cross the border to fight against Kurdish forces who for years helped U.S. troops fight against Islamic State militants.

“How could the United States do something so senseless, so disgraceful, so contrary to our values?” Democratic Representative Eliot Engel, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said as he opened the hearing.

Jeffrey called Turkey’s crossing the border and offensive against the Kurds “a tragic disaster for northeast Syria.”

As the hearing took place, Trump announced that he was lifting recent sanctions imposed in response to violence in Syria, after Turkey said it is stopping combat and making a ceasefire in northern Syria permanent.

Jeffrey also confirmed Secretary of Defense Mark Esper’s statement that more than 100 Islamic State fighters had escaped. “We do not know where they are,” Jeffrey told the hearing.

Jeffrey had said in Senate testimony on Tuesday that “dozens” of the militants had escaped prison since the Turkish offensive in northeastern Syria began about two weeks ago.

Turkish officials have denied that war crimes were committed.

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MIDDLE-EAST

Iraq

Grotian Moment: The International War Crimes Trial Blog

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq Is Struggling to Survive (National Interest) By Seth Frantzman
October 21, 2019

The road north from Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq, is festooned with construction equipment for work on a large modernization project. Earthworks have been churned up, bridges are under construction, like the new multilane span across the Great Zab River. It is part of an artery for trade heading north to Dohuk and Turkey. The construction presents a contrast with the poorer farmers who line the road to sell tomatoes, tea and fish.

On October 17 an area north of these nice pastoral areas became host to refugees fleeing fighting in neighboring Syria. Up to eighteen hundred people, mostly Kurds, had come to a camp near Bardarash. They had come from border areas under bombardment by the Turkish air force and under assault by the Syrian National Army, a collection of Syrian rebel groups. Families from Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ayn) said they fled to Qamishli and then south to the border crossing in northern Iraq that links Syria with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). This emerging instability in eastern Syria, an area that the KRG

authorities had assumed would remain quiet for years due to the U.S. presence, is now on the list of concerns in Erbil.

The contrasts of instability and stability in this region is symbolic of the autonomous Kurdistan region as a whole. In Erbil the pulsating nightlife and broad ring roads that swaddle the city present a picture of prosperity and stability in the new Iraq that has emerged after the war on ISIS. However, there are lingering problems such as disputes between Erbil and Baghdad over budgets and arms for the Kurdish security forces, called Peshmerga. There are vacuums between the defensive lines where the Peshmerga and Iraqi security forces are supposed to meet and where ISIS remnants have found small ungoverned spaces to exploit. Most of all, there is the strategic position of the region, politically closer to the United States and Ankara, and wary of the rising power of Iran and Iranian-backed political and paramilitary groups that dominate parts of Iraq. The protests that erupted across central and southern Iraq on October 1, leading to the deaths of dozens and a harsh crackdown by Baghdad, were not felt in the Kurdistan region. While Baghdad suppressed social media and cut off the internet, in Erbil people could still use apps and cellphones.

A recent multiday visit to the region reveals the hurdles the KRG faces two years after it held an independence referendum that was condemned by its neighbors and largely ignored or opposed by the international community. Under new and younger leadership of President Nechirvan Barzani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, the region has moved on from a focus on national dreams of independence to more pragmatic day-to-day issues of economic revival and working with Baghdad to secure the region's demands under Iraq's 2005 Constitution.

In mid-September Nechirvan Barzani held a series of important meetings. He met with the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, the Speaker of Iraq's Parliament, the president of the country, and other officials. India's minister of state for external affairs arrived in Erbil on September 17 to unveil a statue of Mahatma Gandhi. Prior to that, on September 15, the deputy prime minister of the KRG, Qubad Talabani, met China's consul-general in Iraq to discuss bilateral relations. This capped a month of similar important meetings and discussions, including a phone call between Nechirvan Barzani and Vice President Mike Pence in late August. During the phone call Pence commended the region's efforts at aiding the war on ISIS and hosting displaced civilians. The Kurdistan region is asserting itself on the international stage and attempting to show Baghdad how it is a key to stability in the country. "The people here suffered a great deal, we need to focus on reconstructing the country and looking to the future, a secure and brighter future cannot happen unless there is stability," said Falah Mustafa, the senior policy advisor to the regional president.

While the region appears stable and its officials and Peshmerga generals often describe it as an island amid a region that is plagued by extremism and sectarianism, there are fears that a combination of threats are a rising tide around the island. ISIS is seeking to reorganize itself to the west, just an hour's drive from Erbil. Baghdad's Iraqi security forces are stretched thin and U.S. coalition advisors can only assist in encouraging the Peshmerga and Iraqi forces to work more closely together. The KRG is wary of the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias or Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) that man checkpoints across Nineveh plains down toward Kirkuk to the south, disputed areas that Baghdad wrested from Kurdish control in 2017. There is lasting anger at the way Peshmerga were evicted from Kirkuk in 2017. In the KRG there is a feeling that the United States, a key partner, turned its back on Erbil and enabled U.S.-supplied tanks and weapons sent to Baghdad for the ISIS war to be used against the Kurds. Local officials have said that a security mechanism is needed and trust-building necessary to normalize the situation.

The role of Iran in Iraq is a sensitive issue in Erbil but it is also one that comes up in almost every discussion. This includes complaints that Shi'ite religious groups are fanning the flames of incitement against the Kurds. For instance, scurrilous reports in Baghdad in late August suggested there was an Israeli base in the Kurdish region, leading the authorities to issue a denial. This comes amid near-daily reports of suspicious air strikes on PMU positions across central and western Iraq that Iraqi prime minister Adel Abdul Mahdi has blamed on Israel. PMU figures have also blamed the United States and Israel for the attacks that began in late July and often target PMU munitions. It has led PMU members such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis to suggest the PMU needs an air force. Iran's ambassador to Iraq has condemned the United States. The Kurdish region views these comments as a dangerous development. Some in Erbil now believe the PMU is seeking to become an Iraqi version of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, a kind of parallel state with its own powerful army, economy and maybe even air power.

The rise of the PMU, now an official paramilitary force in Iraq paid by Baghdad and once described by former Iraqi prime minister Haider Abadi as the "hope of the country and region," leads to questions about why Baghdad is not paying Peshmerga salaries. Unlike the PMU, the Kurdish Peshmerga are part of the Iraqi constitution. Negotiations for the budget have dragged on and despite promises from Baghdad the Peshmerga are systematically underfunded. A visit to their bases and frontlines reveals the reality, they often lack heavy weapons, uniform armored vehicles and even the proper barracks and facilities for the men. During the war on ISIS the Coalition helped train the Peshmerga and equipped some brigades, and millions in funding from Washington is still supposed to be forthcoming. The Peshmerga want support to reform their units, and they desire anti-tank weapons, body armor, as well as anti-drone capabilities. But the concern is that support, if it ever arrives, will be too little and too late as Iran's allies grow more powerful and through their power in the largely Sunni provinces liberated from ISIS a new conflict with extremists will emerge. A Peshmerga general warned that currently his men receive only two percent of the

equipment and budget they should receive. "All of the rest of it ends up with Iraqi Security Forces and the PMU."

Some of the tensions have improved under Iraq's Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi. But he lacks power and is not rooted in either the Fatah Alliance that is linked to the PMU or Muqtada al-Sadr's party, which has the largest number of seats in Iraq's parliament. The protests in early October appeared to erode what little authority he has. Evidence points to the abuses by the PMU, including sniper fire against protesters. Iran may benefit from the instability in Baghdad, even though some protesters have condemned Iran's role in Iraq. Sadr showed up in Tehran for a ceremony on September 10 with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. The symbolism was not lost in Erbil. "It shows no matter how much Saudi Arabia or others pay Sadr, he is in their [Iran's] pocket," said one official.

With a relatively benign prime minister in Baghdad, a rising Iran, sectarian paramilitaries on the border and ISIS resurgence, the Kurdistan region looks to the United States and other western powers for support. "Who do you have as a friend, ally and partner, with an open and welcoming society," say those in Erbil, suggesting Erbil shares values with western democracies. After many years working with Washington, Erbil wants a clearer statement or kind of "white paper" that expresses U.S. commitment and intentions. But there are simple hurdles that make the region more distant. For instance in the absence of a visit by Baghdad's leaders to Washington the KRG's leaders have been told that protocol means they cannot come. Iraqi president Bahram Salih met Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on September 23 during the UN General Assembly. But closer relations between Baghdad and Washington are overshadowed by Iran tensions and protocol appears to prevent a high level visit from the KRG, even though it would be in the interest of both the United States and Iraq. For instance, President Donald Trump's visit to Iraq in December 2018, in which he didn't meet officials, was seen as snub in Baghdad. Comments about using Iraq to "watch" Iran ruffled feathers. In Erbil the region would welcome a high-level visit though.

Among the other challenges Erbil faces today are a desire to solve disputes with Baghdad over Kirkuk and Sinjar, as well as encourage more stability in Nineveh plains between Erbil and Mosul. The minister of transportation and communication, Ano Jawhar Abdulmaseeh Abodka, is a member of the Christian minority. He speaks with passion about the KRG's role in sheltering Christians who fled ISIS and also in creating conditions for the community to thrive today. He also speaks of the problems Christians face today in Nineveh due to sectarian paramilitaries. Here he suggests the United States could also play a role, especially given the current administration's commitment to religious freedom. Yazidis who fled ISIS are also still living in IDP camps in the Kurdistan region, unable to return to Sinjar where they lack security and investment.

The transportation minister says that there is an opportunity now to commit to the private sector and provide new options for transportation. The KRG suffered from historic neglect, especially in the era of Saddam Hussein when the region was persecuted brutally. Now the bridges and new highway stretching north of Erbil to Dohuk and the Turkish border are examples of the future. But again, here, he stresses the need for a budget from Baghdad.

The fiscal constraints facing the transportation sector are linked to those facing the security forces in the region. The Peshmerga provide the security to keep the region safe and stable and enable an economy that is closely tied to trade with Turkey to prosper. It is a complex and hard-to-balance situation. "We need serious help to protect ourselves, we are under threats every minute. We must be ready for the eventualities," says a Kurdish commander who is in charge of the border regions between the KRG, Iran and Turkey. "We are trying to get back on track and our relations with central government is getting better, I think the current PM is the last chance for Iraq, if we can't solve the problems with those who lead Iraq now, then we are unlikely to solve them in the future."

Across the border in Syria the surprise U.S. decision to leave on October 6 has added to the problems facing Erbil. The current and past presidents have warned the United States and also called for a return to peace in eastern Syria. Even though Washington scrambled to put together a ceasefire on October 17, the reality appears to be that fighting will continue. This will mean more refugees coming to the Kurdistan region. It also raises questions about who will control the border area, will it be the Syrian regime, or will Turkey have increased influence, or will the Syrian Democratic Forces remain. If the United States is willing to walk away so easily from an area it invested in since 2014 to defeat ISIS, what will become of U.S. policy in Iraq? These are the questions now being asked in Erbil.

The Peshmerga commander's comments about fears for the future and those of other officials from ministries and frontline Peshmerga units show the growing concern about the future of the region two years after ISIS was routed in Mosul and Erbil suffered a setback after the independence referendum. Washington's policy is to avoid a conflict with Iran while keeping up the maximum pressure campaign. Tensions across the Gulf have affected Iraq where Iranian-backed Shi'ite paramilitary groups, some of them already sanctioned by the United States for ties to the IRGC, have threatened U.S. forces and demand the United States leave Iraq. This puts U.S. forces in a bind, wary of the threats and also wanting to continue the mission of defeating ISIS. It also means that U.S. policymakers are concerned about alienating Baghdad. For the Kurdish region the main message is that Washington should see Erbil as an essential partner for regional stability, a hinge on which stability across northern Iraq and into Syria turns. With the United States already involved in a complex balancing act in eastern Syria, fighting ISIS while keeping an eye on Iran and working with Turkey on a security mechanism, the KRG is more important than ever. Erbil wonders when the United States will start to see it that way.

In Iraq, concern that Syria chaos would bring back IS (Hartford Courant) By Hadi Mizban

October 20, 2019

Iraq's defense minister on Wednesday expressed concerns that the Islamic State group could take advantage of Turkey's invasion of northern Syria to destabilize Iraq, saying that a number of militants have been able to escape detention in Syria amid the chaos and cross into Iraq.

Speaking to a group of journalists touring the Iraq-Syria border with him, Najah al-Shammari urged the Iraqi government to work quickly on sealing the border.

"The Iraqi government should act quickly to close illegal crossings between Iraq and Syria," al-Shammari said. He did not elaborate or say how many IS members have crossed into Iraq. He said that some of them are still at large while others have been detained.

There have been concerns in Iraq that the Turkish military operation against Kurdish fighters in neighboring Syria might lead to the escape of Islamic State group prisoners from detention centers run by Syrian Kurdish fighters. Some 10,000 IS members are being held in prisons across territory in northern Syria. Over the weekend, 780 supporters fled from a camp for the displaced in the town of Ein Issa.

On Wednesday, an official with an organization that assesses terror threats in Belgium told a parliamentary committee that at least two Belgian militants fled their detention center in Syria.

Paul Van Tigcheld, head of Belgium's threat analysis organ, OCAD, told the committee Wednesday: "We know about five (foreign terrorist fighters), three women and two men, who were in camps or prisons, and who are no longer there."

Later on Wednesday, French President Emmanuel Macron said foreign fighters from the Islamic State group who might flee Syrian detention centers and go to Iraq should be arrested and sent to trial there.

Macron, speaking in the southern French city of Toulouse, said French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian will travel Thursday to Iraq to speak with local authorities about French IS detainees.

Macron said "it's too soon" to say if some members of IS may seek to reach the European Union and France.

He insisted that Turkey's offensive is helping the IS group's "re-emergence" and called on the United States and other European countries to increase pressure on the country so that it ends its military operations.

IS once held large parts of Iraq and Syria, where the extremists declared a so-called caliphate in 2014. IS was defeated in Iraq two years ago and in Syria in March but the extremists' sleeper cells have continued to carry out attacks in both countries.

Meanwhile on Wednesday, Iraqi President Barham Saleh discussed with a visiting U.S. official the situation in northern Syria and ways of preventing Islamic militants from taking advantage of the chaos to rise again.

A statement by Saleh's office said he spoke Wednesday in Baghdad with David Schenker, U.S. assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs, about ways of supporting Iraq to preserve its security "amid the current challenges."

The statement said both officials said the extremists should not be given a chance "to revive their criminal activities and threaten the region and world's security."

New refugees arrive to Iraq in a week of violence in northeast Syria (reliefweb)

October 18, 2019

For the fourth consecutive day, UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, has been receiving hundreds of refugees crossing the border into Iraq from northeast Syria. Refugees mainly come from towns in northern Syria - Kobani, Amoda and Qamishly and surrounding villages.

As of this morning, over 1,600 Syrian refugees have been transported from the border areas to Bardarash refugee camp, some 150 kilometres east of Syria-Iraq border. The site has been prepped to receive the latest arrivals fleeing the fighting in northern Syria.

Newly arrived refugees told our staff that it took them days to get to the border as they fled amid shelling and fighting. Most of the new arrivals are women, children and elderly. Their general physical condition appears to be good, but some required psychosocial support.

In support of the response led by local authorities, our teams and those of other aid agencies and partners have been working round the clock to transport refugees to the Bardarash camp and meet their immediate needs. Family tents are being pitched to provide shelter, water and sanitation systems have been put in place together with other basic facilities.

Upon arrival refugees are given hot meals, water, basic aid items including mattresses, blankets, kitchen sets, jerrycans and other items. Medical teams with ambulances and a mobile medical unit are present to provide medical assistance if needed. Our teams are working with partners to provide services needed including psycho-social support and protection services. The refugees are registered using biometric iris-scanning and their specific needs are assessed to determine what kind of assistance they may require.

Meanwhile in Syria, after a week of violence in country's northeast, we and our partners have been able so far to provide life-saving assistance to nearly 60,000 newly displaced Syrians as well as to those forced to flee from one camp to another. Nearly 23,000 people have received core relief and winter items in the camps. UNHCR also provided same assistance to another 35,700 living in collective shelters and host communities.

The UN currently estimates some 166,000 people have been forced to flee their homes over the past seven days. Newly displaced families continue to seek shelter in camps, makeshift sites, communal shelters, with family, friends or acquaintances. Many of them have been displaced multiple times from one area to another in Al-Hassakeh, Tal Tamer and Raqqa.

Where possible, UNHCR teams conduct protection assessments and our response continues. Our protection partners identify those in need of specialized care and attention every day.

Violence has wreaked chaos among civilians, hitting the most vulnerable hardest. Our teams reported story of a child, a 13 year-old boy from Ras-Al-Ain, who ran for his life amid intense fighting and got separated from his parents. He followed the crowds and reached one of the communal shelters in Al-Hassakeh where UNHCR outreach volunteers tirelessly went through communal shelters until they were able to reunite the boy with his family.

Given the new and significant humanitarian needs, UNHCR reiterates its calls for the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It is also critical that humanitarian workers are given unfettered humanitarian access to reach those newly displaced and assist them wherever this is required.

Iraq: Stop security forces from threatening, forcibly disappearing and abusing activists (Amnesty International)

18 October 2019

The Iraqi authorities must immediately end a relentless campaign of intimidation and assault against activists in Baghdad and reveal the whereabouts of others, among them a doctor and a lawyer forcibly disappeared more than 10 days ago, Amnesty International said today.

The organization has spoken to 11 activists, relatives of detained activists, as well as journalists and lawyers from Baghdad, Diwaniya, Basra and Amarah. Their testimony shows that Iraqi security forces are systematically targeting anyone speaking out against the conduct of security forces during the protests.

“Anyone voicing dissent in Iraq today faces interrogation at the point of a gun, death threats and enforced disappearance. The Iraqi authorities promised they would open an investigation into the killings of protesters. It’s been over a week now since the protests quieted, there’s been no such action; instead, what we’re seeing is a continuation of the same approach – one of repression at a shocking cost to the Iraqi people.

“The Iraqi authorities must immediately rein in the security forces and dismantle the climate of fear they have deliberately created to stop Iraqis from peacefully exercising their rights to freedoms of expression and assembly,” said Lynn Maalouf, Amnesty International’s Middle East Research Director.

“The Iraqi authorities must also disclose the whereabouts of Ali Jaseb al-Hattab and Maytham Mohammed Rahim al-Helo who have been subjected to enforced disappearance since last week. They should be given immediate access to lawyers and their families. Unless they have been charged with a recognizable criminal offence, they should be released.”

Relatives of Ali Jaseb al-Hattab, a 29-year-old lawyer who has been representing protesters arrested in the current wave of anti-government demonstrations, told Amnesty International that he was bundled away by suspected members of a faction of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) on the evening of 8 October.

According to his relatives, armed men in two black pick-up trucks belonging to the PMU dragged him away from his car in the

southern city of Ammarah in Al-Maysan governorate - where he had been due to meet a client - and then drove him away in one of the trucks. The ambush took place two days after two armed men from the PMU came to Ali Jaseb al-Hattab's home to warn him to stop being vocal about the killing of protesters on Facebook, otherwise they would kill him.

Local security forces told his relatives that they were not aware of his arrest or whereabouts. "When we went to report this to the local police, we got a phone call on the way to the station from the [faction of PMU] threatening us that they are watching us. But we reported it anyway," Ali Jaseb al-Hattab's relatives said. "We cannot just sit and wait because we know the government will not come to our rescue. By the time they [authorities] act, Ali could be dead." In a similar case of enforced disappearance, Maytham Mohammed Rahim al-Helo, a 51-year-old doctor and activist was last seen leaving his clinic in Baghdad on the evening of 7 October. His relatives reported his disappearance on 8 October to the local authorities but were told they were unaware of his arrest or whereabouts.

According to information available to Amnesty International, members of security forces stated that this incident was intended to "truly scare him".

Another activist in Baghdad told Amnesty International that on 9 October he received threatening and insulting messages on his phone from a member of a faction of the PMU, who falsely accused him of affiliation to a political party.

On 14 October, while leaving his home in Baghdad, a black pick-up truck with darkened windows stopped him. "I was shocked to find that the person inside was pointing a weapon at me as the windows rolled down. I was ordered to get in the car after where I sat with a gun pointed at my head," he said.

Two armed men in civilian clothing interrogated the activist about his name and occupation. When talking back to them he told Amnesty International that he was punched in the face. After checking his identification documents, the armed men told him that that there had been a case of mistaken identity and then threw him out of the car.

On 17 October, two activists from Baghdad told Amnesty International that men in civilian clothing, who identified themselves as members of the local intelligence forces, visited their homes and interrogated them about their activities during the protests. At no point were the activists presented with an arrest or search warrant.

Amnesty International continues to receive reports of activists and journalists being threatened by security forces who have warned them that if they continued to speak out against human rights violations committed against protesters they would be added to a blacklist compiled by intelligence services.

One activist told Amnesty International that members of security forces told him to "hide his face" from now on if he wanted to avoid being targeted.

He told the organization: "They are doing this because they want to scare us so that we tell others not to go to any future protests. We all know how easy it is for them to disappear and kill young men from the protests. But they do not realize these actions will only make protesters angrier. The rage from the streets is like a piece of burning coal, and the security forces are the wind that will keep it burning."

Activists from Basra told Amnesty International that security forces had chased them down and arrested them on 4 October during protests in the city. They were beaten and held for several hours without being given a reason; they were then forced to sign pledges, under threat of imprisonment, that they would not take part in protests again as well as other documents, the contents of which they were not allowed to see.

The authorities must demonstrate zero tolerance for such crimes. They take immediate action to end enforced disappearances and other serious violations, carry out independent, impartial and effective investigations, and prosecute those in the security forces suspected of responsibility in fair trials," said Lynn Maalouf.

Improving Services for Newly Liberated Areas in Iraq (UN Ops)

October 17, 2019

To improve living conditions for returnee populations living in newly liberated areas, UNOPS – with funding from the government of Japan – is helping to provide renewable energy and emergency waste disposal services in three Iraqi governorates.

"[This project] comes at a time when Iraq is counting on its friends to recover after its battle against ISIS and after the liberation of Iraqi territories," said Mr. Istabraq Al shook, Deputy Minister of Iraq's Ministry of Construction, Housing, Municipalities and Public Works at a recent handover ceremony.

“The UN and the people of Japan and its government showed a solid commitment to stand by Iraq during critical hard times and after the crisis. Today's closing ceremony is a testimony of this commitment,” he added.

With a \$3.1 million donation from the government of Japan, UNOPS procured solid waste machinery and provided specialized training to local authorities on modern waste disposal systems, better utilization of debris, and waste sorting and recycling.

UNOPS further installed solar systems – to help alleviate frequent electricity shortages – as well as street lights and water heaters in six health facilities in the governorates of Anbar, Diyala and Ninewa.

“I hope that this project helps to urgently restore basic services needed for daily lives, such as energy and waste disposal, and that the people in those liberated areas can restore and lead a stable life as quickly as possible,” said Mr. Naofumi Hashimoto, Ambassador of Japan to Iraq. “UNOPS remains committed to supporting the government and the people of Iraq in addressing significant challenges the country is facing, and remains grateful to the people and government of Japan for their continued support to the people of Iraq,” said UNOPS Programme Advisor Ms. Huda Al-Ani.

Mr. Ahmed Shalash, Deputy Director General of Engineering Affairs at the Ministry of Health and Environment, and Mr. Abdul Qadir Al Dhakheel, General Director of Ninewa Municipality attended the handover ceremony held in Baghdad.

France's Le Drian to go to Iraq to discuss trials for jihadists from Syria (Reuters) By Jihn Irish
October 16, 2019

France's foreign minister will travel to Iraq on Wednesday to discuss a judicial framework that would enable jihadists being held in Syria to face trial in Iraq, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said.

European states are trying to fast-track a plan to move thousands of foreign Islamic State militants out of Syrian prison camps and into Iraq, after the outbreak of fresh conflict in Syria raised the risk of jihadists escaping or returning home, diplomats and officials have told Reuters. Foreign Minister Jean-Ives Le Drian will discuss with the Iraqi government “measures to be set up and possible support that could be put in place, particularly in the field of judicial cooperation,” Philippe told French Senators in a weekly question and answer session.

“A number of those who are detained in Syria by the Kurds have committed crimes in Iraq and may therefore, if necessary, be judicially tried on the spot,” he said.

Europe does not want to try its Islamic State nationals at home, fearing a public backlash, difficulties in collating evidence against them, and risks of renewed attacks from militants on European soil.

Several European nations have been working on a framework since June and holding talks with the Iraqi government, which is also seeking millions of dollars in financial compensation for taking European fighters.

“The subject with the Iraqi authorities is to find a judicial system that could try all these fighters, including the French ones,” Le Drian told BFM television on Wednesday, referring to Islamic State militants held in Kurdish-controlled camps in northeastern Syria.

Iraq saw some of the bloodiest battles against Islamic State and its government is already conducting trials of thousands of suspected Islamic State insurgents.

Le Drian said nine French women had escaped on Sunday from the Ain Issa camp in northwestern Syria. Kurdish officials have said almost 800 people fled that camp after the Turkish offensive into northern Syria targeted the area.

Le Drian said women who had joined Islamic State should also face justice in the region, although Paris would look to bring back children.

“The French women who went to this region in 2015 knew what they were doing. They aren't tourists. They are fighters against France and must face trial (in Iraq) if possible,” he said.

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Turkey/Syria: Civilians at Risk in Syria Operation (Human Rights Watch)

October 11, 2019

The Turkish offensive in Northeast Syria points to urgent need for the Turkish Armed Forces, Kurdish-led forces, and all other local armed groups to make protecting civilians and respect for human rights a priority in their operations, Human Rights Watch said today.

Human rights priorities for Turkish forces and Kurdish-led forces, including the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), should include taking all feasible precautions to avoid civilian casualties, investigating alleged unlawful strikes, and ensuring that civilians can flee the fighting in safety. All parties that effectively control areas in Northeast Syria should also provide sufficient support to displaced people and ensure that ground troops do not harass, arbitrarily arrest, or mistreat residents who choose to remain. The Turkish offensive has heightened concerns that those most responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity could escape, including Islamic State (ISIS) members detained in Northeast Syria.

"Turkey and its allies have previously unlawfully killed, arbitrarily arrested, and wrongfully displaced civilians. This military operation risks repeating these abuses unless they take steps now," said Kenneth Roth, Executive Director at Human Rights Watch. "Another key concern is that already inhumane conditions for tens of thousands of men, women, and children held in camps and makeshift prisons under the control of Kurdish-led forces could get even worse."

At least 700,000 of the 1.7 million people in Northeast Syria need humanitarian assistance, according to the United Nations. While the extent of the Turkish military operation is not yet known, any major offensive is likely to displace thousands more people, straining a humanitarian response that is already at its limits, Human Rights Watch said.

Close to a half-million people have already been displaced in recent months by hostilities in Northwest Syria. The International Rescue Committee predicts that the new hostilities will displace 300,000 more immediately. Humanitarian groups have told Human Rights Watch that they have been unable to respond to the needs of the displaced and would be hard-pressed to mobilize sufficient resources to respond to any additional displacement. Turkey had previously announced that it would create a 32-kilometer-wide safe zone in Northeast Syria in response to threats from the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish-led authority in Northeast Syria that the Turkish government describes as a terrorist group. A second stated objective for the safe zone was to relocate there a million Syrian refugees who are in Turkey. However, an October 6 announcement by the US that it is withdrawing troops from Syria was seen by Turkey as greenlighting an offensive on the area, analysts said.

On October 9, news reports quoted a Turkish Security Directorate statement stating that criminal investigations had been initiated against 78 people for "spread[ing] black propaganda against our country regarding Operation Spring of Peace and inciting enmity and hatred, through unsourced and false social media postings intended to destroy the reputation of our security forces."

The Birgun daily newspaper reported that its website director, Hakan Demir, was detained and released by an Istanbul court with an overseas travel ban pending an investigation. Diken news website reported that its editor, Fatih Gokhan Diler, was also detained.

"The Turkish military operation in Northeast Syria should not be used as a pretext to target democratically elected Kurdish mayors, politicians, and peaceful activists in Turkey itself," Roth said. "Nor should Turkey target journalists and human rights defenders for critical reporting on the conduct of the military operation."

Based on its experience in monitoring and documenting violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch highlights the following concerns and recommendations:

Avoiding Unlawful Strikes; Minimizing Civilian Casualties

The Turkish Armed Forces should take all feasible measures to ensure the protection of civilians and civilian objects during military operations. This includes maintaining international standards and procedures designed to prevent civilian casualties, and robustly and transparently reporting airstrikes and enemy and civilian casualties.

This also requires promptly, impartially, and thoroughly investigating instances in which civilian casualties may occur as a result of those operations; and providing compensation for wrongful civilian deaths and injuries and appropriate "condolence" or ex gratia payments for civilian harm.

Human Rights Watch had previously documented several Turkish Armed Forces aerial attacks that caused civilian casualties in their 2018 offensive on the Afrin district in Syria's Aleppo governorate.

The laws of war strictly prohibit attacks targeting civilians or civilian structures unless they were being used for military purposes, and they prohibit indiscriminate attacks which fail to distinguish between military and civilian targets. Attacks must also be proportionate, meaning that any anticipated civilian casualties or damage to civilian buildings should not be excessive in light of the concrete military advantage anticipated.

All parties to the conflict should ensure that fleeing civilians are safe and have access to humanitarian assistance. They should always ensure the safety and security of humanitarian relief personnel. All parties to the conflict are required to allow civilians to flee ongoing hostilities and to receive aid.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented efforts by all parties to the conflict to block Syrians from fleeing the violence. Turkish border guards have shot at and blocked Syrians attempting to flee violence in other areas of Syria and deported Syrians from Istanbul and other provinces back to areas where hostilities are ongoing.

The Syrian government had also blocked civilians fleeing the Turkish-led military actions in Afrin in 2018 from entering territory under government control, while the armed groups allied with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) had prevented civilians from fleeing and forced them to remain in areas where active hostilities occurred.

Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which has closed its border with Syria to fleeing refugees in the past, should respect the customary international refugee law and international human rights law principle of non-refoulement. That requires them not to push back anyone fleeing threats to their life or freedom or anyone who faces a serious risk of torture or other cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment or punishment.

The laws of war require all parties to the conflict to take all feasible steps to evacuate civilians from areas of fighting or where fighters are deployed and not block or impede the evacuation of those wishing to leave.

Turkey should vet armed groups before assisting them, and monitor their compliance with international humanitarian law, and make clear to them that looting, arbitrary arrests, and mistreatment are unlawful. Turkey should also investigate any credible allegations of abuses by groups on the ground.

Turkey has condemned looting by its allies but has not addressed any other abuses by the armed groups it backs or held them accountable. Turkey is equally responsible for the violations committed by its allies on the ground.

Human Rights Watch has documented that Turkey-backed armed groups in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have seized, looted, and destroyed the property of Kurdish civilians in the Afrin district of northern Syria. The groups also had taken over residents' homes and destroyed and looted civilian properties without compensating the owners.

Under the laws of war, pillaging, or forcibly taking private property for personal use is prohibited and can constitute a war crime even in the context of fighting in an area. Combatants are not allowed to seize property for personal use, including to house their own families. The laws of war also prohibit destruction of property not justified by military necessity.

Local activists have also reported hundreds of incidents of abuse by Turkish-backed factions that amount to unlawful arrests, torture, and disappearances. The UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that arbitrary arrests, detention, and pillaging became pervasive throughout Afrin.

Despite pledges to stop the practice, the YPG has recruited children, including girls, and used some in hostilities. The YPG should immediately demobilize children in its ranks and stop recruiting children.

International law prohibits non-state armed groups from recruiting anyone under 18, and enlisting children under 15 is a war crime.

Any authority with effective control over the prison facilities should ensure that detained ISIS suspects are afforded due process and fair trial rights and protected from reprisals and indiscriminate attacks, and that they are kept in prisons equipped for them in line with international best standards. No one should be detained without a legal basis or when detention conditions would amount to cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment.

If Turkey's ground offensive proceeds, the government should secure any detention facilities that come under its effective control and protect the detainees. It should also make sure that those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity are held accountable.

Northeast Syria was also the site of major offensives by the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (ISIS), which resulted in

the deaths and displacement of thousands of people, as well as the destruction of essential infrastructure.

Almost 100,000 women and young children are locked in squalid camps for suspected ISIS family members with insufficient clean water or health care. In addition to Syrians and Iraqis, the detainees in makeshift prisons and camps include men, women, and children from about four dozen other nationalities.

Nearly 340 children died in al-Hol, the largest of the camps, between December and September, according to the International Rescue Committee, most from preventable diseases such as severe diarrhea and malnutrition. Most were under age 5.

On September 30, Medecins San Frontieres reported that at least one female camp detainee was killed and at least three others were wounded when security authorities responded with gunfire to an alleged protest by camp residents. Since then, all medical services have been closed in the al-Hol annex, which holds about 11,000 non-Iraqi foreigners, according to aid workers and detained women.

About 11,000 men and boys as young as 12 suspected of ISIS membership have remained detained in makeshift prisons for months without charge in severely overcrowded prisons under the control of the SDF.

ISIS fighters in Syria have been responsible for a range of abuses, including intentionally bombing civilian targets; mass abductions, including of children; arbitrary detentions; mass executions; unlawful sieges; using child soldiers; and using prohibited weapons.

ISIS subjected people under its control to severe restrictions and punishments including executions of allegedly gay men and stoning people for alleged adultery. ISIS destroyed religious and archaeological sites throughout areas under its control and looted and stole valuable cultural artifacts to help finance its operations.

On October 10, US President Donald Trump tweeted that the US had transferred two high-value British detainees known as the “Beatles” to “a secure location controlled by the US.” The US also reportedly took custody of 38 other high-value prisoners for transfer outside of Northeast Syria. The US should ensure that all prisoners it transfers do not face the risk of torture and can challenge their transfer. For prisoners from the UK and other countries that have abolished the death penalty, such transfers should not take place without effective assurances that the prisoners will not face capital punishment should they be convicted in US federal courts.

Countries whose nationals are held in prisons and camps for ISIS suspects and family members should urgently assist their citizens who want to return home for rehabilitation, reintegration, and, if appropriate, prosecution in line with international standards, or evacuation to third countries where they are not at risk of torture and other inhumane treatment.

In the course of the military incursion on Northeast Syria, Turkey should refrain from arbitrarily targeting Kurdish political activists, politicians, journalists, and dissenting voices in Turkey.

Abusive prosecutions and investigations relying on overly broad and vague terrorism laws and other criminal charges are widely used in Turkey to silence and arbitrarily detain government critics, journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition politicians, Human Rights Watch said.

After Turkey’s January 2018 military incursion into the north Syrian district of Afrin, the Turkish authorities detained and prosecuted hundreds of people for social media posts advocating peace and criticizing the operation.

Turkey’s military incursion into Northeast Syria comes at a time when the Turkish authorities have targeted democratically elected mayors from the pro-Kurdish opposition Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). In August, the Interior Ministry removed from office mayors of three major municipalities of the mainly Kurdish southeast and eastern regions of Turkey and dissolved their local councils, blatantly violating the rights of voters and suspending local democracy in those municipalities. Further detentions of Kurdish political activists and HDP officials followed.

Moves by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government against democratically elected officials and other peaceful government critics violate Turkey’s obligations under international and regional human rights law.

Turkish-led forces film themselves executing a Kurdish captive in Syria (Washington Post) By Liz Sly
October 13, 2019

Videos posted on social media showing at least one execution-style killing have called into question the discipline of the soldiers engaged in Turkey’s near week-long effort to seize territory controlled by Kurds in northeastern Syria.

The most gruesome and explicit of the videos shows Turkish-allied Syrian fighters pumping bursts of automatic fire into the body of a bound man lying on the side of a desert road as a gunman shouts to his comrades to take his phone and film him doing the shooting. Another trembling, handcuffed man crouches on the opposite side of the road as the shooting erupts. "Kill them," one man is heard shouting.

The video is one of a series of photographs and videos posted on Twitter accounts of the Turkish-backed rebel groups and circulated by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces that suggest some of the Syrian rebels participating in Turkey's offensive to capture territory in Syria might have committed war crimes.

The Turkish army is leading the incursion, but is relying heavily on Syrian rebels to drive the Kurdish-led SDF away from Turkey's border.

A separate video shows fighters crowding around a black, bullet-riddled SUV that had apparently come under a hail of gunfire before being forced to stop. The fighters step over the body of a man in civilian clothing to reach inside the vehicle.

"Another fleeing pig has been liquidated by the hands of the National Army," one of the fighters says as the others clamor to be filmed. "He was fleeing in an armored car."

A female voice is briefly heard coming from the back seat.

What happened next is unclear, but the Kurdish-led SDF say the woman in the car was Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf, whose body was found later in a nearby morgue. Khalaf was the secretary general of the newly established Future Party of Syria. U.S. Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper, speaking on CBS's "Face the Nation," noted that the videos could not be independently confirmed. But, he said, if true, "they would be war crimes." A Turkish newspaper, Yeni Safak, trumpeted Khalaf's killing as a "successful operation" against a politician affiliated with the "terrorist" People's Democratic Union, the Kurdish political party that runs northeastern Syria.

The newspaper said she had been "neutralized" in the operation and described her death as a major setback for the group.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, said nine civilians were executed Saturday at the roadblock to the south of the town of Tal Abyad. Several other photos and videos posted by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya rebel group, which was apparently among those involved in staffing the roadblock, show captured men surrounded by fighters on the side of the road.

Ahrar al-Sharqiya is composed of fighters mostly from the eastern province of Deir al-Zour, much of which is controlled by the SDF.

The Syrian National Army, an umbrella group uniting a number of Syrian rebel factions, condemned the killing in a statement and said it had launched an investigation into what it said represented a violation of "the standards and values that we commit to."

The killing and others that might have occurred off camera almost certainly constitute a war crime, under international law, and could breach one of the conditions President Trump set for allowing the Turkish offensive to go ahead unhindered by U.S. troops in the area. In a tweet last week, he cautioned the Turks not to undertake any "unforced or unnecessary fighting" or they would face measures against their economy and currency.

Turkey views the Syrian Kurdish forces, which were key U.S. allies in the fight against the Islamic State, as a terrorist group on its doorstep and a threat to its national security.

12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia. (New York Times) By Evan Hill and Christiaan Triebert
October 13, 2019 (Updated October 18, 2019)

The Russian Air Force has repeatedly bombed hospitals in Syria in order to crush the last pockets of resistance to President Bashar al-Assad, according to an investigation by The New York Times.

An analysis of previously unpublished Russian Air Force radio recordings, plane spotter logs and witness accounts allowed The Times to trace bombings of four hospitals in just 12 hours in May and tie Russian pilots to each one.

The 12-hour period beginning on May 5 represents a small slice of the air war in Syria, but it is a microcosm of Russia's four-year military intervention in Syria's civil war. A new front in the conflict opened this week, when Turkish forces crossed the border as part of a campaign against a Kurdish-led militia.

Russia has long been accused of carrying out systematic attacks against hospitals and clinics in rebel-held areas as part of a

strategy to help Mr. Assad secure victory in the eight-year-old war. Physicians for Human Rights, an advocacy group that tracks attacks on medical workers in Syria, has documented at least 583 such attacks since 2011, 266 of them since Russia intervened in September 2015. At least 916 medical workers have been killed since 2011.

The Times assembled a large body of evidence to analyze the hospital bombings on May 5 and 6.

Social media posts from Syria, interviews with witnesses, and records from charities that supported the four hospitals provided the approximate time of each strike. The Times obtained logs kept by flight spotters on the ground who warn civilians about incoming airstrikes and crosschecked the time of each strike to confirm that Russian warplanes were overhead. We then listened to and deciphered thousands of Russian Air Force radio transmissions, which recorded months' worth of pilot activities in the skies above northwestern Syria. The recordings were provided to The Times by a network of observers who insisted on anonymity for their safety.

The spotter logs from May 5 and 6 put Russian pilots above each hospital at the time they were struck, and the Air Force audio recordings from that day feature Russian pilots confirming each bombing. Videos obtained from witnesses and verified by The Times confirmed three of the strikes.

Recklessly or intentionally bombing hospitals is a war crime, but proving culpability amid a complex civil war is extremely difficult, and until now, Syrian medical workers and human rights groups lacked proof.

Russia's position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council has shielded it from scrutiny and made United Nations agencies reluctant to accuse the Russian Air Force of responsibility.

"The attacks on health in Syria, as well as the indiscriminate bombing of civilian facilities, are definitely war crimes, and they should be prosecuted at the level of the International Criminal Court in The Hague," said Susannah Sirkin, director of policy at Physicians for Human Rights. But Russia and China "shamefully" vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have referred those and other crimes in Syria to the court, she said.

The Russian government did not directly respond to questions about the four hospital bombings. Instead, a Foreign Ministry spokesman pointed to past statements saying that the Russian Air Force carries out precision strikes only on "accurately researched targets."

The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, opened an investigation into the hospital bombings in August. The investigation, still going on, is meant in part to determine why hospitals that voluntarily added their locations to a United Nations-sponsored deconfliction list, which was provided to Russia and other combatants to prevent them from being attacked, nevertheless came under attack.

Syrian health care workers said they believed that the United Nations list actually became a target menu for the Russian and Syrian air forces.

Stéphane Dujarric, a spokesman for the secretary general, said in September that the investigation — an internal board of inquiry — would not produce a public report or identify "legal responsibility." Vassily Nebenzia, the Russian permanent representative to the United Nations, cast doubt on the process shortly after it was announced, saying he hoped the inquiry would not investigate perpetrators but rather what he said was the United Nations' use of false information in its deconfliction process.

From April 29 to mid-September, as Russian and Syrian government forces assaulted the last rebel pocket in the northwest, 54 hospitals and clinics in opposition territory were attacked, the United Nations human rights office said. At least seven had tried to protect themselves by adding their location to the deconfliction list, according to the World Health Organization.

On May 5 and 6, Russia attacked four. All were on the list.

The first was Nabad al Hayat Surgical Hospital, a major underground trauma center in southern Idlib Province serving about 200,000 people. The hospital performed on average around 500 operations and saw more than 5,000 patients a month, according to Syria Relief and Development, the United States-based charity that supported it.

Nabad al Hayat had been attacked three times since it opened in 2013 and had recently relocated to an underground complex on agricultural land, hoping to be protected from airstrikes.

At 2:32 p.m. on May 5, a Russian ground control officer can be heard in an Air Force transmission providing a pilot with a longitude and latitude that correspond to Nabad al Hayat's exact location.

At 2:38 p.m., the pilot reports that he can see the target and has the "correction," code for locking the target on a screen in his

cockpit. Ground control responds with the green light for the strike, saying, “Three sevens.”

At the same moment, a flight spotter on the ground logs a Russian jet circling in the area.

At 2:40 p.m., the same time the charity said that Nabad al Hayat was struck, the pilot confirms the release of his weapons, saying, “Worked it.” Seconds later, local journalists filming the hospital in anticipation of an attack record three precision bombs penetrating the roof of the hospital and blowing it out from the inside in geysers of dirt and concrete.

The staff of Nabad al Hayat had evacuated three days earlier after receiving warnings and anticipating a bombing, but Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital, three miles northwest, was not as lucky.

A doctor who worked there said that the hospital was struck four times, beginning at 5:30 p.m. The strikes landed about five minutes apart, without warning, he said, killing a man who was standing outside and forcing patients and members of the medical staff to use oxygen tanks to breathe through the choking dust.

A spotter logged a Russian jet circling above at the time of the strike, and in another Russian Air Force transmission, a pilot reports that he has “worked” his target at 5:30 p.m., the time of the strike. He then reports three more strikes, each about five minutes apart, matching the doctor’s chronology.

Russian pilots bombed two other hospitals in the same 12-hour span: Kafr Zita Cave Hospital and Al Amal Orthopedic Hospital. In both cases, spotters recorded Russian Air Force jets in the skies at the time of the strike, and Russian pilots can be heard in radio transmissions “working” their targets at the times the strikes were reported.

Since May 5, at least two dozen hospitals and clinics in the rebel-held northwest have been hit by airstrikes. Syrian medical workers said they expected hospital bombings to continue, given the inability of the United Nations and other countries to find a way to hold Russia to account.

“The argument by the Russians or the regime is always that hospitals are run by terrorists,” said Nabad al Hayat’s head nurse, who asked to remain anonymous because he feared being targeted. “Is it really possible that all the people are terrorists?”

“The truth is that after hospitals are hit, and in areas like this where there is just one hospital, our houses have become hospitals.”

Syrian Arab Fighters Backed by Turkey Kill Two Kurdish Prisoners (New York Times) By Ben Hubbard, Karam Shoumali, Carlotta Gall and Patrick Kingsley
October 12, 2019

Turkish-backed Syrian Arab fighters killed at least two Kurdish prisoners on Saturday, one of them lying on the ground with his hands bound behind his back, in a powerful illustration of the forces unleashed by President Trump’s decision to pull back American troops shielding former Kurdish allies in northern Syria.

A video that captured one of the killings shows two of the Turkish-backed group’s fighters firing bullets at close range into the man with his hands tied while their colleagues shout “God is great!” The second prisoner who was killed appears in the video alive and wearing a military uniform, but he is missing from the group’s later social media post about its captives.

“The guy in the military outfit was neutralized,” said Al-Harith Rabah, a media activist with the Arab fighters who was at the scene.

The killing of two Kurdish captives by Arab fighters — a possible war crime — is an indication of the ethnically tinged hatreds flaring in the wake of President Trump’s pullback of American forces in the area. The move cleared the way for a Turkish military incursion into a northern Syria border area aimed at rooting out the Kurdish-led militia that had been the key American-allied ground force helping to wrest territory from the Islamic State.

On Saturday, Turkey and its allied Syrian fighters established a foothold in a strategic Syrian border town, Ras al-Ain, and were gathering to launch an offensive against another, Tel Abyad, according to the Turkish Defense Ministry and a spokesman for the Turkish-backed fighters.

The new hostilities have displaced at least 100,000 people and ignited fears that tens of thousands of ISIS fighters and their relatives held by the Kurds could escape their camps and prisons.

The two captives were killed early Saturday after the militant group Ahrar al-Sharqiyeh, which had entered Syria from Turkey, took control of a main road through the territory and began stopping passing cars, according to Mr. Rabah, the media activist.

When military vehicles belonging to the Kurdish-led militia passed, the militants stopped them, at times getting into clashes, he said.

Also killed on a main road through the territory was Hervin Khalaf, the head of a Kurdish political party. Kurdish officials accused Turkish-allied Arab fighters of attacking her car, a charge a spokesman for the Arab fighters denied.

Mr. Rabah said his group killed nine Kurdish fighters, he said, without specifying whether the two prisoners were among them.

When asked about the video showing the Turkish-allied fighters shooting the bound prisoner, Mr. Rabah grew nervous and said he had been trying to stop them from shooting.

“Everything happened so fast,” he said

In the video, the fighters call the captives “pigs” and shout “God is great!” as two of them shoot the bound captive.

Mr. Rabah said that the second prisoner’s identification card linked him to a Kurdish security force, and that the Turkish-backed group had killed him after he tried to flee.

“You know in the law of war, it is O.K. to kill anyone who is a threat,” he said.

But a video published by the militant group on Twitter shows that same prisoner sitting passively on the side of the road, dabbing blood from his nose as if he has just been hit.

The video with the fighters shooting the bound prisoner shows three other prisoners, including the one in the military uniform. But in a later post on the group’s Twitter feed announcing its captives, there are only two in the photo. The prisoner in the uniform is not among them. Turkey’s incursion into northern Syria comes more than eight years into a civil war that has shattered the country and pulled in Russia, Iran, Turkey and the United States, all of which have forces on the ground backing their local Syrian allies.

The United States has long backed a Kurdish-led militia in the country’s northeast called the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F., which played a key role in the battle against the jihadists of the Islamic State and took over much of the territory it once controlled.

But the rise of Kurdish autonomy across its southern border angered Turkey, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had threatened to send Turkish forces into Syria to root out Kurdish militants long before Mr. Trump acquiesced to the idea on Sunday.

To prepare for the incursion, Turkey supported groups of predominantly Arab fighters in Syria who also oppose the S.D.F. In videos posted as the incursion began, the fighters sometimes referred to Kurdish forces as pigs and used religious battle language to justify fighting them.

Previously, the roughly 1,000 United States troops posted in northeastern Syria formed a buffer between the Arab militants and Kurdish fighters, running daily patrols to keep them apart.

But that buffer collapsed with the Turkish incursion because Turkey began bringing Syrian Arab fighters across its border directly into the Kurdish-controlled zone. It was one such group that carried out the killings on Saturday.

Turkey’s entrance into Ras al-Ain on Monday marked the first significant strategic breakthrough of its incursion. The town sits on the border with Turkey on a road connecting the eastern and western wings of Kurdish-held territory.

Capturing the rest of the town would allow Turkish forces to control a main link between the border towns, making it harder for Kurdish forces to move troops and supplies.

Footage broadcast on Turkish television showed Syrian Arab fighters in the streets of the seemingly abandoned town. But Kurdish-led forces said they were still present in another part of Ras al-Ain.

Turkish troops and their Arab allies were pushing to take a second strategic border town, Tel Abyad, 75 miles to the west, and an advance group briefly reached a second major supply route, roughly 20 miles inside Syria. The Turkish government says its incursions have so far been small, with soldiers holding territory only a few miles inside Syria. Its aerial bombardment has affected a much larger area.

The invasion has prompted a threat of crippling United States sanctions and a wave of international criticism — both Germany and France said on Saturday that they would block future exports of weapons to Turkey that could be used in Syria. Turkey

says it wants to create a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border to protect itself from the Kurdish-led militia. The militia has close links to a guerrilla movement that has been fighting a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state.

But that has upended efforts by the United States and the Kurdish-led militia to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. Since the incursion began on Wednesday, Kurdish leaders have pulled their fighters away from counterterrorism operations to fight the Turks, leaving the territory vulnerable to ISIS sleeper cells.

“We are now fighting on two fronts — one front against the Turkish invasion and a front against” the Islamic State, a Kurdish military official, Redur Xelil, told reporters on Saturday.

The extremist group claimed responsibility for a car bomb in Qamishli, a large border city, on Friday. Turkish airstrikes near a prison in Qamishli on Friday allowed five ISIS prisoners to escape. A second car bomb exploded Saturday in the city of Al Hasakah outside a prison holding ISIS militants.

On Friday night, the Pentagon announced that a group of American troops had narrowly avoided being hit by Turkish artillery fire in Kobani, a border town, despite providing their coordinates to Turkey.

United States military officials said privately that they were convinced Turkish forces had deliberately targeted the area to encourage the American military to leave.

The Turkish Defense Ministry acknowledged that shells had fallen near American forces, but said its troops had been aiming at Kurdish fighters in the area.

Syrian fighters backed by Turkey gathered on the outskirts of Tel Abyad, the next big objective for Turkey, said Sohaib Jaber, a spokesman for the group.

The Syrian fighters encountered fierce resistance from the Kurdish militia on the eastern edge of Tel Abyad on Saturday and pulled back to allow Turkish snipers to go in, he said. As several hundred fresh Syrian fighters rode in a convoy of buses through the town of Akcakale after dark to join the battle, Mr. Jaber said they would make a new push Saturday night.

Syrian refugees from Tel Abyad watched the fighting from a hilltop across the border on Saturday afternoon.

“We are in very good shape,” one of them, Abdullah al-Ibrahim, 33, said. A former Arab fighter, he said he was a refugee from Tel Abyad and had not seen his house in five years. “According to our plans, in one week we will take the whole area that we need,” he said. “Today is the best day of my life,” his friend, Hamad al Idham, said. Some residents of Turkey have fled the border to escape mortar fire from Syria that has killed at least 17 people.

More than 50 Kurdish and 40 rebel fighters have been killed in fighting inside Syria, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitor based in Britain.

Esper: Turkey 'appears to be' committing war crimes in northern Syria (The Hill) By Zack Budryk
October 13, 2019

Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Sunday that Turkey “appears to be” committing war crimes in its incursion into northern Syria.

“It appears to be, if true, that they would be war crimes,” Esper agreed on CBS’s “Face the Nation” on Sunday when host Margaret Brennan described some of Turkey’s actions against Kurdish forces as war crimes, including footage appearing to show the summary execution of Kurdish captives.

“It’s a very terrible situation over there, a situation caused by the Turks, by President [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan. Despite our opposition, they decided to make this incursion,” Esper said.

Esper also said officials need to sort out reports that Turkish forces attacked U.S. Special Forces in Syria.

“We’ve given them the locations of our forces. But look, I’ve been to war. I know what war’s like. There’s a fog out there, and things happen,” he said.

He also confirmed that about 1,000 U.S. troops would be withdrawn from northern Syria as part of a “deliberate withdrawal.” The Defense secretary, however, pushed back when Brennan asked if the U.S. withdrawing from northern Syria and turning over operations to Turkey was “a retreat,” telling the host, “I wouldn’t characterize it this way. ... We did not want to put American forces into harm’s way.”

“Turkey committed this action. They decide to make an incursion in northern Syria despite our protestations, our urgings not

to do it, all of our warnings," Esper added. "We are doing what's in the interests of our service members not to put them in harm's way."

Esper also struck a different note from other members of the Trump administration on the House's ongoing impeachment inquiry, telling Brennan that Pentagon officials "will do everything we can to comply" with recent subpoenas from House Democrats.

Reported executions by Turkish forces in Syria may be 'war crimes': U.S. Defense Secretary (Yahoo News)

October 13, 2019

The Pentagon is hearing reports of potential war crimes committed by Turkish-backed fighters in Syria, the head of the Defense Department said on Sunday (October 13).

The accounts include Turkish-backed fighters executing captured Syrian Kurds and Kurdish civilians.

"It appears to be, if true, that they would be war crimes," U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said to CBS News anchor Margaret Brennan.

Turkey's offensive has raised alarm bells around the world amid concerns about its impact on civilians and the possibility of Islamic State militants escaping from Kurdish-led authorities.

Syria war criminals may find the law is finally closing in on them (The Guardian) By Simon Tisdall

October 14, 2019

Actual or suspected war crimes have been reported at every stage of Syria's long-running civil war – and Turkey's latest cross-border incursion has unleashed another wave of atrocities, including executions of civilians and other alleged crimes against humanity.

But despite huge amounts of documentary evidence collected since 2011 by the UN and independent human rights groups, the perpetrators of such crimes in Syria, whether they are governments, armed factions or individuals, have mostly escaped punishment. This has encouraged a sense of impunity among wrongdoers – and dismay among victims.

Ahrar al-Sharqiya, the Turkish-backed rebel group allegedly responsible for killing nine civilians near Tel Abyad at the weekend, exemplifies this phenomenon. It was previously accused of abusing civilians, including forced disappearances and looting, during last year's Turkish-led occupation of Afrin in north-west Syria.

Fighters in Jaish al-Sharqiyah, another faction attached to the rebel Free Syrian Army, were also accused of human rights abuses in Afrin. FSA officials later pledged action would be taken against those responsible. But according to a Human Rights Watch report, this never happened.

Turkey's proxy forces are not alone in committing alleged war crimes in Syria. A military offensive last spring in Idlib province in north-west Syria by Syrian and Russian forces caused hundreds of civilian deaths, and displaced tens of thousands of people. In one episode, four hospitals were deliberately targeted by Russian bombers in the space of 12 hours.

"Intentional attacks against civilians are war crimes, and those who have ordered them or carried them out are criminally responsible for their actions," Michelle Bachelet, the UN's human rights chief, declared in July. Mark Lowcock, another senior UN official, angrily accused UN security council members of "doing nothing for 90 days as the carnage continues in front of your eyes". But a UN board of inquiry into Idlib has yet to report its findings.

Bashar al-Assad, Syria's president, has frequently been accused of war crimes through illegal use of chemical weapons. One of the most notorious incidents occurred in the town of Khan Sheikhun, where nearly 100 people died in a sarin gas attack in April 2017.

The international chemical weapons watchdog officially blamed the regime for the attack, as did the US and Britain. But Assad flatly denied it, Russia said the incident was staged – and no one has been held to account.

Donald Trump and other western leaders have also faced war crimes controversies, for example over airstrikes in Raqqa and Mosul during coalition operations against Islamic State. Unknown numbers of civilians died in the bombings. Yet their deaths have not been investigated or, in Britain's case, even acknowledged.

When it comes to war crimes, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump, Assad, the Russian and US air forces and the

rebel militiamen in Tel Abyad all have one thing in common: they are unlikely to face prosecution. The culture of impunity stretches from the top to bottom.

The international criminal court, which has lead responsibility for investigating war crimes, lacks authority and is not officially recognised by the US, Russia, Turkey or Syria. The UN's international commission of inquiry on Syria, created in 2011, has a mandate to investigate violations of human rights law – but Assad's refusal to cooperate has stymied it.

In practice, hopes of justice for war crimes victims mainly rely at present on independent, non-government organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the Syria Campaign and the Commission for International Justice and Accountability that collect and document evidence and witness statements that could be used in future prosecutions.

Recent history suggests most culprits will escape justice, including the killers now on the rampage around Tel Abyad. But this may be changing. Groundbreaking cases brought in Germany and France this year against alleged Syrian state torturers, which are expected to go to trial, have raised hopes the law is slowly catching up with the lawless.

What to know about potential war crimes in Syria by Turkish-backed fighters (ABC News) By

Alexandra Svokos

October 17, 2019

Hevrin Khalaf, a 35-year-old Kurdish-Syrian politician and the general secretary of the Syria Future Party, which aimed to transition the government should strongman President Bashar al-Assad be ousted, was riding in a vehicle on the M4 highway in Syria when she was apparently targeted and killed on the roadside, along with others in the car.

The Syrian Democratic Forces claimed she was killed by members of the Islamist militant organization Ahrar al-Sharqiya, an anti-Assad rebel group now fighting for Turkey.

While questions swirled around her death, videos were posted by the Turkish-backed Syrian rebel group Ahrar al-Sharqiya on social media that appeared to be filmed by her killers, and which showed them mock her and her companions, as described by The Associated Press. The videos apparently show unarmed civilians with their hands tied as they're shot.

ABC News confirmed that the politician, a human rights advocate, was shot in the face, but reports that she had been raped were untrue.

"Turkish-backed terrorist groups are committing war crimes in NE Syria," British politician Lloyd Russell-Moyle tweeted on Sunday, the day after the killings. "Filmed sectarian roadside executions recall IS tactics. Future Syria party leader Hevrin Khalaf has been executed. Her killers filmed it on their phones."

Russell-Moyle's tweet echoed calls from around the world labeling these killings -- and other actions taken by the Turkish military and Turkish-backed fighters -- as war crimes. But actually labeling, let alone getting justice for, an action viewed by many as a "war crime" is more complicated, especially given the region's increasingly complicated politics.

As civil war in Syria continued through the early part of this decade, between attempts to overthrow Assad and the rise of ISIS, the U.S. entered the scene and worked with local forces, including the Kurdish People's Protection Units, a local militia that worked to protect Kurdish areas from attack. But Trump entered office with the intent of pulling troops out of the country, and in October, seven months after declaring the end of ISIS, he announced troops would be withdrawing.

This announcement came after a call with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Within a week of that call, Erdogan announced Turkey had begun an operation in Syria, including targeting the Kurdish forces the U.S. had supported, and Khalaf was dead. A State Department spokesperson confirmed seeing "reports of the killing of" Khalaf and found them "extremely troubling," adding that the U.S. will "condemn in the strongest of terms any mistreatment and extrajudicial execution of civilians or prisoners."

"President Erdogan bears full responsibility for its consequences, to include a potential ISIS resurgence, possible war crimes and a growing humanitarian crisis," U.S. Secretary of Defense Dr. Mark T. Esper said in a statement Monday about Turkey's overall actions in Syria.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949, which included Turkey, clearly state that "murder of all kinds," "torture," "humiliating and degrading treatment" and "the carrying out of executions without previous judgment pronounced by a regularly constituted court" of people "taking no active part in the hostilities" are war crimes. "If a politician is driving away from the fighting, not participating at all, her killing would be a murder, and murder is clearly prohibited in the Geneva Conventions," Mary Ellen

O'Connell, a professor of international law at Notre Dame, told ABC News.

A spokesman for the United Nations human rights office said U.N. war crimes investigators would be following up on incidents in Syria, Reuters reported Tuesday. But "the question of accountability is a complicated one," Sarah Cleveland, faculty co-director of the Human Rights Institute at Columbia Law School, told ABC News.

There are various people who could be held accountable for a war crime -- the individuals who committed the actions, their commanders and up through the ranks depending on who's deemed responsible. Turkish officials could be held responsible for the actions of Syrian fighters if it's proven they directed the fighters. Then, there are several avenues through which war crimes and human rights violations can be prosecuted.

Probably the most well-known avenue is that the U.N. Security Council can refer cases to the International Criminal Court in The Hague. However, Cleveland cautioned, given that Russia is a permanent member of the Security Council with veto power - and since Russia is playing its own complex role in Syria and in relation to Turkey -- it's less likely that the ICC will see a case.

Another option is that countries not involved in a certain conflict have the ability to exercise jurisdiction over war crimes. Germany, for example, has arrested former Syrian officials for crimes against humanity and is holding trials. A third possibility, floated by some in the international community, is to set up a tribunal, which can be established within the United Nations to address a broad range of crimes in a particular region. Tribunals were set up for the former Yugoslavia to address war crimes in the Balkans in the '90s and for Rwanda to address the genocide there in the '90s, resulting in indictments and imprisonment for dozens.

So far, setting up a tribunal has primarily been discussed in the context of prosecuting ISIS militants, but one could be broadened to also address other potential war crimes in Syria, including actions committed by Assad and his forces and by Turkey and fighters supported by that country. Additionally, the European Court of Human Rights could take up a human rights-based case should individuals or states submit one.

As O'Connell, the Notre Dame professor, sees it, focusing on individual murders by Turkish or Turkish-supported fighters misses a bigger point: "Turkey's cross-border operations in Syria are a violation of the U.N. Charter prohibition on the use of force. It is an act of aggression."

"Aggression is the most serious war crime you can commit," she continued. "It means that all of the killing, all of the destruction that follows from that unlawful decision to use military force is unjustified."

She doubts that will be prosecuted, however, as nations like Russia and the U.S. are "not coming to this argument with clean hands" given their military actions in Crimea and in Iraq in 2003, respectively.

Rather than turn to prosecution, O'Connell believes the international community should rally together to use this moment as "a chance for a reset, to get back to the law that everyone was committed to before 9/11." The international community, she said, should urge Turkey to pull back and be part of regional negotiation to bring an end to the Syrian civil war and ISIS.

This is something Vice President Mike Pence could have the opportunity to do as he leads a delegation to Turkey this week to attempt to negotiate a ceasefire and settlement between Turkey and U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish forces. "If that message isn't brought home to Turkey, the worst-case scenario is extraordinarily grim," O'Connell said.

But for Cleveland, of Columbia Law School, focusing only on Turkey's actions has the possibility of missing an even broader range of potential war crimes and human rights violations committed in the region over the last decade.

"Basically every form of violation of international, humanitarian law possible has been committed in Syria, from the use of chemical weapons to intentional targeting of civilians and hospitals and schools, to indiscriminate bombing of heavily occupied civilian areas," she said. "The list goes on and on."

Syria-Russia Attack on Refuge an Apparent War Crime (Human Rights Watch)

October 18, 2019

A Syrian-Russian military alliance strike on a displacement compound in mid-August is an apparent war crime, Human Rights Watch said today.

Witnesses said there was no apparent military target for the attack in the town of Hass, in Idlib governorate. The strike killed at least 20 civilians at the center and displaced about 200 survivors. They fled to nearby villages and displacement compounds along the closed Turkish border under the control of the anti-government groups, where hundreds of thousands of other displaced Syrians are trapped with nowhere left to flee.

“Since the start of the offensive on Idlib, the Syrian-Russian military alliance has used unlawful tactics to kill and injure hundreds of civilians,” said Gerry Simpson, associate crisis and conflict director at Human Rights Watch. “The tragic loss of life and injury to civilians is made worse by the devastating impact these attacks have had on civilian infrastructure, bringing an ongoing displacement crisis in Syria to its breaking point.”

In April, the Syrian-Russian alliance escalated its military campaign on Idlib governorate and other parts of Northwest Syria, the last anti-government stronghold in the country. In its offensive, the alliance has killed at least 1,000 civilians and displaced over half a million others, according to the United Nations. The alliance has also struck other protected infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. Despite an August 30 ceasefire, aid workers told Human Rights Watch they are still unable to adequately assist many of the people displaced since April, leaving tens of thousands without shelter. On October 9, Turkey and armed factions invaded Northeast Syria, an area under the control of Kurdish-led forces. Active hostilities there have displaced a further 160,000, adding to the growing burden of displacement in Syria.

Human Rights Watch spoke to 24 witnesses and residents, who said that on the evening of August 16, an aircraft bombed a displacement compound run by a Syrian aid organization. Only Syrian and Russian air forces are known to be active in this part of Northwest Syria, which is under the control of anti-government groups. The center, founded in 2014 to house displaced families, is right outside the city of Hass, in a relatively remote area. It is made up of a series of residential and small commercial buildings around two open squares.

Witnesses said that no armed men or other military targets were in the displacement center. Most of the casualties Human Rights Watch documented were women and children. Human Rights Watch could not independently verify the absence of a military target in the vicinity, but even if there were one, using a weapon with wide-area effects in an area populated by civilians would have been unlawfully indiscriminate or expected to cause disproportionate civilian loss. Six survivors said the strike hit one of the compound’s two squares, where the displaced families usually sat in the early evening while their children played. The civilians at the compound had all been repeatedly displaced by fighting in other parts of Syria. Survivors described the bloody aftermath of the strike, which killed many women and children and, in one case, an entire nuclear family including a pregnant woman. A cameraman working for Macro Media Center (MMC), a local media company, filmed and photographed the rescue effort.

Human Rights Watch reviewed satellite imagery taken before and after the attack on August 21. The damage signature in the satellite imagery is consistent with a large air-dropped munition falling on an open square, consistent with witness evidence. Human Rights Watch was unable to confirm whether this was a single or multiple detonation.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed images and footage provided by the cameraman, who also published his photos and a video of the attack on Facebook just after 9 p.m. that evening. The footage showed major damage to the compound, as well as several injuries and deaths consistent with what witnesses described. There was no evidence of military objects in the footage.

A displaced man who took on the responsibility of keeping track of the displaced families told Human Rights Watch that after the strike, the surviving families fled north but that some were unable to find shelter due to the large-scale displacement crisis. A father of eight told Human Rights Watch he had lived in the Hass displacement compound since 2015, and that now his family had no option but to take shelter in an abandoned school.

Witnesses said the August strike on the compound was not the first. On July 19, a Syrian-Russian helicopter strike on the same compound killed a man and destroyed one of its buildings, displacing 80 families living there. Forty families returned in early August because they couldn’t find shelter elsewhere. Khalid al-Satuf, 34, originally from Latamneh, was among them. He lost his wife and three children in the August 16 attack.

“After the barrel bomb attack on 19 July, I left Hass with my family because we were afraid of another attack, but I couldn’t find anywhere else to live as the rent is so high now everywhere, so we came back about two weeks before the August attack,” he said.

Deliberate or reckless attacks against civilians and civilian objects committed with criminal intent are war crimes. Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, an attack against a civilian object constitutes a war crime if it is not imperatively demanded by necessities of the conflict. The laws of war require parties to a conflict to take constant care during military operations to spare the civilian population and to “take all feasible precautions” to avoid or minimize the incidental loss of civilian life and damage to civilian objects.

People who commit serious violations of the laws of war with criminal intent – that is, intentionally or recklessly – may be prosecuted for war crimes. Individuals may also be held criminally liable for assisting in, facilitating, aiding, or abetting a war crime. All governments that are parties to an armed conflict are obligated to investigate alleged war crimes by members of their armed forces.

As a member of the joint military operation, Russia is jointly responsible for unlawful attacks by the Syrian government. Providing weapons or material support to a country or nonstate actor knowing that it is likely to use them in a serious violation of international law creates risk of complicity for the supplier and the supporter.

The Syrian-Russian military alliance should immediately cease all unlawful attacks on Northwest Syria. It should take all feasible precautions to ensure that civilians are protected. Concerned countries should make clear to Syria and Russia that there will be no business as usual for officials who have intentionally or recklessly violated the laws of war. Turkey should not block asylum seekers fleeing the violence at its border.

Donors should provide additional funds and support, including to local Syrian organizations, to provide shelter to those displaced by the hostilities. All parties to the conflict should ensure safe passage for humanitarian assistance.

“Through its repeated strikes on civilian objects, the Syrian-Russian alliance has sent a message to civilians in Idlib that there is nowhere they can run to,” Simpson said. “By closing their borders as civilians are killed, maimed, and blocked from seeking safety, Turkey and other countries are making this nightmare a reality.”

At about 7:30 p.m. on August 16, an aerial bomb hit a displacement center just outside Hass, a town in Idlib governorate, approximately 30 kilometers from the front lines where Syrian government and pro-government forces were fighting anti-government groups, including Hay’et Tahrir al-Sham. The attack killed 20 people and injured 52, according to the head of the displacement center. Human Rights Watch was able to verify 15 of the names by cross-referencing information from friends and relatives of the victims.

Human Rights Watch spoke by phone to 16 people who were at the displacement center at the time of the attack and confirmed that it happened just before the sunset prayer. Human Rights Watch also spoke to two witnesses who arrived at the scene shortly after the attack; two relatives who were not there; as well as a doctor, the head of the local council, and one staff member of the NGO that runs the center. Four witnesses who were at the displacement compound said they saw an aircraft fly right above the settlement just before the explosion. The others said they heard but didn’t see the aircraft.

The head of the Hass Local Council, a civilian body providing services in Hass, who was in nearby olive groves at the time of attack, also said he saw an aircraft empty munitions over the compound right before the sunset prayer; after, he immediately called Syrian Civil Defense, a nongovernmental group, to rescue the injured.

Human Rights Watch also spoke with three people living in the compound who were not there at the time of the attack and who said that their relatives called them shortly afterward to tell them what happened.

Six witnesses who survived the attack said that the munition landed in a square between the residential buildings and shops in the compound. Dozens of families usually congregated there in the evening, and at the time of the attack, witnesses estimated, 20 to 30 people were in the square. One witness, who was checking the water tanks on the roof of a three-story residential building that was damaged, said:

The open area was full. I was on the roof, and could see them all. My friends were calling to me to come down and join them for tea, and I was telling them I am coming down, but in a blink of an eye, the plane had struck.

First responders and witnesses also described immense damage. The strike completely destroyed a row of one-story shops, partially damaged the south side of a three-story residential building, and created a large crater.

A man who was sitting outside in the square when the attack occurred said he saw the incoming plane:

The next thing I knew was that I was lying on the ground and my clothes were torn. There was smoke and dust everywhere. I had been talking to two men in the square and I could not see them. One of my eyes was hurting but it wasn’t a serious injury. I also couldn’t hear much and my hearing is still bad now because my right eardrum was burst.

This man lost his wife in the attack. He said:

Then I saw my wife lying face down on the ground and I started to cry. I thought she was unconscious, not dead. ... We buried my wife in Killi [a town near the border] the same day, at 9 p.m. When I went back to the compound a few days later, I saw the huge crater next to where we had been sitting.

A resident at the center who was there during the attack said that he went looking for his son after the explosion and found that he had died in the strike:

Outside I saw people crying and shouting. I saw my car, covered in flesh and blood. The shop was on fire. I walked through the square that was covered in blood and flesh and body parts and destruction. I saw the dead and injured. One of them was a boy

holding 200 Syrian pounds in his hand who must have been on his way to buy something from the shop when the attack happened, and who had shrapnel in his back, lying on his chest shouting "help me." I saw a woman with her belly open and a fetus next to her. I saw a badly burned man who others told me died the next day.

Then I saw three children lying on the ground with grapes in their hands. They were dead. One of them was my son, Amjad, who had very serious neck and back injuries. One of them was a boy called Khalid, about 11 years old and from Kafr Zita. I didn't know who the other boy was.

The attack killed entire families who had taken shelter in the displacement center after being displaced by hostilities elsewhere, and who had nowhere else to go, witnesses said. One man, who lost his wife and two children, said:

My family and I were all in the square when the attack happened. We used to sit there to enjoy the cool evening air. I was talking with some men and the women and kids were talking and playing. We heard a warplane above us but we didn't expect anything bad to happen. Suddenly I saw a red flash, heard an explosion, and then everything went dark.

I was unconscious for a few seconds. I stood up and saw my wife and two daughters lying on the ground. The moment I saw them I knew they were dead. Just imagine how I felt at that moment, seeing them dead in front of me. I lost consciousness again and I woke up in the Maarat al-Numan hospital that evening.

In the hospital my relatives told me that my wife and two daughters Maria and Aya had died and that they were burying them in Ibin [town near the border] that same night. I was very badly burned on my back, arms, and parts of my face and did not want my [other] children to see me like that. It was two weeks before I saw them in the Atma hospital, which has a burn unit.

Human Rights Watch was able to verify the names of 15 people who died, including 7 children and 5 women, by contacting their relatives and friends and by cross-referencing the names through other witnesses.

Human Rights Watch cross-checked these names with lists of dead and injured recorded at the Maarat al-Numan hospital and with a list of the dead and injured received from the representative of the displaced people living in the settlement at the time of the attack. Human Rights Watch was able to verify the names of 12 of the 15 dead shared by the representative, and 9 of the 13 on the list of injured shared by the representative, and 8 of the 16 names on the hospital's list.

One child who was injured in the attack lost her father and one of her siblings in the strike. Her family had sought refuge in the displacement compound after an attack on Kafr Zita killed her mother, grandmother, and two of her uncles. The child, her siblings, and her grandfather all were injured. Human Rights Watch spoke to the child's aunt, who said that they were unable to find a place to house all three surviving children given the extent of their injuries and that the siblings were separated and staying with different family members across northwest Syria.

The representative of the displaced people living in the settlements confirmed that after the attack everyone living there had left and, as of late September, had not returned. July 19 Attack

Five witnesses described to Human Rights Watch a helicopter attack just after the sunset prayer at around 7:30 p.m. on July 19 that struck the displacement compound near Hass. Witnesses and relatives said that the attack killed a man in his mid-60s, identified as Abd al-Rahim a-Saghir.

His daughter said:

Just after evening prayer, I was standing with my father and my uncle's children next to our building... Suddenly I heard a helicopter. I looked up and saw it coming toward us. It was quite low and I was very afraid. I went inside and stayed at the bottom of the stairs with my uncle's children. My father said he would go to the roof. About one minute later I heard an explosion. I ran out of our building and to the building where my uncle lives so that he knew his children were safe.

After about 10 minutes I went back to my building. There were people at the entrance who stopped me from going inside because they were afraid there would be more bombs. Then my mother told me she had found my father lying on the stairs inside our building and that when she had raised the back of his head with her hand, she felt something soft. He was still breathing and she said some men had already taken him to the Maarat al-Numan hospital. When we got there, the doctors told us my father had died. We buried him the next morning in Kafr Zita.

Another witnesses said he saw the helicopter approach the compound. A third said he heard the explosion while it was hovering overhead. They both confirmed that the attack hit a three story building at the compound.

A man who witnessed the attack from a few hundred meters away from the compound said he also saw the helicopter drop two large objects onto a building there.

All five witnesses interviewed said there were no fighters in or near the compound and that as long as they had lived there, they had never seen fighters or military vehicles there.

Turkey Accused of War Crimes After Suspected White Phosphorus Use Against Kurds in Syria (Newsweek) By Tareq Haddad

October 18, 2019

Turkey, a NATO member, has allegedly used munitions containing white phosphorus against civilians in northern Syria.

Multiple sources have reported that the munitions are believed to have been dropped in the border town of Ras al-Ayn, after images and video surfaced of civilians, including children, suffering gruesome burns associated with the chemical.

Anthony Loyd, a journalist for The Times of London, was present at a Syrian-Kurdish hospital in Tal Tamir where a 13-year-old boy was brought in with associated injuries.

"The burns on the screaming child brought into the Syrian-Kurdish hospital at Tal Tamir were enough to reduce even hardened medical staff to silence yesterday," he wrote.

"Yet the terrible wounds that had all but flayed the 13-year-old Mohammed Hamid Mohammed's skin from his torso, penetrating deep into his flesh, suggested his injuries were caused by something far worse than blast alone.

"They added to the growing body of evidence that suggests Turkey, a NATO member, is using white phosphorus against Kurdish civilians in its eight-day offensive into northern Syria."

Loyd shared the images with Hamish de Bretton-Gordon, a British chemical weapons expert, who confirmed in his estimations that white phosphorus was used.

"This very much looks like it was caused by white phosphorus," Bretton-Gordon said.

"In 24 hours I have been shown more photographs of these kinds of burn than at any recent stage in Syria's war. White phosphorus is a horrific weapon, which can be delivered by aircraft or artillery. It reacts to the moisture in the skin in a way that intensifies its burning, so that water cannot put it out."

The alleged use of the chemical was also documented by Mustafa Bali, head of media relations for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—the Kurdish-led group currently trying to keep the Turkish invasion into northern Syria at bay. "After eight days of fierce resistance by our fighters against heavy ground and aerial attacks of Turkey in Serekaniye, we suspect that unconventional weapons are used against SDF fighters upon the reports and signs we receive from the besieged town," Bali said on Twitter.

"We urge international organizations to send their teams to investigate some wounds sustained in attacks. The medical facilities in NE Syria lack expert teams following withdrawal of NGOs due to Turkish invasion attacks."

A corresponding video shows several children with severe burns around the body and face.

The deployment of incendiary weapons against civilian targets is banned by the Geneva and Chemical Weapons conventions. However, white phosphorus is used in a great variety of munitions and devices for a number of purposes. It is not universally illegal, although many countries have disavowed its use in civilian areas. Moreover, not all such devices can be considered chemical weapons. The U.S. uses white phosphorus in devices like smoke grenades, tracer rounds and artillery shells.

It is not yet clear exactly what kind of munitions impacted Ras al-Ayn and how they were deployed.

A spokesperson for the U.N.'s Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) told Newsweek: "The OPCW is aware of the situation in northern Syria and is collecting information at OPCW Headquarters with regard to the alleged use of chemical weapons.

"So far, the OPCW has not yet determined the credibility of these allegations."

The allegations come as a press release on the OPCW website released on Thursday stated that Turkey donated €30,000 to the body in order to support construction of a new facility. "The OPCW plays a significant role in the field of disarmament and international security and it is the central actor in the chemical non-proliferation regime," Turkey's ambassador to the OPCW Şaban Dişli said in the accompanying statement.

"This contribution is another display of the strong commitment of Turkey to the Chemical Weapons Convention and to the

OPCW."

The allegations surfaced shortly after an announcement from Vice President Mike Pence on Thursday that a ceasefire deal was reportedly agreed between Turkey and Kurdish-led forces.

Both sides have pushed back against the remarks, however, and evidence of clashes have continued to mount on Friday.

Turkey has denied any use of chemical weapons in a statement released on Thursday. It claimed that terrorists were staging the attacks.

"We receive information that terrorist organizations, after using chemical weapons on themselves, will throw the blame onto our armed forces and try to create perception," Minister of National Defense Hulusi Akar said.

"It is a fact known by everyone that there are no chemical weapons in the Turkish Armed Forces' inventory."

Newsweek has contacted the Department of Defense, the White House and NATO for comment.

Amnesty International Accuses Turkish Troops, Mercenaries Of War Crimes In Syria (NPR) By Dan Estrin, Ailsa Chang
October 18, 2019

A human rights group has accused Turkey of war crimes in Syria. Many of those fighting for Turkey are not Turkish; they're Syrians who originally armed themselves to fight the Syrian regime. Today, Amnesty International accused those militias of gruesome executions of Kurds, including an execution of a prominent Kurdish politician.

NPR's Daniel Estrin reports from Dohuk, Iraq near the Syrian border. And a warning to listeners, this report contains graphic details.

DANIEL ESTRIN, BYLINE: This shaky video shows a group of men in uniform surrounding a black armored car pockmarked with bullet holes. A man lies on the ground next to the car.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PERSON: (Speaking Arabic).

ESTRIN: Another pig, an armed man says. The Kurdish Red Crescent says the man killed was the driver of 35-year-old Hevrin Khalaf, a Syrian Kurdish political leader. Her mother, Suad Mohammed, told local Kurdish TV what happened next.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

SUAD MOHAMMED: (Speaking Arabic) They could have killed her with a bullet or two, but they mutilated her body with bullets.

ESTRIN: Amnesty International quoted a medical report saying she was dragged out of her car, beaten and shot to death on a major highway in northeast Syria. Khalaf headed the Kurdish Future Syria Party. Zozan Aloush was her close friend.

ZOZAN ALOUSH: She was really working for gender equality, even inside the party. And I cannot describe her more than she was friendly and believing in equality. So really sorry for her. We lost our really - leadership.

ESTRIN: Amnesty says it gathered testimonies from 17 people - from rescue workers to civilians - verified video and reviewed medical reports. It says Turkey and its allied militias carried out, quote, "serious violations and war crimes, including attacking a school with displaced families inside." Youssef Hammoud, the spokesman of the Syrian militias fighting on Turkey's behalf, tells NPR they're investigating the killings and tries to explain his soldiers' background.

YOUSSEF HAMMOUD: (Speaking Arabic).

ESTRIN: He says many are as young as 18 and grew up during Syria's civil war, without going to school for the last eight years. Many took up arms to fight the Syrian regime. And they live in a disintegrated society under continuous war, he says. Elizabeth Tsurkov, a Syria researcher, is in contact with many of the Turkish-backed fighters.

ELIZABETH TSURKOV: Some of them are from Idlib, but the overwhelming majority of people who've been displaced from their homes.

ESTRIN: Some are hardline Islamist militants. Some have criminal records and are accused of looting as they fight. Some just need a job, she says.

TSURKOV: But they do not want to admit to themselves that they are fighting for money, so they make up all sorts of reasons for fighting.

ESTRIN: Now they're accused of doing Turkey's bidding - to rid the area of Kurdish forces Turkey sees as a threat. Kurdish forces themselves may have also violated international law, Amnesty says. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke to reporters after meeting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MIKE POMPEO: To the extent there are abuses that are identified, we'll ask each leader - certainly President Erdogan and his team and others - to investigate any allegations of abuse that have taken place.

ESTRIN: The U.S. says it expects Turkey to ensure the safety of religious and ethnic minorities. Kurdish authorities say more than 200 Syrian civilians have been killed. And Turkey says nearly 20 have been killed by mortars fired by Syrian Kurdish fighters. Now the sides have agreed to a five-day pause in fighting.

Turkey's Attack on Kurds in Syria 'Biggest Ethnic Cleansing Operation in the 21st Century,' says top commander (Newsweek)

By Brendan Cole

October 20, 2019

A Kurdish commander has warned that the Turkish offensive launched in northern Syria and an agreement with the U.S. to end hostilities would lead to "ethnic cleansing" for which the U.S. bears "full responsibility".

Turkey's offensive, launched after President Donald Trump said he would pull out U.S. troops, has prompted hundreds of thousands to flee their homes.

During a five-day ceasefire, an agreement brokered by the U.S, saw Turkey agree to permanently halt the offensive if Syrian Kurdish militias, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), withdrew from northern Syria.

The Washington Post noted that it was a "stunning victory" for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan because it meant Washington now accepted the safe zone they had been arguing about for years and it also made U.S. the guarantor of the Kurdish fighters' withdrawal. The head of Kurdish forces in Syria General Mazlum Kobane has said that Turkey's intentions are more sinister and the U.S. is to blame for any bloodshed.

He told NBC: "This agreement will kill millions of Kurds and the expulsion from their land of millions of Kurds. It will be the biggest ethnic cleansing operation of the 21st century and its happening right in front of the American army's eyes."

Both sides have accused the other of breaking the five-day ceasefire and Erdogan was bullish on Saturday when he said "we will start where we left off and continue to crush the terrorists' heads," according to the BBC.

Turkey says that Kurdish forces are terrorists and wants to create a "safe zone" buffer inside Syria. Turkey wants to resettle up to two million Syrian refugees inside that zone, although critics have warned this could trigger the ethnic cleansing of the local Kurdish population, the BBC reported. Meanwhile, Amnesty International has reported it has "damning evidence" of war crimes by Turkey and other violations by their side.

"Amnesty evidence shows how Turkish forces have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, including through summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians," it said.

Kobane told NBC: "America has full responsibility for what is happening now because we trusted them for five years in the continuing war against Isis. But now, there is ethnic cleansing. If they wanted, they would stop it."

The Washington Post noted that there is no clarity as to whether Turkey and the U.S. had agreed how exactly how big the safe zone would be, although it is believed to be around 20 miles south of the Turkish border.

Turkey 'outsourcing war crimes' to armed groups, Amnesty says after Kurdish politician's murder (CBC News)

By Margaret Evans

October 20, 2019

Soud Mohammed sat in her dead daughter's bedroom in the home they shared in the Syrian town of Derik in the northeastern corner of the Kurdish enclave known as

Rojava.

She was sifting through the chapters of her daughter's life, turning the pages of a small photo album open on the bed in front of her.

When she came to what looked like a graduation photo she stopped and pointed to her daughter's long dark hair. Her killers had pulled that same hair so hard, she said, that it had come away with bits of her scalp.

Hevrin Khalaf is the Kurdish politician who was brutally murdered on a stretch of the M4 highway on Oct. 12 when suspected members of a Syrian rebel militia linked to Turkey stopped her car, dragged her from it and killed her.

Her driver and another passenger in the car were also killed.

It was just four days after Turkey had launched its incursion into Northern Syria to create what it calls a "safe-zone" along its southern border.

"They could not even show her body to me," said her mother. "There was not any part of it without bullets."

An autopsy report made public lists multiple gunshot wounds to Khalaf's body along with fractures to her legs, face and head.

The 34-year-old civil engineer was the secretary general of the recently formed Future Syria Party. She had travelled to attend a funeral the night before and was returning home, according to her mother.

Khalaf's execution-style killing cast an immediate spotlight on the militias unleashed by Turkey as proxy ground forces and the nature of those fighters.

"Turkey is responsible for the actions of the Syrian armed groups it supports, arms and directs," said Amnesty International in a statement. "Turkey cannot evade responsibility by outsourcing war crimes to armed groups," it said.

Amnesty launched an investigation into Khalaf's death and laid blame for it at the feet of an Islamist group called Ahrar al-Sharqiya, one of the groups fighting under a Turkish-backed coalition calling itself the Syrian National Army.

Killers apparently filmed aftermath Amnesty also verified video footage apparently taken by Khalaf's killers that showed her body on the ground with a foot pushing at it and calling it the "corpse of a pig."

The knowledge of how Khalaf died added another layer of suffering to those mourning her death. The horror of it was cemented on to the faces of friends and family who came to visit Mohammed last Thursday.

It was a day when the family had planned to visit Khalaf's grave at the cemetery just outside of Derik, but an airstrike near it the evening before convinced them to change their plans. Instead, they set up plastic chairs outside the family home in a circle around pictures of Khalaf, and the driver who was killed with her. One group arrived in a procession, carrying flowers and chanting "Martyrs Never Die." People lit candles and friends of the family handed out sweets to the guests.

When the ceremony was over, Mohammed made a point of thanking "our president, Apo."

Apo is the nickname of Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, a guerrilla group that has waged a decade's long and bloody war against the Turkish state.

Had never carried a gun Turkey accuses the main Kurdish militia in Northern Syria, the People's Protection Units (YPG), of links to the PKK.

Khalaf's family clearly supports the PKK, as do many Kurds in northern Syria who see the group as a defender of Kurdish identity across a region where it has long been suppressed.

Khalaf's older sister Zozan was a PKK fighter, killed at the age of 25 in the 1990s.

But Khalaf had never carried a gun, her mother insisted, more interested in the political struggle than fighting.

The Future Syria party, of which Khalaf was the secretary-general, preached conciliation between Arabs and Kurds according to friends and family.

"She liked everything good in this world. She was very emotional and had a very good heart," said Samira Abdel Aziz, who spoke about her friend at the Thursday gathering.

"She didn't differentiate between people. She wanted communities in Syria to be united."

Abdel Aziz, an Arab, points to her friendship with Khalaf as proof of that. The two met while working on women's issues in and around Raqqa, after the city that was capital of the group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was liberated by Syrian Kurdish forces helped by U.S. troops.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces lost more than 10,000 fighters in the struggle against ISIS.

The sense of betrayal felt by the Kurds in light of Washington's perceived green-lighting of the Turkish incursion is impossible to overstate.

"I'm very, very angry," said Shepal Mustapha, one of Khalaf's cousins. "Why all of this happens to us? Only just because we are Kurdish?"

Outgunned by the Turks, the Kurds reluctantly invited the government forces of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad back into the region.

But few Kurds believe al-Assad will leave them with their lands or autonomy intact in the long run.

"We don't trust anyone," said Mustapha. "Not [the Turkish president], not Assad, not America. Because all of them gives us and gave us a lot of promises but they went back."

And they want the world to know the devastating cost to families like Khalaf's.

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Yemen

Yemen's rebel court issues 'subpoena' for Donald Trump, Barack Obama and MbS (The New Arab)

October 17, 2019

A Houthi court has summoned prominent world leaders, including US President Donald Trump and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman within a next month before slapping a lawsuit against them over alleged war crimes in Yemen.

A total of 124 figures were ordered to appear in court to defend themselves of charges of war crimes, with the names published in al-Thawra newspaper.

Politicians across the world are on the list, including Trump's predecessor Barack Obama, former US defense secretary James Mattis, along with former British Prime ministers Theresa May and David Cameron.

A number of Arab leaders were also mentioned, including Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi who has been in exile in Saudi Arabia since 2015.

Prominent Emirati figures have been mentioned in the list, along with Jordan's King Abdullah and former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir.

Top level members of the Saudi monarchy are on the list, including King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Lower-level Yemeni politicians and journalists were also mentioned in the list, which was considered a way to silence opponents to the militia.

The court threatened that those who refused to appear in court will be tried in absentia as fugitives.

The Houthi rebels violently took over Yemen's capital city Sanaa on 21 September 2014 are also responsible for various crimes against humanity.

For years, human rights groups have accused the rebels of planting landmines, recruiting children, withholding aid and shelling civilian areas.

The Houthis have also imposed a siege on Yemen's third largest city – Taiz.

Saudi Arabia waged war on Houthi rebels in Yemen in March 2015, following the Houthi takeover.

Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the United Nations. Tens of thousands of people have died as a result of indiscriminate airstrikes, fighting, or famine caused by war.

Yemen rebels say Saudi-led airstrike kills 5 civilians (The Washington Post)

October 22, 2019

Yemen's Houthi rebels say an airstrike by the Saudi-led coalition has killed at least five civilians, including two children, when it hit a vehicle in a northern province./p>

Youssef al-Hadri, spokesman of the Houthi-run Health Ministry, said in a statement the airstrike took place Monday in Kitaf district of Saada province, which borders Saudi Arabia.

He says the dead include two women, two children and the vehicle's owner.

The rebels have released graphic images showing dead bodies, claiming they were of the victims.

There was no immediate comment from the coalition.

The Saudi-led coalition has been battling the Houthi rebels on behalf of Yemen's internationally recognized government since 2015. The war has killed tens of thousands of people.

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Special Tribunal for Lebanon

**Official Website of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon
In Focus: Special Tribunal for Lebanon (UN)**

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Israel and Palestine

Meet Benny Gantz, the man who may be the post-Netanyahu face of Israel (The Washington Post) By Steve Hendrix

October 22, 2019

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's failure to form a governing coalition by this week's deadline has turned the spotlight on his political rival, former Army chief of staff Benny Gantz, who becomes the only other Israeli authorized to form a government in more than a decade.

Even after many months of campaigning and political intrigue, Israel is still trying to get to know this newcomer.

Gantz campaigned for Israel's top job with minimal policy pronouncements and vague speeches. The strategy proved effective in an election that was largely a referendum on the colorful, contentious Netanyahu.

But Gantz's resulting soft outlines are as much temperament as technique, according to those who know the man his Army buddies called "Benny-huta," a play on his name that translates as "laid-back."

In stark contrast to Netanyahu, a political showman whose command of the spotlight delights his base and annoys his opponents, Gantz has risen to the top of two Israeli institutions known for shooting and shouting — the military and politics — with a reputation for calm and moderation.

His ascent was rapid. He was the head of the army by age 52 and less than a year after launching his political career has become a top prospect for prime minister, potentially the third army chief of staff to reach that position after Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak.

"Nobody knows what kind of politician he's going to be," said Anshel Pfeffer, a columnist for Haaretz and biographer of Netanyahu. "The campaign didn't tell us, and Gantz has never been in this kind of limelight before."

For his political team, Gantz's lack of a political record was an asset, allowing him to be presented as a battle-tested general and a centrist alternative to Netanyahu without tying him to specifics. One political commentator here compared him to Chauncey Gardiner, the Peter Sellers character from the 1979 movie "Being There" who rose to presidential heights by uttering platitudes.

Gantz's path to power is still uncertain. He faces the same closely divided Knesset, Israel's parliament, that stymied Netanyahu. Gantz will have a month to find 61 lawmakers willing to support his bid to lead the country. If he fails to break the gridlock, Israel could endure its third national election in a year.

If he succeeds, he will crack the grip of the country's longest-serving leader. With that prospect in view, Israelis are beginning to focus on the tall, blue-eyed former paratrooper who could well become the post-Netanyahu face of the nation.

Gantz, who turned 60 shortly before the election, grew up in a farming village in southern Israel founded by Holocaust survivors. Among them were his Hungarian and Romanian parents, who met on a ship on their way to Israel. The only boy amid three sisters, he began his military service at 18 and joined a paratrooper brigade.

He didn't leave the ranks for almost four decades, a career that would put him in the middle of some of the country's most momentous conflicts.

Among his first assignments was providing security for Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's groundbreaking visit to Israel in 1977. He was the commander of forces in southern Lebanon when Israel pulled out of the country in 2000, and he rode in the last armored vehicle over the border. The Palestinian uprising in the Gaza Strip known as the Second Intifada erupted soon after he took charge of the division responsible for security in the region.

It is an action-packed résumé. But his men remember an officer who seldom raised his voice.

"He never had to scream," said Aharon Fuchs, who served eight years under Gantz in the 1980s. "He just talked. It was with his eyes that he would tell you that you didn't do something well."

Gantz was known to make friends all along the chain of command, said Fuchs, down to the lowliest cooks and mechanics. For decades, the two have gone together every year to visit the family of a comrade killed on the Lebanese border. It's one of several such honor calls Gantz is known to pay in a calendar filled with anniversaries of those who fell under his command.

"First we go to the cemetery and then to the house," Fuchs said. "When Benny comes to a family like this, it's like he's coming to a holy place."

But Gantz has his critics. Some of his military peers have told reporters that Gantz's meetings — known to be long affairs where everyone gets to talk — sometimes smacked of indecision.

Naftali Bennett, a former education minister who served in Netanyahu's government, went further, blaming Gantz's slow response as chief of staff during the 2014 Gaza war with the Palestinian militant group Hamas for producing a stalemate.

"If Hamas leaders could vote, they would vote for Benny Gantz, the hesitant general," Bennett told the Irish Times during the campaign.

Gantz's restraint, however, has also won him plaudits. One night in the 1980s, when Gantz was leading a patrol south of Jerusalem during the Palestinian uprising known as the First Intifada, molotov cocktails exploded beside his jeep. He and his men jumped out, but Gantz stopped them from firing into the dark.

"It was the middle of the night, we didn't see anyone, so he didn't want us to shoot," said Dan Emergui, a radio man who was

in the vehicle. “Benny has the right considerations.”

One of the missions Gantz recalls most fondly, friends say, was his command of a ground unit in Addis Ababa during Operation Solomon, the secret 36-hour airlift of more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1991.

The general has a preference for humanitarian tasks over combat, said a senior officer who rose through the ranks with Gantz and served with him on the general staff. After Gantz left the military in 2015, for instance, he worked on education projects for Jewish and Bedouin groups in the Negev desert.

“It all goes back to his roots, everything that his parents experienced,” said the senior officer, citing in particular Gantz’s mother’s experience at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. “He doesn’t hesitate in these operations, but he’s not a guy who wants to hurt human beings.”

Tales from the campaign trail, his supporters say, suggest Gantz has brought the same humanity to his second career. During the political campaign earlier this year, unconfirmed reports circulated that his cellphone had been hacked, perhaps by Iranian intelligence, perhaps revealing salacious material. It was the kind of anonymous attack common in Israeli politics, and some of his advisers pushed Gantz to take some swipes at Netanyahu’s domestic drama. He refused.

“Benny insisted on staying calm, even if it would cost him more votes,” said Chili Tropper, a Knesset member from Gantz’s Blue and White party. “He said he would not attack Bibi’s family,” Tropper added, referring to Netanyahu by his nickname.

But if Gantz does not want to engage in the rough stuff personally, he did not stop his campaign team from doing so. Working to establish the security credibility vital in Israel, the team introduced Gantz in videos that were more blood-and-guts than bread-and-honey, touting the “terrorists killed” and the Gaza neighborhoods bombed when he led the army.

His war record has cost him support from Israel’s Arab population. A slate of Arab parties, which finished third in the parliamentary voting after Gantz and Netanyahu’s factions, broke with decades of precedent to throw their support behind Gantz’s bid to become prime minister. But one of the factions backed out within hours, saying it could not endorse a “war criminal.”

His measured, deliberate style, however, has already paid dividends in his political career, his backers say. The most recent example, they say, was his ability to wrangle the fractured, squabbling center-left of Israel’s political spectrum into his Blue and White party, which slightly outpolled Netanyahu’s Likud party in the election last month.

“Nine months ago, he was not even involved in politics,” said Tropper. “Only a person with his temperament could do this.”

Jordanian woman on hunger strike in Israeli prison is refusing medical treatment (Middle East Eye) By Mustafa Abu Sneineh
October 22, 2019

A Jordanian woman held in Israeli prison has refused medical treatment as she approaches a month on hunger strike against being held in administrative detention, her father said on Tuesday.

Heba Labadi, 24, is one of two Jordanian citizens arrested by Israel and put under administrative detention, a system that allows Israeli authorities to hold people without charge or the possibility of appeal for prolonged periods of time.

Labadi’s father, Ahmed al-Labadi, told MEE that his daughter was arrested on 20 August on her way back from a relative’s wedding in the occupied West Bank town of Yabad, near the city of Jenin.

Heba’s father told the Jordanian radio station Al-Balad on Tuesday that his daughter has refused to be transported to an Israeli hospital to receive treatment.

“Her lawyer appealed to the court against the administrative detention, but we do not know if the appeal will be accepted,” Heba’s father told Al-Balad radio.

Ahmed said that a list of charges against Heba had not been presented to her lawyer yet.

“Her mother applied for a visa through the Red Cross to visit her, but she was denied. She tried again through Jordan’s foreign ministry and was also denied a visa,” he said.

Samer Simaan, one of her lawyers, all members of the Palestinian prisoners’ rights group Addameer, visited Labadi early in October.

He said in a statement at the time that during the first 16 days of detention, Labadi had been interrogated by Israeli authorities for 17 hours a day, from 9 am to 2 am.

Labadi was also denied legal help for the first 25 days from the time of her arrest.

"Heba's isolation cell is filthy and has surveillance cameras. The designated area for bathing is completely exposed, and therefore she has not been able to shower since arriving at Jalameh prison."

The lawyer added that her cell doesn't have windows but has an air conditioning unit that keeps it cold, and she has only one dirty bed sheet to cover herself with.

Heba is not allowed to walk in the prison's yard.

"She confirmed that she is not taking any vitamins, nutritional supplements or salt, and she is content with only drinking water. She has lost eight kilograms since starting her hunger strike," Simaan said.

Abdel-Rahman Meri, 29, is the second Jordanian languishing in Israeli prison.

Meri was arrested by Israel as he attempted to cross the Allenby Bridge from the occupied West Bank to Jordan with his mother on 2 September.

Labadi and Meri are the first two Jordanians to be placed in administrative detention, but they are not the only ones detained. There are 23 Jordanians being held in Israeli prisons serving different sentences.

There are currently five Palestinian detainees on hunger strike, four of them are from West Bank towns and one is from occupied East Jerusalem.

Ahmed Ghanam, a 42-year-old Palestinian from the village of Dura in the southern West Bank, began his hunger strike 101 days ago on 14 July, the day he was arrested and placed in detention without charges.

An Israeli court renewed Ghanam's administrative detention on 6 September, when he was on his 55th day of hunger strike.

Ghanam is now in critical condition, having been diagnosed with cancer before being detained.

The Palestinian Society Prisoner's Club (PPS) said in a statement on Monday that Ghanam, a father of two, is set for a court hearing on Wednesday.

"Ghanam entered a critical health stage and he was hospitalised last week at Kaplan Medical Centre, while the Israeli occupation authorities are denying Ghanam's relatives a visit. He was put in solitary confinement on the first day of his hunger strike," PPS said.

Tarek Gaadan, a 46-year-old from the village of Deir Abu Mishaal in the northern West Bank, has also been on hunger strike for 84 days, according to PPS.

Gaadan has been arrested 17 times by Israeli forces since 1989 and has spent almost 11 years in prison, most of which were under administrative detention. He was accused of being a member of Islamic Jihad in the West Bank.

Gaadan went on hunger strike for 96 days in 2013 in protest against being administratively detained and was subsequently released.

He was arrested again in February and was put on administrative detention for six months. In August, he launched his hunger strike after Israeli authorities extended his detention for another period.

Ismail Ali, 30, from Abu Dis, east of East Jerusalem, has been on hunger strike for 91 days. Arrested in January, he launched his hunger strike in June after the first six months of his administrative detention was renewed.

He is also a former prisoner who had spent almost seven years in Israeli prisons.

Between Ghanam, Ali and Gaadan, the three men have spent 27 years under administrative detention.

The two other Palestinian prisoners who have joined the strike are: Ahmed Zahran, 42, also from Deir Abu Mishaal, and who is on his 30th day of a hunger strike; and Musaab al-Hindi, 29, from Tall in the northern West Bank, who has been on hunger strike for 18 days.

According to Addameer, 5,150 Palestinians have been detained by Israel as of July - 460 of whom are under administrative

detention.

Palestine: Ghannam completes 100 days of hunger strike (MEMO Middle East Monitor)

October 22, 2019

Palestinian prisoner Ahmed Ghannam completed his 100th day without food Monday, along with five other prisoners, in a protest against the Israeli occupation authorities.

The Prisoner Club, a non-governmental organisation focused on prisoners issues, said that Ghannam, 42, from the town of Dura west of Hebron will face a hearing Wednesday in the Israeli Supreme Court.

The club said Ghannam has been transferred to the Israeli hospital, Kaplan. Israeli occupation authorities continue to deny his family from visiting him and impose torture measures against him. These measures started from the moment he announced the strike when he was isolated and harassed through jailers and held in forceful and challenging conditions in the cells of Ramleh-Nitzan detention centre before being recently transferred to hospital.

This prisoner, who is a father of two children, was arrested on 18 June 2019, and was then transferred to administrative detention by the Israeli authorities under the so-called "secret file". He is currently in a severe health situation, especially as he has previously had cancer, and he needs to be continuously followed up, in addition to being immuno-deficient.

Along with prisoner Ghannam, there are five prisoners on strike, namely Ismail Ali, who has been in prison for 90 days, Tariq Qa'dan, in jail for 83 days, Ahmad Zahran, detained for 30 days, Musab Al-Hindi, jailed for 28 days, and Hiba Al-Labadi, a Jordanian national, who has been on hunger strike for 28 days. The Prisoner Club pointed out that a hearing session is scheduled for prisoner Qa'dan on the 23rd of this month to consider the issue of confirming his administrative detention. Another hearing is planned for prisoner Ismail Ali on the 24th of this month in the occupation's Supreme Court.

According to a statement issued by the Prisoners' Affairs Authority, the government body that follows the prisoners' file, prisoner Hiba Al-Labadi, who turned out to be administratively detained a few days ago, continues to fight, even though she is in very poor health conditions, suffering from tingling and severe heartache, fatigue, dizziness, fainting, and stomach pains.

In a statement, the authority confirmed that Israel continues to detain prisoner Al-Labadi in Al-Jalama detention centre in awful circumstances as she currently sits in a small, dark, non-ventilated cell which is filled with moisture and insects and which has four surveillance cameras. Besides, the prison administration refuses to fulfil any of prisoner Al-Labadi's personal needs.

Israel to hold hearing for jailed Palestinian on hunger strike (The New Arab)

October 17, 2019

An Israeli military court will hold a hearing for a Palestinian-Jordanian citizen held arbitrarily on Thursday, the Palestinian Prisoners Society has announced.

Hiba al-Labadi, was arrested at the Allenby Bridge - King Hussein - crossing in August while travelling with her mother and aunt from Jordan to the West Bank for a cousin's wedding.

Al-Labadi launched a hunger strike on 26 September in protest of the conditions of her detention, her lawyer said on Wednesday, and has reportedly lost 10 kilograms in weight while suffering other health problems.

Jordan's foreign ministry said on Wednesday that the hunger strike "makes the need for her immediate release more urgent".

The PPS said on Thursday a hearing for her case will begin as her health deteriorates under Israeli captivity.

Family members say she has no political causes and is not an activist.

Israeli intelligence claims al-Labadi was detained "because of suspicion of her involvement in serious security violations", without providing further details.

Last week, the Palestinian Commission of Detainees' Affairs released disturbing details of the alleged torture suffered by Hiba al-Labadi at the hands of Israeli authorities.

The department published a statement by al-Labadi from 29 September in which she reported being verbally, physically, and psychologically abused by the interrogators and guards in the various prisons in which she has been held in administrative detention since 20 August.

Israel's widely condemned policy of administrative detention allows Palestinians to be detained without charge or trial for renewable intervals usually ranging between three to six months.

More than 400 Palestinians are being [sic.] currently being held under the policy.

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Gulf Region

Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Europe's 'double standard' in arms sales (Al Jazeera)

October 16, 2019

European powers have moved quickly to censure Turkey over its long-threatened military offensive in northeast Syria.

Soon after Turkish troops launched the cross-border operation on October 9 - aiming to "eliminate" Kurdish fighters it considers "terrorists" from the region - European members of the United Nations Security Council called for an immediate cessation of hostilities. In a joint statement, they said Ankara's actions could destabilise the Middle East and displace even more people.

The condemnation was followed swiftly by bans on arms sales to Turkey.

Europe's top weapons exporters - France, Germany, United Kingdom, Spain and Italy - all said they would halt the export of arms that Turkey could use in its military operation in Syria.

The swift response on Turkey stands in stark contrast to the resistance most of them showed this time last year, when human rights groups had called for similar penalties against Saudi Arabia over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi.

The journalist's murder on October 2, 2018 - carried out by Saudi agents inside the kingdom's consulate in Istanbul - shocked the world and prompted renewed scrutiny over Riyadh's actions in Yemen, where a Saudi-led coalition has waged a years-long campaign against Houthi rebels.

That conflict has killed tens of thousands of people and pushed the Arab world's most impoverished country to the brink of famine.

As the outcry over Khashoggi intensified, Germany responded with a six-month long arms ban on Saudi Arabia, but the other four countries continued to ignore calls for action.

France and Britain, in fact, criticised Berlin after it extended the arms ban earlier this year, with London expressing "grave concerns" about the effect the freeze was having on the supply chains of the European defence industry.

The UK was ultimately forced to suspend weapon sales to Riyadh in June when an appeals court said it had broken the law by allowing arms exports that might have been used in Yemen's war. The British government, however, plans to appeal the ruling.

France, Spain and Italy refused to follow suit. That's despite a recent United Nations report saying countries that sell arms to Riyadh may be complicit in war crimes in Yemen.

"When you compare Turkey to Saudi Arabia, we see an element of hypocrisy in the position of European and other Western countries," said Marwan Kabalan, Director of Policy Analysis at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar.

"This is because countries are less concerned about principles or consistency when it comes to foreign policy. They are mainly seeking their own interests."

The "double-standard" in policy towards Ankara and Riyadh, according to Kabalan, mainly comes down to the volume of

weapons each country imports.

Saudi Arabia is the world's top arms importer and spent \$16.9bn buying weapons in the period between 2014 and 2018, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), a defence think-tank. At least \$4.9bn of that amount was spent on European arms.

In contrast, Turkey spent \$3.4bn on weapons imports in the same period, SIPRI said, half of which went to European countries.

Sinan Ulgen, chairman of the Istanbul-based Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, said Europe's top arms exporters stood to "forego a much larger pie if they were to stop arming Saudi Arabia than if they were to stop military exports to Turkey.

"So it is more difficult for them economically to take that step," he said, noting the European move against Turkey was "not a blanket ban on all military materials" as it only applied to items that could be used in Ankara's ongoing cross-border operation.

The measure is further weakened, said Andrew Smith, spokesman for the UK-based Campaign Against Arms Trade, as it did not apply to Europe's existing defence contracts with Turkey.

"This is largely symbolic and is unlikely to make any difference militarily," he said.

Turkey's domestic defence industry

Indeed, the move appears to have done little to deter Ankara.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promised to continue with the offensive in Syria until the Kurdish fighters laid down their arms.

"Those who think they can make Turkey turn back with these threats are gravely mistaken," he said on Monday, referring to the weapons bans.

In an editorial on the same day, the pro-government Daily Sabah newspaper said the European moves "have no impact or is very limited on the defence capabilities and inventories of the Turkish military".

Turkey produces 70 percent of the arms it needs, the newspaper said, and the development of "homegrown air, land and marine platforms has secured Turkey's success in anti-terror operations both at home and abroad ... without relying on imported defence products".

The desire for self-sufficiency in defence, according to Daily Sabah, was driven by a US arms embargo against Ankara in 1974 when Turkish troops seized the northern third of Cyprus in response to a Athens-inspired Greek Cypriot coup seeking union with Greece.

Under Erdogan, Turkey's defence exports have boomed, according to figures published by SIPRI.

Ankara's arms sales have increased by 170 percent in the last four years, with its top buyers being the United Arab Emirates, Turkmenistan and Saudi Arabia.

Despite the allegations of double standards in Europe's policies on arms exports, the Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies' Ulgen said there were important differences in Europe's considerations when it came to Syria and Yemen.

Europe's main concern over Syria, he said, was that the renewed fighting could revive the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, or ISIS) and result in those displaced trying to seek refuge in Europe, as they did in 2015.

"Yemen is too far away for Europe as well as the US, in terms of their security landscapes. Syria is much closer," he said.

"The fight against the Islamic State, the refugee issue - all of these things has a much bigger bearing for those countries, also in terms of their domestic politics."

American weapons ended up in the wrong hands in Yemen. Now they're being turned on the US-backed government (CNN) By Nima Elbagir, Mohamed Abo El Gheit, Florence Davey-Attlee, and Salma Abdelaziz
October 20, 2019

American-made weaponry has fallen into the hands of rival militia groups in Yemen,

some of whom have turned their arms against each other in a bitter and worsening conflict, a new CNN investigation has found.

Fresh evidence shows that military hardware that was supplied to US allies has been distributed in contravention of arms deals to militia groups, including UAE-backed separatists. They are now using it to fight the Saudi-supported forces of the internationally recognized government, who are also armed with US weapons.

These new findings follow an exclusive investigation by CNN in February which traced US-made equipment that was sold to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The weapons were being passed to non-state fighters on the ground in Yemen, including al Qaeda-linked fighters, hardline Salafi militias and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, the report found, in violation of arms sales law.

Following CNN's initial reporting, the Pentagon said it had launched its own investigation into the unauthorized transfer of US weapons in Yemen. But more than half a year on and the situation on the ground only seems to have got worse.

Saudi Arabia has led a coalition, in close partnership with the UAE and including various militia groups, to fight Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen since 2015. But, in a clear break with its Saudi partners, the UAE said in July that it was reducing its forces in the country, and fighting escalated between separatists and government forces on the ground in August. The UAE has since thrown its support behind the separatist movement.

That month, separatists said they'd taken control of the strategic port city of Aden after days of fighting with government forces. A couple of weeks later, the Yemeni government accused the UAE of carrying out a series of airstrikes that killed dozens of its troops -- but the UAE said it was targeting terrorist militias.

Saudi-backed forces have since regained control of Aden and talks are under way to end the power struggle over the city, news agencies report.

As infighting has escalated in southern Yemen, ISIS has seized the opportunity to resurface there. It claimed responsibility for a series of attacks in Aden in August, the first in more than a year and a worrying sign that the conflict is creating a vacuum for extremists to flourish.

US lawmakers have reacted with outrage to CNN's new findings. One of them, Senator Elizabeth Warren, a frontrunner to become the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in 2020, said: "One report of US military equipment ending up in the hands of our enemies is troubling. Two reports is deeply disturbing."

Warren said she intends to pursue the findings with the Trump administration, adding: "The Defense and State Departments have not yet provided answers to questions I asked back in February and I intend to follow up."

Working with local journalists, CNN was able to film a number of US-made Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles that have been used by separatist militia groups led by the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

One was a BAE Caiman that was used by separatists in the fight for Shabwah, southern Yemen, against government forces in August.

It, like several other pieces of weaponry that CNN identified, can be traced back to a \$2.5 billion arms sale contract between the US and the UAE in 2014. Like all arms deals, this contract was bound by an end user agreement which certifies the recipient -- in this case the UAE -- as the final user of the weaponry. From this evidence, it is clear that this agreement has been broken.

In February, the UAE told CNN that there was no violation of end use requirements "in any manner."

Inside the vehicle was further evidence of its provenance. Its air conditioning system had a serial number from American company Real Time Laboratories, indicating the part was manufactured at its facility in Mississippi.

When asked whether it knew if its technology was ending up in the wrong hands in Yemen, Real Time Laboratories told CNN they had supplied the product to BAE Systems in 2010 under a US government subcontract, but "cannot comment on what the US Government may have eventually done with this vehicle."

A spokeswoman for BAE Systems, which manufactured the Caiman MRAP vehicle, said the company complies with "all relevant export control laws and regulations in the countries in which we operate," and referred CNN to the Pentagon for further comment.

In response to CNN's new findings, Pentagon spokesperson Lt. Col. Carla Gleason said in September that the joint investigation by the State Department and Department of Defense into unauthorized weapons transfer in Yemen remains

"ongoing."

Analyzing hours of social media video of recent clashes in southern Yemen, CNN found multiple instances of American MRAPs being used by militia groups, many of them fighting against government forces.

One of the most prominent is a group known as Alwiyyat al Amalqa or "Giants Brigade" -- a predominantly Salafi, or ultra-conservative Sunni -- militia supported by the UAE. One of their videos shows a US-made MaxxPro MRAP vehicle, purportedly being driven in convoy to join the separatists' battle against government forces in the south.

The Giants Brigade did not respond to CNN's requests for comment. Earlier in the year, a senior Emirati official told CNN the Giants Brigade was "part of Yemeni forces" and under the "direct supervision" of the UAE. But the brigade has now joined the separatists in their battle against the government.

Responding to the latest evidence, a UAE official said: "There were no instances when US-made equipment was used without direct UAE oversight. Except for four vehicles that were captured by the enemy."

The Saudi Arabian government has not responded to CNN's request for comment on this issue.

Not only is US weaponry being used directly against America's allies in Yemen, but its presence also plays into Iranian propaganda in the region. The latest example of this saw footage being broadcast on a pro-Iranian Lebanese channel that showed US-made armored vehicles being unloaded into a Yemeni port off UAE ships. It turned out this footage was not recent, but the broadcast indicates the presence of US hardware in Yemen continues to be a card played by America's enemies.

With the conflict spiraling and the role of US weapons in its deterioration becoming clearer, all while the humanitarian crisis deepens by the day, the Pentagon has pledged to investigate how its military hardware ended up in the wrong hands.

Speaking at a Senate hearing the day after CNN's initial report was published in February, Gen. Joseph Votel, then head of Central Command (CENTCOM) said the military was "looking more closely at the allegations."

He was categorical that the United States has "not authorized Saudi Arabia or the Emirates to retransfer any of this equipment to other parties on the ground in Yemen."

In recent months there have been multiple efforts by US lawmakers to force President Trump to end US financial and military backing for the war in Yemen.

Senator Chris Murphy authored an amendment to the annual US defense spending bill, which is currently being debated in Washington, that would cut off support for the Saudi-led coalition until the Secretary of Defense could certify that both the Saudis and Emiratis have stopped transferring US weapons to third parties in Yemen. It's just one of recent bipartisan efforts in the US Congress to address US military involvement in Yemen.

Sen. Murphy responded to CNN's latest findings, saying: "For years, US-made weapons have been fueling the conflict in Yemen and it's no surprise they are now ending up in the hands of private militias."

"This exposes sensitive military technology and endangers our soldiers. It's also a violation of US end-use agreements that govern our arm sales. That's why I pushed for and got passed an amendment in the Appropriations Committee that gets at stopping this problem," Murphy added.

It's not only lawmakers trying to end US support for the war in Yemen. This week 100 Christian faith leaders from 50 states wrote an open letter calling for Congress to cut off arms sales and military support to Saudi Arabia and the UAE in order to stop what they call "the world's worst humanitarian crisis."

Calls for change are also coming from outside the US. The United Nations said last month that countries that supply weapons to parties involved in Yemen's conflict may be complicit in war crimes.

A UN-commissioned panel of experts recommended that the US, UK and France "refrain from providing arms to parties to the conflict" because of "the prevailing risk that such arms will be used by parties to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law."

Libya: likely war crimes being committed in battle for Tripoli - first detailed investigation (Amnesty International UK)

October 22, 2019

Warring parties in the ongoing battle for Tripoli have killed and injured scores of civilians in indiscriminate attacks using inaccurate weapons in populated urban

areas, Amnesty International said today, following a detailed investigation into the conflict.

In the first in-depth field investigation in the area since fighting broke out in April between the UN-backed Government of National Accord and the self-proclaimed Libyan National Army, Amnesty spoke to scores of local residents at 33 attack sites in and around Tripoli, unearthing evidence of potential war crimes by both sides.

In its 32-page report, Amnesty shows that those unlawfully killed or injured have included children as young as two playing outside their homes, mourners attending a funeral and ordinary people going about their daily activities. One distraught woman, whose 56-year-old husband - a father of six - was killed when a rocket struck their home, said to Amnesty:

“What kind of war is this, killing civilians, families, in their homes? What can we do? May God help us.”

This incident was part of an indiscriminate attack launched by the Libyan National Army on the Abu Salim neighbourhood late on the evening of 16 April. A salvo of six notoriously inaccurate ground-launched “Grad” rockets rained down over several city blocks, killing eight civilians, injuring at least four more and leaving survivors badly traumatised.

Meanwhile, a Government of National Accord artillery attack on the densely-populated civilian neighbourhood of Qasr bin Ghashir at around 12.15pm on 14 May, hit a three-storey building, killing at least five civilians and injuring more than a dozen. The brother of 19-year-old Ahmad Fathi al-Muzughi, who died in the strike, told Amnesty:

“I was at home and my brother was standing outside on the street. The strike was massive; it sent a vehicle flying on top of another vehicle and for a moment everything was black. I rushed outside and there were many neighbours dead and injured on the ground; there were severed body parts. It was a shocking sight. Then we found my brother; he had injuries everywhere; he died. I couldn’t believe it.”

Government of National Accord airstrikes in Qasr Bin Ghashir and Tarhouna have also hit civilian homes and infrastructure, using FAB-500ShL unguided “parachute” bombs. With a blast radius of over 800m, this weapon is completely inappropriate for use in urban areas.

Some of the attacks documented by Amnesty were either indiscriminate or disproportionate - violating fundamental principles of international humanitarian law - and could amount to war crimes. In other cases, the presence of fighters at or near civilian homes and medical facilities endangered civilians there.

Neither the Government of National Accord nor the Libyan National Army have responded to questions sent to them by Amnesty about their lethal attacks.

Brian Castner, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Advisor on Arms and Military Operations, said:

“Scores of civilians have been killed and injured as both sides use everything from Gaddafi-era unguided rockets to modern drone-launched guided missiles in attacks that could amount to war crimes.

“The international community must uphold the UN arms embargo, which Turkey, the UAE, Jordan and other countries have flagrantly violated.”

Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Response Adviser, said:

“Our on-the-ground investigation on both sides of the frontline revealed a systematic disregard for international law fuelled by the continued supply of weapons to both sides in violation of a UN arms embargo.

“All sides must take immediate and concrete steps to protect civilians in line with the laws of war and investigate the conduct of their forces. A Commission of Inquiry should be put in place to pave the way for justice and reparation for the victims and their families.”

Mitiga Airport - for months Tripoli’s only functioning airport - is now closed after being repeatedly targeted by Libyan National Army attacks. Nearby civilian homes and a school have also been struck, in what appear to be indiscriminate attacks. Amnesty experts examined craters and munitions fragments at several of these strike sites, pointing to the use of large unguided explosive weapons.

Libyan National Army attacks have also damaged or destroyed several ambulances and field hospitals used to treat wounded fighters. Medical workers and facilities - including those treating sick or wounded fighters - have special protection under international humanitarian law and should not be targeted.

Amnesty has also found that Government of National Accord fighters have used field hospitals and medical facilities for

military purposes, thereby rendering them vulnerable to attacks. The deadliest such attack was a missile strike on a field hospital near the closed Tripoli International Airport on 27 July that killed five medics and rescuers, and injured eight more. Based on Blue Arrow 7 munition fragments found at the site and other evidence, Amnesty has determined that the strike was launched by a Chinese Wing Loong armed drone - which the United Arab Emirates has been operating on behalf of the Libyan National Army. Amnesty has also established that the facility was not marked as a medical facility and had been used by fighters for eating and other purposes.

Despite a comprehensive UN arms embargo in place on Libya since 2011, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey have been supporting the Libyan National Army and Government of National Accord, respectively, through illicit arms transfers and direct military support.

According to UN statistics, the fighting over the last six months has killed and wounded more than 100 civilians - including dozens of detained migrants and refugees - and has displaced more than 100,000 people.

Amnesty investigators were on the ground in Libya during 1-14 August, visiting both sides of the conflict in and around Tripoli, Tajoura, Ain Zara, Qasr Bin Ghashir and Tarhouna. They interviewed 156 residents, including survivors, witnesses and relatives of victims, as well as local officials, medical workers and members of militias. Amnesty experts in remote sensing, weapons and ordnance, photographic and video verification, and members of its Digital Verification Corps, also carried out an open-source investigation into many of the strikes.

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ASIA

Afghanistan

Linda Reynolds backs inquiry into possible war crimes in Afghanistan (The Australian) By Paul Maley
October 23, 2019

Defence Minister Linda Reynolds has backed the long-running inquiry into possible war crimes in Afghanistan, saying it was "critical" that investigators be allowed to do their work.

Amid growing frustration among soldiers, veterans groups and witnesses that the inquiry is taking too long, Senator Reynolds said the investigation was an administrative inquiry, not a criminal probe.

She said the investigation, which is being conducted under the auspices of the Inspector-General of the Australian Defence Force by NSW Supreme Court judge Paul Brereton, was being held at arm's length from the military chain of command and the government.

"There has been a great deal of conjecture in the media about the duration of the inquiry," Senator Reynolds told The Australian.

"For all concerned, clarity regarding these serious issues is critical. For that reason, the inquiry must be fully resourced, conducted in full and allowed to run its necessary course."

In May 2016, the IGADF commenced an investigation into a consistent stream of rumours and reports that members of the Special Operations Task Group had breached the laws of war in Afghanistan.

The inquiry has been conducted in conditions of intense secrecy and has so far called more than 200 witnesses.

But 3½ years later, it has yet to hand down its findings, triggering concerns that it is having a corrosive effect on those caught

in its dragnet or that it is being used by some soldiers as a forum for score-settling.

Australia's most decorated soldier, Victoria Cross recipient Ben Roberts-Smith, is among those caught in the inquiry's slipstream. He has been publicly accused of committing war crimes while serving with the SAR in Afghanistan — allegations he has denied, claiming his anonymous accusers were motivated by professional jealousy and personal vendettas.

Senator Reynolds said the wellbeing of those caught in the inquiry was of the utmost importance. "As important as ensuring that justice is done, it is critical the wellbeing of the individuals involved and their families is safeguarded, and procedures are in place to protect the reputations of individuals that may be unfairly harmed by publication," she said.

Running parallel to the IGADF inquiry is an Australian Federal Police criminal investigation into an alleged war crime committed in the Afghan village of Darwan in 2012. The investigation is understood to relate to an allegation Mr Roberts-Smith kicked a handcuffed Afghan prisoner off a cliff then oversaw his execution by another soldier, a claim Mr Roberts-Smith denies.

While the two inquiries are investigating the same alleged incidents and approaching the same witnesses, the IGADF is forbidden from sharing its evidence with the AFP as it has been collected under different rules of evidence.

Whereas the IGADF can compel the testimony of soldiers, the AFP cannot.

Atrocity Alert No. 177: South Sudan, Afghanistan and Syria (Relief Web)

October 23, 2019

On 12 September 2018 a Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed by the country's major political leaders – including President Salva Kiir and former Vice President and rebel leader Riek Machar – formally ending a civil war that started in December 2013. Following numerous delays and extended deadlines, on 12 November the parties are supposed to establish a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU).

With less than a month until the deadline, many outstanding issues remain. Crucially, the current army (SPLA) and former rebel forces have not been unified into a new national army, and there has been no resolution of the issue of the number of states within South Sudan and their boundaries.

Both issues have grave implications. In the past, sections of the SPLA were largely organized and mobilized along ethnic lines, resulting in deadly clashes between those loyal to Machar and those loyal to Kiir. These clashes eventually escalated into a full scale civil war during which an estimated 400,000 people were killed and 4 million displaced. Both sides, and their allied militias, engaged in widespread war crimes and targeted civilians on the basis of their ethnicity and presumed political loyalties.

Additionally, President Salva Kiir's unilateral decrees during 2015 and 2017, increasing the number of states from 10 to 32, were seen as consolidating his political dominance over the South Sudanese state. Disputes over state boundaries were also linked to wider arguments between the government and opposition regarding perceptions of ethnic favoritism and the abuse of power.

Earlier this week, on 20 October, the UN Security Council (UNSC) visited Juba. While meeting with the UNSC delegation Machar expressed serious concern about the failure to unify the armed forces, and said that his party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In Opposition (SPLM-IO), will not join the new transitional government on 12 November. Machar warned that if the TGoNU is established prematurely, then "the ceasefire that we have been enjoying will be in jeopardy." Machar, who fled the country in August 2016 and is supposed to become Vice President again on 12 November, has also said that he is not willing to permanently return to South Sudan until security measures are in place.

After numerous previous failed peace agreements, the 2018 R-ARCSS presented a genuine opportunity for South Sudan to overcome past divisions, end its crippling humanitarian crisis and ensure that its people no longer have to live in fear of atrocities at the hands of competing military forces and ethnic militias. The future of the entire peace process now depends upon the same leaders that led South Sudan into five years of civil war and their ability to resolve outstanding issues in just three weeks. The UNSC and African Union must ensure that the current obstacles are overcome and make it clear that all those who jeopardize the fragile peace in South Sudan will be held accountable for their actions.

Deadly mosque attack highlights civilian death toll in Afghanistan

Last Friday, 18 October, at least 69 civilians were killed and 40 injured in a deadly bombing inside a mosque in Haska Mena district in the eastern Nangarhar province, Afghanistan. No group has claimed responsibility, but the Afghan government has

accused the Taliban of perpetrating the attack. A spokesperson for the Taliban denied responsibility, claiming that it was a mortar attack by government forces.

Throughout the conflict in Afghanistan places of worship, worshippers and religious leaders have been the target of attacks, resulting in 453 civilian casualties in 2018 alone. Such attacks violate International Humanitarian Law.

Responding to Friday's attack, Tadamichi Yamamoto, Head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), said that the the mosque bombing had no possible justification. "Those who are responsible for enabling this attack must be brought to justice and held to account. These brutal and senseless attacks against people at prayer are atrocities. Such attacks at congregations and places of worship may amount to war crimes."

In its quarterly report released on 17 October, UNAMA noted that more civilians have been killed and injured in Afghanistan in the last three months than in any other three-month period in the past decade. Between July and September 1,174 civilians were killed and 3,139 injured, bringing the total number of civilian casualties in 2019 to more than 8,000.

The Afghan government, with support from the international community, must increase its efforts to protect civilians. Those responsible for war crimes, including targeted attacks on civilians and places of religious worship, must be held accountable for their actions. The government should also continue to explore the possibility of all parties to the conflict resuming substantive dialogue aimed at ending the 18-year war.

Turkish troops allegedly use white phosphorus against Kurdish civilians

Since Turkey launched "Operation Peace Spring" in northeast Syria on 9 October, there have been widespread civilian casualties as well as attacks on health facilities by Turkish forces and affiliated non-state armed groups. Last Thursday, 17 October, Kurdish forces alleged that Turkey has illegally used prohibited weapons, including napalm and white phosphorus munitions, in and around the town of Ras al-Ayn. The Kurdish Red Crescent said that patients, including several civilians, were being treated at a hospital in Hasakeh for "horrific burns" caused by a Turkish airstrike. Turkey has denied the accusation.

White phosphorus is an incendiary weapon that causes horrific injuries as it burns structures and people. The use of white phosphorus and other incendiary munitions in civilian-populated areas is prohibited under International Humanitarian Law and could constitute a war crime. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons said that it is also "aware of the situation" and is collecting information "with regard to possible use of chemical weapons."

The alleged white phosphorus attacks took place just hours before the announcement of a five-day ceasefire. Turkey committed to pause its military operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) until 22 October, in return for the YPG withdrawing from a large strip of territory along Syria's northern border. At the time of publication, Russia and Turkey had negotiated a further 150-hour extension of the ceasefire.

Turkish airstrikes, artillery and ground attacks have also caused thousands of Kurdish civilians to flee northeast Syria, creating a major displacement crisis. Despite the ceasefire, there were reports that Turkey continued to attack Kurdish fighters and civilians in Ras al-Ayn.

In a joint statement on 18 October, the chairs of the Foreign Affairs Committees of the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the European Union and the US House of Representatives, all condemned Turkey's invasion of northeast Syria as "a military aggression and a violation of international law." The lawmakers also said that the Turkish invasion was "causing suffering for the local people who are forced to flee," resulting in "further instability in Syria and the neighboring region."

Turkey, if proven to have illegally used white phosphorus and other prohibited weapons against civilian populations, must be held accountable for its actions. All UN member states should impose targeted sanctions on those responsible for war crimes and the potential ethnic cleansing of the Kurdish population from northeast Syria. All members of the international community - but particularly EU member states - should also join Germany, France, Finland and the Netherlands in immediately halting all arms sales to Turkey.

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Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)

Meas Muths Hearing Scheduled for Next Month (The Khmer Times) By Ben Sockhean
October 25, 2019

The pre-trial chamber of the UN-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal is due to hear arguments of parties in Case 003 against former Khmer Rouge navy commander Meas Muth next month.

The hearings will take place for three days from November 27 to 29 after the appeals lodged by the national co-prosecutor and the co-lawyers for Mr Muth on April 5 and 8, respectively, against the closing order delivered by the international co-investigating judge on November 28 last year. In November last year, judges at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia issued a split decision on whether or not to prosecute Mr Muth.

The national co-investigating judge ruled that Mr Muth was not a senior Khmer Rouge leader nor was he one of the persons most responsible for crimes committed by the Khmer Rouge regime. However, the international co-investigating judge ruled that Mr Muth was in fact subject to the ECCC's jurisdiction because he was a senior Khmer Rouge leader and it prompted the case to be transferred to the Pre-trial Chamber. According a statement released by the ECCC yesterday, it will hear the arguments of the parties before it issues its decision. "The national co-prosecutor, the international co-prosecutor, and the national and international co-lawyers for the charged person will be given the floor to present their arguments," the statement said. "The charged person, if present, shall be given the opportunity to make a personal statement at the end of the hearing." Tribunal spokesman Neth Pheaktra yesterday said that the judgement on the appeal will be issued early next year.

"The pre-trial chamber projects its judgement(s) on appeals against the closing orders by the first quarter of 2020," Mr Pheaktra said. He said that Mr Muth informed his co-lawyers on Monday to "exercise right to remain silent" and waiver of right to attend hearings on the appeals against the closing orders. Mr Muth told Khmer Times last year that he was a low-level official during the Khmer Rouge regime and claimed his health deteriorated and should not be responsible for the crimes. "Now I almost die. I have my coffin prepared already and I have difficulty breathing," Mr Muth said then. Mr Muth was initially named a suspect in Case 003 regarding crimes against humanity committed by the regime.

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Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal

Five men given death penalty in Bangladesh over 1971 war crimes (Xinhuanet)
October 15, 2019

A special tribunal in Bangladesh capital Dhaka Tuesday sentenced five men to death for crimes against humanity during the country's war of independence in 1971.

The International Crimes Tribunal, led by its Chairman Justice Md Shahinur Islam, found the suspects Abdul Jabbar Mondol and his two sons, Jachhijar Rahman and Abdul Wahed Mondol, and Ranju Miah and Montaz Ali Bepari guilty of the charges brought against them.

The charges include killing, abduction, confinement, torture, arson and looting.

One of the convicts Miah was taken to the tribunal for verdict delivery at 10:30 a.m. local time Tuesday as the rest are on the run.

Bangladeshi police chief was asked for immediate steps to arrest the fugitives.

In line with law, the death row convicts have the opportunity to appeal the decision at the Supreme Court within a month of the verdict.

After returning to power in January 2009, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, daughter of Bangladesh's independence hero Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, established the first tribunal in March 2010, almost 40 years after the 1971 war.

Muslim-majority Bangladesh was called East Pakistan until 1971. The government of Hasina said about three million people were killed in the independence war.

Bangladesh War Crimes: Relentless Pursuit (India Legal) By Prakash Bhandari
October 17, 2019

As Bangladesh prepares to celebrate the golden jubilee of its formation in 2021, there are constant reminders that it is not willing to forgive or forget the past: it continues to punish all those who sided with the Pakistan army in the genocide committed in 1971.

Three international crimes tribunals set up in 2009 to investigate and prosecute all suspects for their roles as Razakars, Al Badr and Al-Shams during the Bangladesh war sentenced to death five persons for committing crimes against humanity during the liberation war. During the liberation struggle, they had worked as members of the Razakars Bahini, an army supported by the Pakistani armed forces and were responsible for committing abduction, confinement, torture and killing of at least 22 persons, including seven freedom fighters. The international crimes the tribunal headed by Justice Mohamed Shahinur Islam and two other members Justice Amir Hossain and Justice Abu Ahmed found that in 1971 all the five convicts who were sentenced to death were involved in supporting the Pakistani rulers and were active members of the jamait-E Islami.

When the court was announcing the judgement, one of the convicts Mohammed Ranju Miah, 60 was present. These convicts were sentenced to death in what is called as the Gaibandha sub division crime in the erstwhile East Pakistan. These convicts were indicted in May 2018 and were tried on four counts of crimes against humanity.

Apart from Mohammed Ranju Miah, four other convicts Md Abdul Jabbar Mondol, 86, Md Jachjar Rahman alias Khoka, 64, Md Abdul Wahid Mondol, 62 and Md Montaz Ali Bapari alias Momtaz, 68 are still in hiding and were tried in absentia.

All the five war criminals were sentenced to death for abducting a Hindu man and two Hindu women from village Bishnupur under Sadar Thana Gaibandha in June 1971, torturing the man in confinement and murdering him and converting women to Islam. They also compelled 330 to 400 Hindus to leave the country and forced to go to India, They were also sentenced to death for detaining seven freedom fighters and torturing and killing them.

The international crime tribunal has ordered that all those who were sentenced should be apprehended and sent to jail and they should be executed. The tribunal ordered that all the sentences would be merged and asked the police to initiate an effective, prompt and appropriate measures for ensuring that the absconding four convicts are caught. So far, six persons who were involved in the war crimes were hanged on the order of the tribunal so far.

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War Crimes Investigation in Myanmar

Amnesty denounces war crimes in Myanmar (The Canberra Times)
October 23, 2019

Amnesty International has accused the Myanmar army of committing new war crimes against civilians in northern Shan state, where it is engaged in a conflict with various ethnic armed groups.

The organization denounced arbitrary arrests, detentions and torture of civilians by the military "based solely on ethnicity"

and said that the soldiers also "fired indiscriminately in civilian areas," forcing thousands to flee their homes.

"The Myanmar military is as relentless and ruthless as ever, committing war crimes against civilians in northern Shan State with absolute impunity," Amnesty's Director for east and southeast Asia, Nicholas Bequelin, said in statement.

According to Amnesty, the military's 99th Light Infantry Division is behind much of the violence - the same division involved in the 2017 offensive and atrocities against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

The civilian population also suffer abuses by ethnic armed groups, who abduct, detain and sometimes torture them, subject them to forced labour and extort food and money from them, Amnesty said.

Fighting in the north of Shan state intensified in mid-August as peace negotiations between the government and some 20 rebel groups have been deadlocked for more than a year.

Ethnic minorities in Myanmar, which include the Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Chin, Kayah and Kachin, represent more than 30 per cent of the 53 million population.

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AMERICAS

North & Central America

U.S. sanctions on Iran Central Bank "war crime": FM (Xinhuanet)

October 9, 2019

"The recent sanctions by the United States on the Central Bank of Iran is a 'war crime'," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Wednesday.

"The U.S. administration's decision to impose new sanctions on the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) is tantamount to a war crime, because it obstructs the purchase of medicines and foodstuff," Zarif was quoted as saying by Tasnim news agency.

"The U.S. recent measures against Iran do not entail the conditions for the imposition of sanctions, but involves conditions for economic terrorism," Zarif said at a conference on global economy and sanctions in Iran's capital Tehran.

"The White House has built its economic war strategy on the basis of violating international laws," he added. As a move to heighten pressures on Iran following the United States' exit from the Iranian nuclear deal last year, U.S. President Donald Trump's administration recently imposed fresh sanctions on the CBI to further curtail Iran's financial transactions with the international community.

Evidence found of war crimes during Turkish offensive in Syria, says U.S. official (Reuters)

By Patricia Zengerle

October 23, 2019

President Donald Trump's special envoy for Syria said on Wednesday that U.S. forces had seen evidence of war crimes during Turkey's offensive against the Kurds in Syria, and had demanded an explanation from Ankara.

"We haven't seen widespread evidence of ethnic cleansing," said James Jeffrey, special representative for Syria, at a House of Representatives hearing.

"Many people fled because they're very concerned about these Turkish-supported Syrian opposition forces, as we are. We've

seen several incidents which we consider war crimes,” Jeffrey said.

He said U.S. officials were looking into those reports and at “a high-level” had demanded an explanation from Turkey’s government. He also said U.S. officials were investigating a report that the restricted burning white phosphorus had been used during the Turkish offensive.

Jeffrey and Matthew Palmer, a deputy assistant secretary of state who handles issues including relations with Turkey, spent a second straight day testifying in the U.S. Congress.

Many lawmakers, including Trump’s fellow Republicans as well as Democrats, disagree with Trump’s decision to withdraw troops from Syria, which cleared the way for Turkish troops to cross the border to fight against Kurdish forces who for years helped U.S. troops fight against Islamic State militants.

“How could the United States do something so senseless, so disgraceful, so contrary to our values?” Democratic Representative Eliot Engel, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said as he opened the hearing. Jeffrey called Turkey’s crossing the border and offensive against the Kurds “a tragic disaster for northeast Syria.”

As the hearing took place, Trump announced that he was lifting recent sanctions imposed in response to violence in Syria, after Turkey said it is stopping combat and making a ceasefire in northern Syria permanent.

Jeffrey also confirmed Secretary of Defense Mark Esper’s statement that more than 100 Islamic State fighters had escaped. “We do not know where they are,” Jeffrey told the hearing.

Jeffrey had said in Senate testimony on Tuesday that “dozens” of the militants had escaped prison since the Turkish offensive in northeastern Syria began about two weeks ago.

Turkish officials have denied that war crimes were committed.

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South America

Former Argentina Spy and Major Sex Trafficker Arrested in Mexico (InSight Crime) By Josefina Salomón
October 23, 2019

An Argentine former intelligence agent was detained in Mexico, accused of leading a powerful transnational sex trafficking ring. The arrest revealed the high-level of sophistication and elite collusion one of the most profitable illegal economies in the world requires.

Raúl Martins, a former agent with the now-defunct State Intelligence Secretary (Secretaría de Inteligencia del Estado – SIDE), was arrested in Cancún, Mexico on October 3, Clarín reported. He was trying to board a flight to neighboring Belize. Martins, who holds dual Argentine-Mexican nationality, is accused in Argentina of leading a crime organization, sexually exploiting women in a number of nightclubs he owned in Buenos Aires in the 1990s and laundering money.

Martins is a renowned and well-connected criminal figure in Argentina, where he lived and operated his businesses for decades.

He built his empire by extorting influential politicians and businesspeople with compromising videos recorded in his nightclubs.

After an investigation was opened against him, he moved to Mexico in 2003. There, he owns a number of bars where he is accused of having exploited women for sex work.

Martin’s organization tricked women by offering them jobs as models or receptionists in Mexico and paying for their tickets to relocate there. Once in Mexico, the women were forced into sex work to pay for their debts.

It is estimated that his organization made as much as \$1 million a year in the bars and nightclubs it managed in Buenos Aires and up to \$2 million for those in Mexico, according to a report published by Clarín.

InSight Crime Analysis

Arresting Raúl Martins is a big win for authorities in Argentina and shows that authorities have taken some positive steps in the fight against sex trafficking despite facing increasingly sophisticated organizations.

Human trafficking is believed to be the fourth most lucrative activity for criminal groups, after counterfeiting, drug trafficking and illegal logging, according to a study by the organization Global Financial Integrity.

But the secretive nature of the crime makes quantifying the number of victims particularly difficult. However, a recent report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that, globally, countries are detecting more victims and convicting more traffickers.

This could either be the result of an increased capacity to identify victims or of an increased number of victims.

In Argentina, the conviction rate for these crimes rose from 52 percent in 2014 to 74 percent in 2017, although total prosecutions dropped from 138 cases to just 51, according to the UNODC report.

Coupled with a number of robust legal protections for victims, better data collection and improved tools for prosecutors, this helped Argentina better its rating in the 2018 Trafficking in Persons Report by the US State Department.

The arrest of Raúl Martins is seen as a result of this progress. However, the fact that his organization continues to operate in Argentina, possibly aided by a complex network of high-level connections, goes to show the enormity of the challenge which remains ahead.

Alejandra Mangano, the lead prosecutor at Argentina's Attorney's Office for People Trafficking and Exploitation (Procuraduría de Trata y Explotación de Personas – PROTEX), told InSight Crime that since the anti-trafficking law was passed in 2008, criminal organizations adapted into more complex operations.

“Investigations adapted and organizations adapted. We have been able to identify the economic beneficiaries of the organizations, the links with the security forces, the doctors who treated the women. We have a clearer picture of how the system works,” Alejandra Mangano explained.

But as in the case of drug trafficking, increased and better prosecutions have also moved crime organizations further underground.

Virgina Toller, a journalist and expert on human trafficking, told InSight Crime that while the improvements are welcomed, trafficking is becoming harder to identify.

“With brothels closing down, women were moved underground, to small private apartments, where they are still being sexually exploited by these organizations. In some cases, they are also forced to sell drugs to their ‘clients’”, Toller explained.

Investigators are finding other similarities between sex trafficking and drug trafficking organizations, including the use of similar routes.

“We have identified sex trafficking routes from the provinces in the north of Argentina, to the centre of the country, to Buenos Aires and to the south. In Patagonia, there is a very high demand of women for sex work. These are some of the same routes that are being used for drug trafficking,” Alejandra Mangano explained.

Brazil Govt Dismisses Prison Torture Despite Mounting Evidence (InSight Crime) By Chris Dalby
October 14, 2019

A damning report stating that federal agents systematically tortured prisoners in Brazil's northern state of Pará have found little attention from President Jair Bolsonaro, who dismissed questions about the scandal as nonsense.

In early October, federal prosecutors in Pará issued a report, stating that members of a security task force, intended to stop violence within prisons, had been torturing prisoners in vicious ways, including “beatings with brooms, daily attacks with rubber bullets and pepper spray, impalement of the anus, and the piercing of feet with nails, among other atrocities,” reported El País.

When asked to comment on the report on October 8, Bolsonaro told journalists to stop “asking bullshit.”

Justice Minister Sergio Moro, who created the task force in July, has said that any agents found to have been involved in such practices would be punished but the Justice Ministry has publicly rejected claims of systematic torture.

“What was done by the task force is an example...The fact is that for a long time, in Brazil, it was common for there to be a situation of almost chaos in prisons,” he told a press conference on October 7 while visiting the state.

“Prison is discipline, prison is serving a sentence,” he continued.

Moro activated the task force in Pará after an outbreak of violence in the prison of Altamira killed 62 people in late July.

The task force, which contained an unspecified number of agents, was supposed to “coordinate actions” by guards and other security staff at Pará’s prisons.

But the report by federal prosecutors, based on testimony from lawyers, local officials and human rights organizations who visited the prisons, is damning. Officials of Pará’s penitentiary system told prosecutors that conditions resembled “a concentration camp.”

They described federal agents arriving with “heavy weaponry,” telling local employees “they were on holiday” and that they had permission to do “whatever they wanted,” according to Exame.

A court in Pará suspended the agent leading the task force, Maycon Cesar Rottava, on October 2 from his duties. But days later, Rottava was seen at Moro’s side during the minister’s visit to the state.

Brazil’s federal penitentiary institution, DEPEN, has also defended the agents, issuing a statement saying that key prisoner testimonies within the report had been false.

InSight Crime Analysis

While the government of President Jair Bolsonaro has established a culture of virtual impunity for state security forces, the flat-out dismissal of well-sourced official reports about horrendous abuses committed by those same forces sets a worrying precedent.

This scandal ties together two crises within Brazil. Firstly, a long history of overcrowding and state abandonment has turned the country’s prisons into powder kegs, which regularly explode with shocking violence. Secondly, buoyed by improving homicide numbers, the government is doubling down on its “tough on crime” tactics, which could lead to the normalization of human rights abuses such as those seen in Pará.

There is little reason to doubt the findings of the prosecutors’ report, which came complete with photographic evidence. Torture inside Brazilian prisons is nothing new.

In 2017, videos emerged showing prisoners in the central state of Goiás being repeatedly shocked with stun guns by guards.

The Bolsonaro administration has defended its agents in Pará, saying that the prisons there were previously run by Red Command (Comando Vermelho – CV). While violence between CV and other gangs for control of prisons has led to dozens of killings, the overcrowding of prisons, with many inmates not even having been formally charged, has been a major factor.

According to Brazil’s Violence Monitor (Monitor da Violência), Pará currently has over 17,000 inmates, a figure 79.5 percent above its official capacity.

And the state government of Pará has sided with the government, also seeking to deny or diminish the accusations laid out against the security task force. On September 19, a glowing statement from the state Attorney General’s Office lauded the task force for bringing about “clear improvements.”

Army deployed in Ecuador as protests descend into violence (The Guardian)

October 12, 2019

President Lenín Moreno ordered the army on to the streets of Ecuador’s capital Quito after a week and a half of protests over fuel prices devolved into violent incidents, with masked protesters attacking a television station, newspaper and the national auditor’s office.

Moreno said the military enforced curfew would begin at 3pm local time in response to violence in areas previously untouched by the protests. Masked protesters broke into the national auditor’s office and set it ablaze, sending black smoke billowing

across the central Quito park and cultural complex that have been the epicentre of the protests.

Later, several dozen masked men swarmed the offices of the private Teleamazonas television station, set fires on the grounds and tried to break into the building where about 20 employees were trapped.

“They’re trying to enter the station, trying to break down the doors, we’re asking for help but the police aren’t coming,” one employee told the Associated Press.

A journalist with the newspaper El Comercio told the AP that the paper’s offices were also under attack. The building’s security guards were seized and tied up and attackers were trying to break into offices where journalists were hiding.

Moreno appeared on national television alongside his vice-president and defence minister to announce that he was ordering people indoors and sending the army on to the streets.

He blamed the violence on drug traffickers, organised crime and followers of former president Rafael Correa, who has denied allegations that he is trying to topple Moreno’s government.

Moreno served as Correa’s vice-president before he become president and the two men went through a bitter split as Moreno pushed to curb public debt amassed on Correa’s watch.

Moreno said the masked protesters had nothing to do with the thousands of indigenous Ecuadorian groups who have protested for nearly a week over a sudden rise in fuel prices as part of an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-backed austerity package.

“I have ordered the [armed forces] to immediately undertake all the necessary measures and operations,” Moreno said. “We are going to restore order in all of Ecuador.”

The violence, curfew and military deployment came shortly after the announcement of a possible softening of the 10-day standoff. Indigenous leaders of the fuel price protests that have paralysed Ecuador’s economy for days said early on Saturday afternoon that they were willing to negotiate with Moreno over the austerity package.

The Confederation of Indigenous Nations of Ecuador said on Twitter that “we have decided to participate in direct dialogue” with Moreno.

Minutes later, Leonidas Iza, a Quechua leader from mountainous Cotopaxi province, told Ecuavisa television that “we have asked for minimal conditions for dialogue,” including what he called an end to government violence against protesters.

Previously, indigenous protesters had refused to negotiate until Moreno restored fuel subsidies.

Quito mayor Jorge Yunda said Moreno was willing to revise the package and planned to meet Saturday with leaders of the demonstrations. Yunda said he and other mayors were mediating the standoff that has halted Ecuador’s oil production, blocked highways and caused hundreds of millions of dollars in loss to industries such as flower-growing to dairy farming.

As the two sides made progress toward compromise, violence was spreading.

Across the capital, hooded men used rocks and burning tires to block streets in residential neighbourhoods. Some drivers, pedestrians and owners of small businesses reported being threatened and robbed. Roads leading to the international airport were blocked, according to city officials.

The indigenous leaders distanced themselves from the violent gangs, calling them instigators unconnected to the native groups’ cause.

Interior minister María Paula Romo said 30 people had been arrested in the attack on the auditor’s office. Firefighters said they extinguished the blaze after soldiers and police retook control of the building, which houses evidence in corruption investigations.

Special Report: A surge in killings by police roils Bolsonaro's Brazil (Reuters) By Gabriel Stargardter
October 9, 2019

Just before leaving her teaching job on the afternoon of May 17, Alessandra Mattos received a panicked voice message.

“Alessandra!” a relative said. “There’s been an accident with Brayan.”

She grabbed her things, flagged a motorcycle taxi and rushed to a slum in the Rio de Janeiro suburb of Sao Goncalo. There, dead in a pool of blood, lay Brayan Mattos dos Santos, the 19-year-old nephew she helped raise.

She tried to get closer, but a policeman blocked her advance. "It wasn't me," Mattos said the officer told her. "It wasn't me."

The "accident," Mattos soon learned, was the sort of fate dreaded by families of young, dark-skinned men across South America's most populous country.

Black and mixed-race youths like dos Santos long have been disproportionately represented among homicide victims in Brazil, the country with the world's highest number of murders. Now, amid a crackdown on suspected criminals championed by President Jair Bolsonaro, they are increasingly dying at the hands of police.

No weapons, narcotics or other illegal materials were found on dos Santos, a car and motorcycle enthusiast who had recently begun driving for Uber. He appears, instead, to have been at the wrong place at the wrong time — near a street stall for illegal drugs just as a police raid went down.

His death, in a state where killings by police have climbed by 16% this year, according to government figures, is being investigated by Rio prosecutors.

The raid is one of many lethal operations that human rights activists, some Rio residents and opposition lawmakers see as part of a bloody and illegal campaign to clean up historically violent neighborhoods across Latin America's biggest country.

Emboldened by victories last year of far-right politicians with aggressive law-and-order agendas, Brazil's police forces are surpassing their own longstanding reputations for being among the most violent in the world.

The slain include victims like dos Santos, who had no known criminal ties. In late September, hundreds gathered in northern Rio to grieve the death of an eight-year-old girl who was shot, according to bystanders, by a policeman who missed when aiming at a motorcyclist. Her death, one of several children allegedly shot by police this year, is still being investigated.

Two top commanders of Rio's military and civil police forces, which together are responsible for security in the state, told Reuters that police have never received or issued orders to kill. Officers, rather, are finding themselves in more violent confrontations because of a nearly 50% increase in the number of raids, a response to higher crime.

"An officer never has the objective of killing," said Fabio Barucke, operational head of the civil police. "But we have a responsibility to defend ourselves."

Rio, a state of 17 million people that includes the seaside metropolis of the same name, has long been known as a hotbed of conflict between criminal gangs and sometimes trigger-happy police. Now, with Bolsonaro and a like-minded governor urging lawmen to get even tougher, tensions, violence and the death toll are mounting.

Bolsonaro is seeking to boost legal protections for police who kill on the job, proposing in a bill to lessen sentences for officers who shoot because of "excusable fear, surprise or violent emotion." He has said criminals should "die like cockroaches."

Wilson Witzel, Rio's governor, has ordered snipers to fire on suspects from helicopters. Witzel recently told foreign journalists that suspects, when confronted by police, should "surrender or die."

To some in the political opposition, the rhetoric of Brazil's new leaders is reminiscent of Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippine president whose offensive against drug dealers has led to thousands of killings by police.

"The police feel authorized to kill," said Marcelo Freixo, a congressman from Rio and veteran researcher on violence and organized crime. "The discourse stimulates violence."

Reuters found no evidence that Bolsonaro, Witzel or other right-wing leaders elected in a wave of populist protest last year have ordered police to break laws or methodically kill criminal suspects. Bolsonaro's justice minister, Sergio Moro, told Reuters that the administration doesn't advocate police violence.

"Confrontations between police and criminals are always undesirable," he said in an interview in Brasilia, the capital. "You don't resolve public security with confrontations, but with intelligence, strategy, due process and state presence."

Between January and August 2019, Rio police killed 1,249 people, according to official figures, nearly a fifth more than a year ago. The rate amounts to 5 people per day, more for the period than any since the state began keeping its current database in 2003. By contrast, 14 police officers have died in operations this year, down from 24 killed on duty between January and August 2018.

Recent nationwide figures aren't available, but killings by police have also climbed in Sao Paulo, Brazil's most populous state, and other major urban areas.

Like dos Santos, most victims of police killings are dark-skinned, a reflection of the socioeconomic and racial makeup of poor neighborhoods where most drug traffickers and other criminal gangs operate. Although whites make up half the population in Rio, they accounted for 12% of those killed by police early this year, according to government data obtained by Reuters via a freedom of information request.

It's impossible to calculate how many of the victims are believed to have been innocent bystanders. Human-rights activists, however, say they believe that the surge in killings indicates some police are out to kill, regardless of any evidence or the risk of collateral damage.

"These numbers aren't those of a few murders," said Freixo, the congressman. "They are numbers of execution, of extermination."

Officially, many of the deaths in police operations are attributed to "resistance" by suspects. Police, wary of heavily armed gangs, argue they have little choice but to shoot in self defense, especially in labyrinthine slums where gangs can easily ambush them.

But local and international activists have for decades decried excessive force and outright executions by police.

The problem predates Bolsonaro.

After a 2003 visit to Brazil, a special rapporteur for the United Nations Commission on Human Rights wrote that she was "overwhelmed with information about human rights violations." She criticized Brazil's government, especially some state administrations, because they "fail to fully accept the existence of extrajudicial and summary executions."

In early September, Michelle Bachelet, a former Chilean president who is now the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, criticized Brazil for "discourse legitimizing summary executions." In response, Bolsonaro criticized Bachelet for pursuing the agenda "of criminals" and "attacking our valiant police."

Dos Santos died at the hands of Rio's 7th Military Police Battalion, the state's most lethal. The unit, one of 39 battalions in Rio, since 2003 has killed 1,055 people. Through August, 137 civilians this year have died in operations involving the 7th, 35 more than any other battalion in the state.

The 7th operates "in very complex geography," said Rogerio Figueredo, commander of Rio's military police force. "There are various communities with several criminal factions all disputing the territory."

According to a police report reviewed by Reuters, dos Santos' death may have been accidental. Officers, the report said, returned fire after being shot at by suspects. Dos Santos died because of "intervention by a state agent."

To understand his killing and the recent rise in the body count, Reuters spoke to police and government officials, security experts, human rights researchers, and friends and family of dos Santos. The picture that emerges, including exclusive details about the May raid in Sao Goncalo, is that of an entrenched conflict worsening amid the law-and-order agenda of a new populist leadership.

"WHAT WE WANT TO HEAR"

The very structure of Brazilian police forces has long been controversial.

After a two-decade military dictatorship that ended in the 1980s, a new constitution gave responsibility for most law enforcement to each of Brazil's 26 states. Rather than reinvent their forces, the states kept a military format for police charged with everyday law enforcement.

A "civil police" force were made responsible for investigations and working with prosecutors. But the beat cops and routine patrols that most Brazilians encounter still operate within a highly regimented, militaristic structure.

As a result, everything from the fortresslike architecture of police stations to the language used by officers still reflects a barracks mentality. Training is often phrased in terms of "us" against "them." Criminals are "the enemy."

"The mold is that of the military," said Fernando Salema, a former commander of the 7th battalion who is now a lawmaker, from Bolsonaro's party, in the Rio state assembly. "We inherited that culture."

That culture is often in sharp relief in Rio.

Clashes are as much a part of the landscape as its verdant hillsides and dramatic juxtaposition of rich and poor. Shootouts and the hum of police helicopters are a daily reality for many in a state where haphazard planning led slums and wealthy neighborhoods to co-exist in a dense urban tangle.

Sao Goncalo, a hardscrabble suburb across the bay that carves Rio's coastline, in recent decades became one of the state's most violent areas. Per capita income, about \$4,000 a year, is similar to that of El Salvador and less than a third the level in the city of Rio.

Once an industrial center, Sao Goncalo has increasingly become a base for criminal gangs who smuggle drugs and weapons through the bay and hijack nearby highway cargo. It's also one of many areas around Rio where so-called "militias," violent criminal enterprises made up of retired and off-duty police, control extortion rackets and other illegal ventures.

In 2011, Patricia Acioli, a state judge who jailed dozens of corrupt Sao Goncalo police, was shot 21 times outside her home. Eleven officers from the 7th, including its chief, were convicted of planning and executing the murder.

"Sao Goncalo is a giant favela," or slum, said another recent commander of the 7th. The officer, who now leads another battalion and spoke on condition of anonymity, said crime is so common it seeps into the force. "It has a corrupt population, and the officers come from the same."

Earlier this decade, as Rio prepared to host the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics, locals in Sao Goncalo complained yet more criminals were moving in because of a police cleanup near beaches, hotels and sporting venues. When a deep recession took root shortly thereafter, crime worsened across Brazil. In 2017, a record 64,000 murders were reported nationwide, more than in any other country.

Already exasperated with the downturn and a far-reaching corruption scandal, voters swung sharply right, electing Bolsonaro and other populist conservatives last year. A former fringe congressman with little record as a lawmaker, Bolsonaro was best known for incendiary comments, including a 2015 quip in which he said police "should kill more."

Witzel, a former judge, was unfamiliar to most of Rio's electorate until he too outmaneuvered veteran rivals with promises to purge crime.

After taking office in January, the two politicians embraced their law-and-order mandate. Witzel rode along with rifle-wielding police in a helicopter and posted the video online, promising to "bring peace back." In an opinion piece in a local newspaper, he said the surge in police killings "isn't difficult to justify."

Some police say they felt invigorated. "It's what we want to hear," Salema, the former commander turned assemblyman, told Reuters.

"NO OTHER OPTION"

On Salema's old beat, police this year began struggling with an internecine war within the local branch of the Comando Vermelho, or CV, one of Brazil's most powerful drug gangs. After one CV boss in April killed a rival, fighting between factions spilled onto the streets. Gun battles erupted across Sao Goncalo, and schools, hospitals and bus routes shut down.

The violence soon spread to other parts of Rio, prompting operations by police seeking to track down those responsible. In Mare, a slum near Rio's international airport, a police helicopter on May 6 flew overhead and began shooting, according to local residents.

By the end of the operation, police had killed eight suspects, including four who had been surrounded after running into a home. A resident of the home told state prosecutors she hid in another room and heard the confrontation. A prosecutor, speaking on condition of anonymity, gave Reuters details of her account.

When police entered, the resident told prosecutors, two of the men gave up. But the officers rejected their surrender, according to the resident, replying, "our order is to kill."

The police then shot the two men and, finding the other two suspects on the roof, shot them, too. Before a forensics team could arrive, the resident told prosecutors, the police dragged the four bodies outside.

The officers, the prosecutor said, told investigators they only fired after being shot at. Rio's civil police force, which ordered and conducted the operation, said it is still carrying out its own investigation and couldn't comment on specifics of the raid.

Eleven days later, in Sao Goncalo, officers from the 7th battalion conducted the raid that killed dos Santos. As part of their efforts to curb gang activity, police had targeted a point of sale for drugs in the Sao Goncalo slum of Chumbada.

Around 4:40 p.m., according to the police report reviewed by Reuters, at least four officers neared the drug stall and split into two teams. One team, Captain Renato de Souza and Sargent Andre Ricardo Mendes, took one path toward the stall. A second, Corporal Erik Ribeiro and Corporal Alex Dias, took another.

Reuters was unable to confirm the details of the police report independently. Police officials declined a request to speak with the officers.

As the operation got underway, dos Santos had gone to a shop in Chumbada to buy clothes for a party that evening, according to Mattos, his aunt. She showed Reuters a credit card receipt for the purchase, which she said came from dos Santos' telephone, valued at 217.79 reais, or about \$53.

"It's expensive here," dos Santos texted a friend in a message, seen by Reuters, about 10 minutes before the raid began.

According to statements the officers gave civil police investigators, Ribeiro and Dias were approaching the stall when gunfire burst from a group of about six people. It isn't clear from the report who within that group is alleged to have fired.

The officers, carrying high-caliber rifles made by Imbel, a Brazilian state-owned manufacturer of military weaponry, said they returned fire. Ribeiro fired 23 times, Dias 31.

During the firefight, Ribeiro told investigators, one person fell to the ground "near a shop." Two others fled on a Honda motorcycle; several more escaped on foot. Another man, his shirt stained by a bullet wound in the shoulder, put his hands up and dropped to the ground.

Ribeiro and Dias approached the drug stall as the other two officers pursued the motorcycle. The injured man, still prone and unarmed, told police he had gone there to buy marijuana. Several meters beyond the stall, on a residential street, lay dos Santos.

Renato Perez, a civil police chief in Sao Goncalo with knowledge of the raid, told Reuters he suspected dos Santos had gone there to buy marijuana. He offered no evidence or documentation to support that claim. Mattos, the aunt, denied the assertion, saying her nephew didn't use drugs.

"They always have to invent something," she said.

Mendes and de Souza, the officers who chased the motorcycle, caught up with the two suspects on a nearby street. According to the police report, one of the men carried 65.2 grams of marijuana and a 9 mm pistol with two bullets and its serial number scraped off. The other carried 49.7 grams of cocaine and a walkie-talkie.

The two were detained and charged with resisting arrest and possession of narcotics. They are awaiting trial, according to Rio's public defenders' office and state court filings. No other suspects were apprehended and no other weapons were found.

Danielle Costa, the civil police investigator who authored the report, concluded the officers had acted legitimately. They had "no other option," she wrote, but to "use their firearms, in legitimate defense and to overcome resistance posed by lawbreakers."

The civil police declined to make Costa available for an interview.

State prosecutors are probing the operation.

Andrea Amin, a Rio prosecutor who investigates police killings, in an interview told Reuters the law-and-order rhetoric risks legitimizing excessive force and a lack of due process. "A rise in deaths can't be seen as a successful public security policy," she said.

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Venezuela

Venezuela wins seat on UN rights body despite opposition (New York Post)

October 17, 2019

Venezuela won a contested election for a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council on Thursday despite a campaign by over 50 organizations and many countries opposed to Nicolas Maduro's government and its rights record.

There was scattered applause in the General Assembly chamber when its president announced the results of the voting for two Latin American seats. Brazil topped the ballot with 153 votes followed by Venezuela with 105 votes and late entry Costa Rica with 96 votes.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza called the vote "a victory" that followed "a fierce and brutal campaign by the United States ... and its subordinate nations."

The Trump administration has recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president and U.S. Ambassador Kelly Craft called the placing of President Nicolás Maduro's government on the council "an embarrassment to the United Nations and a tragedy for the people of Venezuela."

"That one of the world's worst human-rights abusers would be granted a seat on a body that is supposed to defend human rights is utterly appalling," Craft said in a statement after the vote.

Philippe Boloignon, Human Rights Watch's deputy director for global advocacy, called Venezuela's election "undeserved" and "a slap in the face to the country's countless victims who've been tortured and murdered by government forces, as well as the millions who have fled largely because of a humanitarian emergency the government unleashed."

The 193-member world body elected 14 members to the 47-member Human Rights Council for three-year terms starting Jan. 1. Under its rules, seats are allocated to regions to ensure geographical representation.

In other contested races, Iraq lost out in the Asian group contest for four seats to Japan, South Korea, Indonesia and the Marshall Islands, and Moldova lost in the Eastern Europe group race for two seats to Armenia and Poland.

The Africa region had four countries on the ballot — Benin, Libya, Mauritania and Sudan — for four seats. But diplomats said the regional group did a last-minute switch, putting Namibia on the ballot instead of Benin to include a nation from southern Africa, so Namibia, Libya, Mauritania and Sudan were elected.

There was no competition for the two Western group seats and Germany and the Netherlands were overwhelmingly elected.

The Geneva-based Human Rights Council can spotlight abuses and has special monitors watching certain countries and issues. It also periodically reviews human rights in every U.N. member country.

Created in 2006 to replace a commission discredited because of some members' sorry rights records, the new council soon came to face similar criticism.

The United States left the council partly because it saw the group as a forum for hypocrisy about human rights, though also because Washington says the council is anti-Israel.

Craft, the U.S. ambassador, said Thursday's vote "provides ironclad proof that the Human Rights Council is broken and reinforces why the United States withdrew."

Israel's U.N. Ambassador Danny Danon said in a statement immediately after Thursday's results were announced that: "The Human Rights Council continues to abandon human rights and is now in the business of protecting dictators and war crimes."

"In Venezuela, a dictator starves his people, and in Libya there are camps that torture African migrants," Danon said.

Venezuelan officials regularly reject any criticism of the country's human rights record.

When the U.N.'s high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, chronicled cases of torture, sexual abuse and extrajudicial killings in the country, Deputy Foreign Minister William Castillo said her report "does not reflect the reality in our country."

He called it a "biased vision" of Venezuela and demanded it be "corrected."

Maduro's Attorney General Tarek William Saab on Thursday also announced the release of 24 people he called "political prisoners" in a gesture stemming from a new round of negotiations with minority parties that don't include Guaidó.

However, Saab did not immediately release the prisoners' names.

Human Rights Watch's Bolopion said the U.N. Rights Council should continue to scrutinize the Maduro government's "abuses," even with Venezuela at the table, and hold those responsible to account.

"The UN General Assembly should recognize that electing serial rights abusers like Venezuela betrays the fundamental principles it set out when it created the Human Rights Council," he said.

Before the vote, Human Rights Watch also criticized Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro for embracing "rhetoric hostile to human rights norms" and for giving "a green light to criminal networks destroying the Amazon rainforest."

It criticized Poland for systematically eroding "the independence and effective functioning of its judiciary," Indonesia for rising "religious intolerance" and Mauritania for using laws on criminal defamation, spreading "false information and blasphemy to prosecute human rights activists, bloggers and political dissidents."

And it urged Sudan's new transitional government to "set an example on human rights promotion by taking concrete steps toward accountability and reforms."

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TOPICS

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Shallow graves, deep scars: Unmarked cemetery in Alberta reflects atrocities at one of Canada's deadliest residential schools (The Star) By Omar MoslehStar Edmonton

October 13, 2019

The red and yellow autumn leaves crunch under Lyle Keewatin Richards' feet as he walks, sinking into the still snow on a small plot of private land on the outskirts of Red Deer. He treads carefully, for with every step he knows he may be walking on the grave of a child who attended the Red Deer Indian Industrial School.

The unmarked cemetery is located on a mostly empty stretch of farmer's field, dotted with a few small shrubs and trees, next to a steep valley overlooking the Sylvan Creek. It's about 500 metres away from the original site of the Red Deer Industrial School, established in 1892 and considered one of the most atrocious examples of the suffering, abuse and neglect that were rampant in Canada's residential school system.

A 2008 geological survey found 20 burial sites in the field, but it is estimated between 50 and 70 children who attended the school between 1893 and 1918 are buried on the grounds. The Red Deer Industrial School was plagued by widespread disease, a defective sanitation system that led to further contamination and illness, underfunding, overcrowding and one of the highest mortality rates of any such school in Canada.

Prayer flags at an unmarked cemetery in Red Deer, Alta., are placed on nearby trees to honour the children buried nearby who attended the Red Deer Industrial School.

Richards stops to place a piece of tobacco on the ground, saying a prayer for the children in their final resting place. The only sign that this is more than just an empty field are two pairs of red and white prayer flags dangling from tree branches. Richards explains the flags went through a sweat lodge ceremony, and were prayed over by an Elder before being hung to honour the children.

Looking closer, one can observe slight depressions in the ground, marking the shallow graves.

“At this site there are little tiny graves,” Richards notes. “What the hell is that about? Some of the atrocities, I don’t even like to contemplate.”

As Richards walks, he recalls the time he welcomed a large group of students from various First Nations in Alberta to learn about the unmarked cemetery as part of a school field trip.

“I said I’m sure happy these kids are here, because they get to go home,” Richards said. “These kids never got to go home.”

Richards is an Indigenous advocate who has been working for more than 30 years to ensure that the children of the Red Deer Industrial School aren’t forgotten. He is part of Remembering the Children Society, a group composed of relatives of the children, representatives of the United Church, government officials and members of the public who are working to preserve the cemetery and share the tragic history and legacy of the Red Deer Industrial School.

In 2017, they unveiled a memorial stone at the current Red Deer city cemetery dedicated to four children who are buried there, after they died at the school in 1918 from the Spanish flu epidemic: Jane Baptiste, 13; Georgina House, 14; David Lightning, 14; and Sarah Soosay, 13. The group is now working to create something similar at the unmarked cemetery to memorialize the children buried there.

Richards, a ’60s Scoop survivor who draws his roots to Okanese First Nation in Saskatchewan, does not have a direct connection to the Red Deer school. But it’s still deeply personal to him, because his own mother also attended residential school.

“It could just as easily be my mother here. And we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” he said.

The Red Deer Industrial School was effectively a residential school by a different name, the main difference being that it emphasized manual labour, such as farming and household duties, as opposed to academic learning and religious prayer. The industrial schools were also located farther from the reserves. They were later phased out in favour of the residential school model.

About 350 children, mostly from Maskwacis, but also from communities such as Saddle Lake, Whitefish Lake and Nelson House in northern Manitoba, attended the school over the 26 years it was open.

In Uta Fox’s 1993 master’s thesis for the University of Calgary, entitled “The Failure of the Red Deer Industrial School,” she writes that when Peter Bryce, the chief medical officer for Indian Affairs, completed a report about diseases in residential and industrial schools in 1907, he noted that the Red Deer Industrial School had the highest mortality rate of all the industrial schools he examined.

The United Church of Canada’s residential school archive project documents how Bryce estimated that the mortality rate at the school was at least 25 per cent, but that didn’t account for the children who were sent home after showing signs of tuberculosis and other illnesses.

All in all, he estimated about 40 per cent of the children who attended the school died as a result of their time there.

Richard Lightning is part of Remembering the Children Society, an organization working to preserve an unmarked cemetery in Red Deer where children from the Red Deer Industrial School are buried. His uncle David Lightning died at the same school.

One of those children was David Lightning, the uncle of Indigenous Elder Richard Lightning. David died on Nov. 16, 1918, after contracting the Spanish flu. At the time, nearly the entire staff of the school was sick, and principal Joseph F. Woodsworth wrote to Indian Affairs that they had no one to bury the children. So Lightning and three other children were buried at the current Red Deer city cemetery instead of the unmarked one that was next to the school.

“I thought the best thing to do was to have the undertaker from Red Deer take charge of and bury the bodies. This was done, and they now lie buried in Red Deer,” Woodsworth wrote on Nov. 25, 1918.

Death was a fact of life at the Red Deer Industrial School. According to the Red Deer & District Archives, the first death occurred the same year it opened, in 1893.

Of 122 students admitted between 1895 and 1903, 32 children (nearly 30 per cent of the total student population) died from tuberculosis, spinal meningitis and pneumonia following a measles epidemic. Between 1904 and 1907, seven out of 40 students died due to various causes, including six students between 1906 and 1907 — a particularly brutal year.

“As the story goes, when the influenza and tuberculosis and all that stuff was coming through, they were tasked to dig graves

for their fellow students. In fact, they were burying them double,” Lightning, himself a residential school survivor, told Star Edmonton from his home of Ermineskin Cree Nation.

The prevalence of deadly disease at the Red Deer school is directly linked to a defective sanitation system that led to sewage contaminating the school’s well. Children often did not have access to clean water. A lack of proper sanitation and inspections, as well as severe overcrowding in the dormitories, allowed the diseases, especially tuberculosis, to spread widely.

There was also a major lack of proper nutrition and medication, Lightning said.

“There was no prevention ... no wonder tuberculosis was rampant,” he said. “There was no treatment at the time.”

Things improved for a while after an improved sanitation system was installed around 1907, resulting in the death of just one child between 1907 and 1913. But the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak hit the school hard, killing five students, including Lightning’s uncle, David.

Lightning’s father, Albert, also went to the Red Deer Industrial School. He didn’t speak much of his experience there. Lightning, who attended the Ermineskin Indian Residential School in Maskwacis, now understands why; he experienced extensive physical and emotional abuse at the school and believes his father did too.

“I never heard my dad say ‘Son I love you’, I never got a hug,” Lightning said. “I didn’t know why. But he went through the same trauma at the industrial school. Industrial, residential, same thing, different name.”

In 1987, Albert walked into the Red Deer museum and bumped into Richards, who was working there at the time. Albert told Richards he wanted his help finding out what happened to his brother, David, after he died.

That same year, Bartlett M. Moore entered the same museum with wooden grave markers he’d found in his field. Moore knew that his property was adjacent to a former residential school and understood the significance of the grave markers. The head stones were found on the site that is the current unmarked cemetery.

Richards doesn’t believe it was a coincidence that the man who went to the Red Deer Industrial School and the man who found evidence of the school’s unmarked cemetery would come into the same museum in the same year. His spiritual beliefs tell him it was meant to happen.

“And that was the start of the journey.”

Since then, Moore’s son, Doug Moore Jr., has presided over the property. He has worked closely with Remembering The Children Society and is a big supporter of preserving the site as an official provincial cemetery.

“I just feel it’s the least I can do,” Moore Jr. said. “Particularly knowing that it’s all children or mainly all children that are in there ... I just feel that I can do my very small part in respecting it and lowering the grass there and kind of protecting it.”

Moore Jr. said he’s always been aware of the cemetery, but the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made him feel a greater responsibility to do something to acknowledge the horrors that occurred in the residential school system.

“We never really thought about it being a black mark on society,” he said. “It’s not until recent years through the Truth and Reconciliation (Commission) and so on that we’ve started to understand that it was as bad as it was.”

Now the society is working to install a memorial at the unmarked cemetery, similar to the one they put in the current Red Deer city cemetery, perhaps in the form of a cairn. They are planning a road allowance so the site is publicly accessible, along with a parking lot. They are also seeking Provincial Historic Resource designation for the cemetery.

For Lightning, marking the cemetery is crucial from a historical perspective, to acknowledge the atrocities that happened at the school.

“Mainstream (Canadians) don’t have a clue. That’s why this is so important,” he said.

But it’s also a way to free the spirits of the children, which have languished for too long in the unmarked cemetery, he added.

Standing outside the Ermineskin Elders’ Centre, just across the street from the site of the former Ermineskin Cree Nation residential school he himself attended, Lightning is speaking of intergenerational trauma and the continued impacts the legacy of the residential school system has on him, his family and his community.

The whir of a red and white helicopter flying above fills the air.

“It’s not an uncommon sight around here,” Lightning says as he looks up. “Drugs, gangs, suicides, we see all of it.

“That’s why in Edmonton, on Boyle Street, you’ll see a lot of the people who have been drawn to drinking and drugs. That’s part of the intergenerational trauma. Here, too, you go to Wetaskiwin, you’ll see them on the street ... I know what they’re going through. We all hurt differently.”

From hurting to healing, Richards can relate. It’s why memorializing and honouring the children buried in the unmarked cemetery and recognizing the impacts of residential schools is such an important part of his life’s work.

“When I first started out here I didn’t think the residential schools had much to do with me,” Richards said.

“And the more we got into it and I’m talking to my mom ... and you start talking about intergenerational trauma and what that looks like, what that looks like on my daughter — it’s really quite a journey. Because it leaves a scar. It’s a big scar. And we’re only starting to understand that.”

Liberia: Mayor of Monrovia Calls for Establishment of War Crimes Court (Front Page Africa)

October 20, 2019

The Monrovia City Mayor who is also the Youth League Chair of the ruling Coalition for Democratic Change pointed out that people who caused mayhem in Liberia should be made to account for their actions through a Court of competent jurisdiction.

Mayor Kojee, speaking in a Radio interview live from Washington D.C early Friday morning said, “As a strong advocate of the war crimes court, especially during my days in the youth and student communities, I will continue to advocate for the establishment of the war and economics crimes court.”

He noted that his advocacy for the war and economics crimes court can’t in any way be undermined by the position he holds in government.

Kojee is of the strong conviction that the ultimate means to sustaining peace, genuine reconciliation and development in Liberia is through the establishment of the court.

“We must seek to end the scourge of impunity in Liberia by using the law and holding people accountable for their wrongdoings,” Mayor Kojee told Journalists in a live phone interview from Washington.

He lauded President George Weah for making moves that may lead to the establishment of the court.

President Weah recently sought advice from the Legislature on the calls for the establishment of the war and economic crimes court in Liberia and the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations.

Thousands of people were killed, maimed or raped, and children were used as soldiers in the war. Yet over 100 rebel fighters are free and have never been tried in the country. However, a few including Mohammed Jabeteh, aka Jungle Jabbah and Deontee Thomas Woewiyu have faced justice outside of Liberia.

The Monrovia City Mayor also warned against continue protests in the Liberia, something he said taints the image of the country negatively and discourages investors.

“We understand that things are difficult as the result of the economic situation in our country but we cannot use the situation to score political points by continuously staging protest at the detriment of the people we claim to love,” he lamented.

According to Mayor Kojee, every Liberian regardless of their political affiliation needs to play a patriotic role by joining hands with the government to address the current economic situation in the best interest of the citizenry.

He cautioned young people of Liberia to avoid being used as tools for violence.

“Young people of Liberia, we have an opportunity today under this President that we might not have years to come, we have an opportunity to serve in government and make the necessary changes Liberia and Liberians deserve; please don’t allow people use you to undermine this opportunity,” he appealed.

The youthful Mayor called on officials of government to stop shifting blame on the past government and work harder to achieve the pro-poor agenda for prosperity and development.

“We didn’t come to government to shift blame on other people. We came to government on the slogan of change. The past

government has served and gone. Whether they created the messy state of our country's economy or not, it is time we rise to the occasion to work in the interest of the people who gave us the popular mandate to serve”.

“It is time that government officials regain the trust and confidence of their communities by sharing with them, engaging them with sincerity and explaining the actual realities on ground,” he added.

Mayor Kojiee is currently in Washington D.C to establish a sister city relationship which will promote economic development and exchange of ideas and programs between Monrovia and Washington D.C.

He is expected to hold talks with the City Mayor of Washington D.C Muriel Bowser, the City Council, amongst others.

Govt, parties 'have put TJ on backburner' (The Himalayan Times)

October 22, 2019

What actually propels the country's top political leadership to renege on their oft-repeated commitment to reconstitute the transitional justice mechanisms and amend the TJ Act could be anyone's guess. A brief meeting held today after months of hiatus also let an opportunity pass by, again.

Top leaders, including Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba and Nepal Communist Party (NCP) Co-chairperson Pushpa Kamal Dahal, discussed the issue in a meeting at Baluwatar, but the talks failed to yield any tangible outcome.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons have remained vacant ever since their members retired in April.

Political parties had on August 21 reached an understanding whereby the CIEDP would have the same old team, while the TRC would be led by former attorney general Raman Shrestha.

On September 16, the government had presented a modality for holding broad-based consultations in all seven provinces and Kathmandu to gather inputs for amendment to the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act.

However, both these processes have been halted as the government and parties have not held serious talks on the issue. NC leader Ramesh Lekhak said the parties had agreed to amend the TJ Act on the basis of consensus, but that needed intensive talks. “Talks have not taken place for a while. Today's meeting also dwelt on the issue briefly,” he said.

Conflict victims have demanded that the processes of appointing TRC and CIEDP members and amending the act should be taken ahead simultaneously. But top leaders seem only interested in appointing their ‘yes-men’ as members of the commissions, resulting in the present stalemate, they said.

Ram Kumar Bhandari, founder and director of the National Network of Families of the Disappeared and Missing Persons, said the government and parties were least interested in act amendment or the consultation process.

Sharmila Karki, spokesperson for the independent committee formed to recommend new TRC, CIEDP members, said names of the shortlisted applicants would be published soon. But sources said chances of publication of the names were slim before Tihar.

Liberia: War Crime Court Supporter Seeks Holistic Approach in Prosecuting Warlords, Criminals (Front Page Africa) By Obediah Johnson

October 23, 2019

A member of the House of Representatives who signed a resolution seeking the establishment of a war crime court in Liberia, Representative Ivar Jones, says calls and actions for the prosecution of war perpetrators and criminals should not be limited to a specific group of Liberians.

Lawmaker Jones is representing the people of electoral district # 2 in Margibi County.

According to him, the application of justice goes beyond the names and portfolios of individuals, and as such, Liberians should desist from naming particular individuals as those that will be prosecuted and jailed for atrocities and mayhem perpetrated against Liberians during decades of civil wars when the court is established.

He made these comments in an interview with reporters in Monrovia over the weekend.

He underscored that Liberians should holistically call for the formation of the court, avoid naming individuals, and accord those accused in the recommendations contained in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) the opportunity to exonerate themselves before the court.

Representative Jones maintained that the dispensation of justice which does not look at the names of individuals, but the magnitude of the crime or act committed, makes the establishment of the court to be more than an individual or a specific group of war perpetrators.

He justified that it is possible that some of those warlords being stereotyped in their respective communities would be exonerated or set freed when the court is established and therefore, citizens should desist from bullying those TRC indictees.

The Margibi County lawmaker furthered that though the establishment of the court cannot be swept under the carpet, it is prudent for those accused of being responsible for the over 14-years of civil unrest to exonerate themselves by supporting calls for the court formation.

He believed that these war perpetrators and criminals risked being embarrassed both national and international for the rest of the lives, if the establishment of a war crime court for Liberia is delayed

“Whenever the war crime court is being discussed, people call names; people point or look at individuals. They don’t understand that justice does not look at individuals or names. Justice looks at the crime and the degree of the crime,” he stated.

“Let me say this-people who point at individuals and say, it’s because of these people that we are calling for the establishment of a war crime court-let me be very clear to them that, they are making mistake. It’s possible that those people names you are calling could go to the war crime court and come out freely,” he added.

On support for the court’s establishment, Representative Jones pointed out that he affixed his signature to the resolution calling for the establishment of a war crime court in Liberia based upon a mandate from his constituents.

According to him, the actions of war perpetrators to commit atrocities and other heinous crimes during the warring days have biblical, traditional and political implications, and as such, those who aided and abetted civil conflicts in Liberia should not go unpunished.

“Even the Bible-one of the oldest books in the world, speaks about punishments. Whenever people carried on inhumane acts against others; that seem to be civil disobedience (in not a peaceful manner), but disgruntle manner that violates the constitution, norms or religious principles, I think that in the minds of reasonable and sound, those people should not go free,” he noted.

Unlike the House of Representatives, majority members of the Liberian Senate are yet to give a definite position on the establishment of the court, since President George Manneh Weah requested members of the 54th National Legislature to advice he on the way forward.

The Margibi County lawmaker wants Senators to act in line with majority members of the House of Representatives on the establishment of the court upon their return to the Capitol Building in January 2020.

The Capitol Building is the official seat of the National Legislature.

“I was one of the first persons that signed the resolution for the establishment of the war crime court. I am asking my colleagues from the Upper House because the number has been guaranteed already from the lower House,” he stated.

“Having 52 persons signing the resolution from the lower House is a clear manifestation that the establishment of the war crime court-as per the view of the lower house is certain. So, we are calling on members of the upper house to act in similar form and manner,” Representative Jones maintained.

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Terrorism

The president wrongly claimed that a violent Kurdish separatist group was “more of a terrorist threat” than ISIS, among other inaccurate claims.

President Trump on Wednesday defended his abrupt decision to withdraw American troops from northern Syria, seeking to counter international and bipartisan criticism as Turkey continued its offensive against the Kurds.

Here’s an assessment of his remarks at two events on Wednesday.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

“Now, the P.K.K., which is a part of the Kurds, as you know, is probably worse at terror and more of a terrorist threat in many ways than ISIS.”

False.

The Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or P.K.K., is a separatist group primarily composed of Turkish Kurds with deep ties to Kurdish militias that joined with other groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces, which has been fighting the Islamic State, or ISIS, in Syria.

The United States considers those Kurdish-led militias key allies in the fight against ISIS, but has designated the P.K.K. a terrorist organization since 1987. Still, it’s a huge stretch to compare the group to ISIS.

The director of national intelligence has called ISIS a global terrorism threat every year since 2015, while the P.K.K. has been noted as a regional security threat to Turkey or Syria. The State Department’s latest annual terrorism report contains over 500 references to ISIS, including a lengthy introduction assessing its influence in the region, compared with under 30 mentions of the P.K.K.

A spotlight on the people reshaping our politics. A conversation with voters across the country. And a guiding hand through the endless news cycle, telling you what you really need to know.

“The P.K.K. has never ranked close to ISIS in number of incidents or casualties, or been ranked as a top terrorist group in this official report,” said Anthony H. Cordesman, a national security analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

That’s supported by the data. In 2018, the Islamic State committed more than 735 terrorist attacks and killed some 2,200 people while the P.K.K. was responsible for 122 attacks and 136 deaths, according to a recent report from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism at the University of Maryland. (The report noted that the Taliban in Afghanistan was responsible for more attacks in 2018 than any other group “by a wide margin.”)

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

Reporter: “Even after all you have seen, ISIS prisoners freed, all the humanitarian disaster, you don’t have any regret for giving Erdogan the green light to invade?”

Mr. Trump: “I didn’t give him a green light. When you make a statement like that, it’s so deceptive. Just the opposite of a green light. First of all, we had virtually no soldiers there.”

This is misleading.

A defiant Mr. Trump repeatedly insisted that the United States had no business in the region and suggested that pulling its forces out of Northern Syria mattered little because there were few American service members — “26, 28, but under 58 soldiers” — there.

Fewer than 50 special operations soldiers were relocated “out of the immediate zone of attack,” Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper said on Friday.

But that figure is hardly representative of overall troop levels in Syria. Mr. Trump plans to withdraw 1,000 troops from Syria. A separate group of 150 troops in southern Syria will stay there.

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

“We were supposed to be there for 30 days, we stayed for 10 years.”

False.

The Syrian conflict broke out in 2011, but there was no major United States involvement until 2014 and no American ground troops in the area until 2015 — a period of four to five years, not a decade. Furthermore, there were no timetables established, much less a commitment to limit the military engagement to 30 days.

When former President Barack Obama announced the start of airstrikes against Islamic State targets in 2014, he did not define a timeline but instead said “the overall effort will take time.”

A year later, when the Obama administration announced the deployment of fewer than 50 special operations forces on the ground in Syria, Josh Earnest, a press secretary for Mr. Obama, also declined to give a specific date for withdrawal.

“This is not a short-term proposition in terms of our counter-ISIL strategy,” Mr. Earnest said in October 2015, using another acronym for the Islamic State.

Brett H. McGurk, a former special presidential envoy for the coalition to defeat ISIS, refuted Mr. Trump’s 30-day timeline last week in a tweet: “None of this is true.”

WHAT MR. TRUMP SAID

Reporter: “What’s your bottom line with Turkey? Are you O.K. with Erdogan saying he’s not going to do a cease-fire?”

Mr. Trump: “He didn’t say that at all.”

False.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey did, in fact, rule out a cease-fire.

“They say ‘declare a cease-fire’. We will never declare a cease-fire,” Mr. Erdogan said in a news conference Tuesday, according to Reuters.

OTHER CLAIMS

Mr. Trump also repeated a number of other claims The Times has previously fact-checked:

He suggested the Democratic National Committee server hacked in the 2016 election was missing and repeated the conspiracy theory that the owner of American company that examined it “is from Ukraine.” (The server is on display at the D.N.C.’s headquarters and the owner is an American citizen born in Russia.)

He wrongly claimed the United States “never won” a trade case before the World Trade Organization before he took office. (It has won 85.7 percent of the cases it has initiated before the W.T.O. since 1995.)

He again misstated how the North Atlantic Treaty Organization works when he said many members “aren’t paying their dues.” (Members do not pay NATO, but rather commit to spending 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense.)

He exaggerated when he said the trade deficit between the United States and the European Union was \$150 billion. (It’s \$115 billion.)

He claimed that “I lost maybe 2 million votes, maybe more, because of Facebook.” (He was likely referring to a disputed estimate about the impact of Google’s search results on the 2016 elections.)

Has the war in Syria now killed off all accountability for war crimes? (Newsweek) By Ken Sofer
October 25, 2019

President Trump's impulsive decision to allow the slaughter of Kurdish civilians and the Syrian Democratic Forces—the American-backed Kurdish militia that led the fight to destroy ISIS—will leave a dark legacy that extends far beyond this war or this presidency. The two-week Turkish offensive against Kurdish-held northeast Syria is the latest chapter in today's age of impunity, with dire consequences for civilians, humanitarians, and global security.

In the two weeks since Trump's fateful decision, over 150,000 people, including 70,000 children, have been displaced, airstrikes have attacked medical and humanitarian facilities designed to help people fleeing the violence, children and other victims have suffered chemical burns that appear to be from white phosphorus-laced weapons, Syrian government forces have

reclaimed territory they haven't stepped foot in for years, and ISIS appears poised for a resurgence with every other military force in the region now distracted. There have also been disturbing reports of executions of civilians by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed opposition groups, which General Mazlum Kobane, the head of Kurdish forces in the region, predicted would result in "the biggest ethnic cleansing operation of the 21st century."

The horrifying images coming out of northern Syria are a sign that we are living in what David Miliband calls an "age of impunity"—an era where the previously agreed-upon rules that govern war, politics, and international affairs are increasingly violated without concern for the consequences. It's an era in which violations of international humanitarian law, like the ones being committed at this very moment by an allied NATO military, are not simply the unfortunate result of the fog of war—rather, they are part of a deliberate strategy of terror, brutality, and cruelty designed to displace as many people as possible and break the will of the unfortunate few who remain.

Since 2011, Syria has been the epicenter of impunity, beginning first and foremost with Assad and his supporters butchering peaceful protestors, which prompted the first rebels to take up arms against him. That original sin has spawned an ugly, soul-warping war that has dirtied anyone who has dared enter it. When Assad used chemical weapons to attack his own civilians, President Obama's failure to impose costs for his stated red line (reinforced by the UK parliament and the U.S. Congress's equal unwillingness to take any action, along with the thirteen Russian and seven Chinese vetoes in the United Nations Security Council) only reinforced the notion that there are no consequences in Syria, no matter how awful the crime.

This legacy of impunity deepened with the deliberate targeting of hospitals, aid convoys, and civilian infrastructure by Syrian and Russian air forces, particularly in and around Idlib. Since the beginning of the conflict there have been 583 attacks on health facilities—including attacks against eight facilities supported by my organization, the International Rescue Committee, since this April—resulting in the death of 912 medical personnel. When the UN began working with international humanitarian organizations to provide the exact GPS coordinates of hospitals to the various militaries in the conflict, Russian air craft still repeatedly and deliberately struck these deconflicted sites, including striking four hospitals in a 12-hour span in May. The situation has become so desperate that some humanitarian groups, including ours have begun deploying mobile health clinics which can more easily flee incoming missiles.

The Turkish offensive that began last week, the result of Trump's spur-of-the-moment decision to cave to Turkish President Erdogan's demands to establish a so-called "safe zone" in Syria is just the latest, saddest chapter in this war of impunity. The fact that Erdogan made it clear he would commit a series of international humanitarian law violations in his move, including forcibly repatriating 1-2 million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey, intentionally displacing Kurdish civilians, and massacring the American-backed Kurdish forces, seemed to make no difference in the decision to greenlight the invasion. The reports of Turkish and Turkish-backed forces executing Kurdish captives on the side of road with their hands bound behind their backs, targeting and murdering female politician Hevrin Khalaf by a highway, and attacking civilian targets, including water supplies and bakeries, has only confirmed the worst predictions.

Syria is part of a broader story we're seeing around the world. The number of aid workers killed, injured, or kidnapped is up 60 percent since 2010 to a total of 405 humanitarians last year. The Freedom in the World report highlights eleven countries where there have been ethnic cleansing incidents this year compared to just three in 2005. More people are being displaced per person killed in combat—from a historical ratio of 5 to 1 compared to the 25 to 1 rate in Syria—which could be a sign that governments like Turkey realize that subduing a hostile population is much easier what a large percentage of that population has already fled.

The U.S. and Europe are not the primary culprits in this age of impunity, but we should be clear about their complicity. By de-prioritizing human rights in their rhetoric and declining to enforce international humanitarian law, Western powers have inadvertently sent the signal to authoritarian leaders from Syria to China to Saudi Arabia to Russia that the only law of war that matters is that might makes right.

The U.S. under President Trump has fed this dangerous sense of impunity in both word and deed. Bragging about the "Mother of All Bombs" in Afghanistan, defending alleged war crimes committed by military officers, continuing to supply weapons to the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition in Yemen despite their documented use of force against civilians including a bus-load of children, claiming that the best way to fight terrorism is by "taking out their families," and praising another leader for his use of extrajudicial killings has made it frighteningly clear that this administration does not view international humanitarian law as a priority and will not punish those who deliberately violate it.

Even if Trump can credibly argue that he did not know just how brutal Turkish troops would act once they encountered Kurdish forces, his words and actions rolled out the red carpet for the ethnic cleansing we're seeing now. Trump's response to the atrocities, that the Kurds are "not angels" and that whatever happens between Turkey, Russia, Syria, and the Kurds is none of our business because "there's a lot of sand that they can play with," only reinforces perceptions that the U.S. has no intention of establishing accountability for these crimes.

Europe's role in this disaster has been less dramatic than America's and thus the continent has avoided some of the harsh spotlight pointed at Trump. But by showing cowardice in the face of a refugee crisis they did their best to ignore until it was on their doorstep, the EU and its member states allowed themselves to be held hostage by Erdogan's brazen threat to flood Europe with 3.6 million Syrian refugees. European governments have unfortunately made it clear that while they may not support a Kurdish massacre in Syria or widespread Libyan abuses of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, both outcomes are preferable in their eyes to more migrants and refugees making their way across the Mediterranean and the Balkans into the Schengen area.

But the U.S. and key European countries like Germany, France, the UK, and Sweden don't have to simply stand back and watch impunity become the morbid moniker of our generation. Though reestablishing a semblance of accountability in Syria years after it was initially broken may not be possible in the near-term, policymakers should learn three lessons from Syria to prevent the impunity mindset from embedding itself elsewhere and reaping greater chaos for the most vulnerable.

The first lesson is that our leverage to stop such atrocities drops precipitously the moment the atrocities begin—in nearly all cases of foreign policy, it is easier to deter action before it happens than to compel changes to existing policy. This is particularly evident as the Trump administration frantically tries to put the genie back in the bottle by agreeing to a Turkey after it green-lit the invasion in the first place. The U.S. can suspend Turkey from NATO, disinvite the country from international conferences, kick it out of the F-35 program, or sanction it into economic ruin, but all of these actions would have likely had a greater impact on Turkish decision-making if threatened or implemented before Ankara made any decisions. Deterring war crimes requires credible threats, and that means threatening action before the deed is done.

The second lesson is the need to be explicit about what we're trying to prevent and disentangle adherence to international humanitarian law from broader geopolitical goals. This should in theory be relatively easy for enforcing the laws of war and international humanitarian law because they are very clearly codified in a series of documents, including the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, which all 196 states are party to, and the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, to which all nations are bound.

But by inconsistently and selectively calling out war crimes and other violations of international humanitarian law, the U.S. muddied its ability to send a credible signal that they actually did care whether or not humanitarian law was followed, separate from our geopolitical interests in Syria. So when Assad heard that the use of chemical weapons was a redline for President Obama in August 2012, one year after Obama said Assad must go, it's very possible Assad thought the chemical weapons line was simply an excuse to pursue a regime change policy as opposed to a honest, separate concern for the Chemical Weapons Convention. The fact that Trump only references human rights as a means to attack geopolitical rivals has only blurred these lines further and diluted any call for lawfulness. This is the other side of the coin of deterrence: establishing credible assurances that we're willing to not pull the trigger if international humanitarian law is respected.

The third lesson is the need to consistently speak up and speak out when these lines are crossed. Public outcry may feel inadequate in the face of such atrocities, but in an era where countries are willing to pay millions of dollars to PR agencies to prevent bad publicity in Washington and London, day after day of bad press coverage will make governments pay attention. There's even speculation that the constant bad press and criticism in Congress over atrocities in Yemen contributed to the UAE's decision to withdraw their support for that war. Calling out atrocities must include publicly documenting the facts. The newly announced UN Board of Inquiry in Syria is a step in the right direction, but the fact that the UN has yet to pledge to make the findings public is a cause for concern. The Board of Inquiry should examine the alleged violations of international humanitarian law in both northwest and northeast Syria, and the findings and evidence should be released to the public if it is going to help establish accountability in this war. Accountability mechanisms like the Board of Inquiry should become commonplace and it should never come as a surprise to a foreign leader or a military commander when Western capitals erupt in fury over war crimes. The more consistently we loudly and defiantly apply public pressure, the more it will strengthen the credible threats used to deter such atrocities.

Fighting back against an age of impunity that has become the norm on 21st century battlefields won't be easy and we shouldn't pretend there's a silver bullet that can put the broken pieces back together, but it would be a serious mistake to simply accept the abuses we are currently seeing in northeast and northwestern Syria. The only way to fight back is to start chipping away at the aura of inevitability, the belief that the rules are for suckers, and the mindset that all is fair in war. Deterring such behavior only happens by establishing clear and credible threats and assurances and speaking out every single time that line is crossed. Kurdish blood is on our hands because we let that mindset become the norm in international affairs, and there is much more blood to be spilled if we don't start untangling ourselves from this age of impunity.

'Be afraid': one woman's fight to hold Liberia's warlords to account (The Guardian) By Ruth Maclean and Tecee Boley
October 23, 2019

As a child in Liberia's first civil war, Rustonlyn Dennis remembers seeing dead bodies

in the street. In 1991, her immediate family managed to get out of the shattered capital, Monrovia, and survived, but a dozen relatives starved to death.

Civilians were attacked, child soldiers recruited and ethnic groups were targeted in that war, setting a pattern for many of the wars that were to follow on the African continent. Hundreds of thousands of people died.

Like Dennis, now a legislator in the west African country's parliament, most Liberians have a war story to tell. But decades later, a thorough reckoning has still not been had. The recommendations of Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), published in 2009, have never been implemented, and former rebels and their associates have held some of the country's highest offices.

The country's president, George Weah, appears to be changing tack, however, writing to parliament in September to ask for advice on implementing the TRC recommendations including setting up the war crimes court that activists have long demanded, and telling the UN the country needs "closure" on the wounds of 14 years of war – though he stopped short of openly supporting the establishment of the war crimes court.

Dennis has been instrumental in pushing for a resolution on a bill calling for the establishment of such a court, hailed as one of Liberia's first steps towards addressing the legacy of the civil wars.

"I feel all those souls that were lost – we should account for it," she says. "If we don't hold perpetrators accountable, we will have another war. People fought the war because of corruption, nepotism and greed. These things are happening again."

Dennis says she has faced threats from former warlords because of her fight to bring perpetrators of past human rights violations to justice.

Momentum has built, with groups such as the Traditional Chiefs Council gradually coming on board. One of the recommendations of a recently held three-day National Economic Dialogue was to set up the court. At least 52 lawmakers signed the resolution, giving it the requisite support of two-thirds of the House of Representatives. However, recently the Speaker refused to include it on the House agenda, saying that members needed more time to consult their constituents.

The country's Nobel prize-winning former president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, did not act on the TRC's recommendations, including one that she, along with others, should not hold office for 30 years due to her support for war criminal-turned-president Charles Taylor early in his career.

Initially Weah showed every sign of following Sirleaf's lead, despite having called for justice for those who recruited child soldiers 15 years ago.

Addressing the UN in September, however, Weah said he had changed his mind because of a "rising chorus of voices" calling for a tribunal, including, he said, "alleged perpetrators who seem to wish to clear their names".

Although he said he was at a loss to understand why there was such clamour for the court now and not before, he said: "It is important to bring closure to the wounds from the 14 years of Liberia's brutal civil war ... we need to agree on a mechanism that will guarantee the sustenance of peace, stability, justice and reconciliation."

Returning to Liberia from the UN general assembly, however, Weah appeared to backtrack, saying that he had merely informed the UN about the calls for a court, not supported one himself. "I have never one day called for the war-crimes court," he said. "Why should we focus on the war crimes court now, when we did not focus on it 12 years ago?"

To win the 2017 election, Weah relied on the support of Prince Johnson, a warlord-turned-senator who was involved in the killing of the brutal former military ruler Samuel Doe on camera. Fear of upsetting Johnson, and his many supporters, may have been the reason Weah did not act sooner.

Johnson argues a war crimes court would be illegal, though he has said he supports Weah's request for advice on it from the legislature.

People claiming to speak on behalf of Prince Johnson have issued threats to Dennis. She says "since then, there has been this unknown or unlicensed black vehicle that is always tailing me."

Johnson denied any involvement in phone calls to Dennis, adding that he is now a preacher and "vehemently condemn[s] any form of violence against people".

Dennis says she has also received direct threats from other high-profile figures.

"I will get to you, and those who sent you will regret [it]," Dennis says she was told in one phone call.

Nevertheless, she believes it is a cause worth fighting for.

“I just want to walk in light, I just want to walk in justice, and I stand for justice,” she says. “I think the time to be afraid is over, I think they [the warlords] should be afraid now.”

It would help the country economically, she says, because nobody wants to invest in a “totally lawless” country. The economy has sunk since Weah took over in 2017.

If there is no accountability, she says, history will repeat itself.

“How sure are we that another group of people will not rise up again for political power? If we don’t set a precedent, there will always be bloodshed, there will always be killing, there will always be murders.”

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Piracy

The Decline of Maritime Piracy in the Horn of Africa (Jewish Policy Center) By Peter Cook and Terry McKnight
October 11, 2019

In the early morning hours of 17 November 2008, the M/V Sirius Star, approximately 450 nautical miles off the east coast of Kenya, was transiting the Indian Ocean with a full load of two million barrels of crude oil heading for the United States. Well south of Somalia to avoid the prominently pirate-infested area of the Gulf of Aden. The crewmembers of the Sirius Star believed they were well clear of any pirate activity. Without warning the ship was under attack and hijacked by Somali pirates. Even to this day it has never been determined how the pirates knew the location of the Sirius Star, but being fully loaded, with a low freeboard and steaming at less than ten knots the vessel became a prime target.

In the storied history of global pirate activity, the Sirius Star became the largest ship ever hijacked. The Somali pirates had hit the jackpot. Shortly after her capture the Somali pirate leaders demanded the ship owner pay \$25 million for her release. In January 2009, after months of tense negotiations and pressure from major maritime powers in the international community not to make ransom payments, a final agreement was reached to pay the pirates \$3 million for the release of the Sirius Star.

From 2007 to 2012 there were more than 200 vessels captured by Somali pirates in the Horn of Africa region. Fearful of being hijacked in the Gulf of Aden, many merchant ships avoided the area and transited farther out to sea in the Indian Ocean. Starting in 2005 with the hijacking of the M/V Feisty Gas and the eventual ransom payment of over a quarter of a million dollars for her recovery, the cost of piracy off the Horn of Africa reached its peak in 2010 with ransom payments totaling over \$200 million. As in the case of the Sirius Star and the legendary capture of Captain Richard Phillips with his vessel the M/V Maersk Alabama, the Somali pirates changed their tactics and extended their reach hundreds of miles off their coastline into the complexities of the Indian Ocean. This extraordinary increase in pirate activity in the Northwest Indian Ocean region during this period amazed the entire maritime world.

To understand the beginning of this event in history, you must understand the region and the Federal Republic of Somalia. Located in the Horn of Africa, Somalia borders the Gulf of Aden one of the busiest shipping regions in the world. More than 25,000 vessels transit this waterway each year. Most vessels are heading to or from the Suez Canal for ports of call in the Middle East, Mediterranean, Far East and the United States. The state of Somalia itself was formed in 1960 after years of colonial rule by both Italian and British governments. With a government never able to establish any form of rule or economy, Somalia has been devastated for years from tribal warfare and terrorism. Boasting 1,800 miles of coastline, the waters off the coast of Somalia are some of the most abundant fishing grounds in the world. With no central government to fund a navy or coast guard to defend its territorial waters (12 nautical miles), much less the economic exclusive zone (200 nautical miles) numerous foreign fishing fleets have devastated Somali waters without any concern of expense or retribution. Trying to deter these actions, Somali fisherman formed their own law enforcement coalition, capturing fishing vessels and demanding ransom payments. Quickly realizing the considerable profits gained by hijacking merchant vessels in the Gulf of Aden, tribal leaders began recruiting young males to go to sea and capture any vessel they could apprehend. With the seizure of the MV Danica White in June of 2007 not only were fishing vessels under attack, but merchant vessels as well. After almost three months in

captivity and a ransom payment of nearly \$1 million for the release of the Danica White, during the next five years piracy in the Gulf of Aden developed into an exceptionally lucrative business.

How could this vast maritime region be terrorized by a third-world nation? Who were these swashbucklers? With Somalia's per capita income of less than \$300 per year, most of the pirates themselves were young desperate men in their late teens and early twenties with no realistic employment prospects, pushed to a life of crime. They were hired by more experienced local fisherman that served as "pirate leaders" as a result of their familiarity with fishing in the region. However, it has been revealed over the years that reputable warlords served as the negotiators for ransom payments once the vessels were captured. During the height of the piracy period, there was even a "Pirate Stock Exchange" in which investors would provide either money, weapons or small craft to profit from the ransom payments. With a clear understanding of the global economy, the pirate kingpins required ransom payments be made in U.S. dollars only and in \$100 bill denominations.

In the early stages of piracy, the buccaneers departed the port of Bosaso in the northeastern Puntland State of Somalia. Generally, with several small boats teaming together, they were loaded with six to eight pirates each, an assortment of Soviet-era weapons (AK-47 assault rifles), GPS receivers, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG's) and grappling hooks. The indisputable indication that these boats were not fishing vessels is that they were generally overcrowded and showed no visual sign of any fishing nets. The pirates themselves having very little knowledge of the sea, would head north in the Gulf of Aden and attack in the busy shipping lanes. As the pirates became more brazen and had the assistance of dhows (medium size fishing vessels – motherships), they extended their reach to the Indian Ocean. As successful as they would be if they seized a vessel, nearly 50 percent of the pirates that ventured to sea never returned. With heightened concern over the reduction in the free flow of commerce in the region, it became essential for the maritime powers to come together and find a resolution. Most suggested that more navy ships would solve the problem. However, with an area of over 2.5 million square miles, there could never be enough navy ships to patrol this strategic waterway. After much debate, four significant measures that became major factors in stemming piracy in the region.

In 2001 U.S. Central Command established Combined Task Force 150 to patrol the Horn of Africa to fight the global war on terrorism. With very little resources to deal with the piracy problem Task Force 150 was hastily shifted to provide support for the anti-piracy mission. With the increasing number of pirate attacks in 2008, U.S. Central Command took an additional measure and in January 2009 Combined Task Force 151 was commissioned exclusively for counter piracy operations. More than 20 countries provided critical resources from ships to aircraft, in support of Task Force 151. First commanded by a U.S. Navy admiral in 2009, today the task force is under the command of Rear Admiral Byeong-Ju Yu, Republic of Korea Navy. To provide protection along the Somalia coast for vessels belonging to the World Food Program (WFP) and African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), Operation ATALANTA was established in 2008 with nations from the European Union (EU) providing support. Approved by the North Atlantic Council in 2009, Operation Ocean Shield was established with assistance from NATO nations for anti-piracy missions. Even today Task Force 151 and Operation ATALANTA are fully operational and still provide many security measures for the region. Operation Ocean Shield sporadically patrolled the Gulf of Aden and ceased operations in December of 2016. Over the last several years there have been scores of maritime powers providing resources to the counter piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden. Even the Swedish Navy provided boarding team training to African maritime personnel. One noteworthy navy that has continually deployed to the region to protect its massive merchant fleet is the People's Republic of China – Navy (PLAN), first operational in late 2008. The Chinese clearly understand the importance of the region for the free flow of commerce. China has even established a logistics facility in Djibouti. Even though they operate independently, PLAN forces have continuously cooperated with the other task forces and are a major reason why piracy has decreased in the region.

In December 2008 the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed both Resolutions 1846 and 1851. These gave States cooperating with the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG) the powers to enter Somalia's territorial waters and use "all necessary means" to fight piracy in the region. With these resolutions, navies could extend their reach to go after the pirates in their encampments and if necessary bring down their economic support enterprises.

There are very few times over the years when the U.N. Security Council has voted with all 15 members supporting a resolution to enforce international laws. Without these resolutions the navies patrolling the region would only have been allowed to take measures in international waters and the pirates would have had the protection of their territorial waters under international law.

Despite the unprecedented cooperation and coordination by naval forces from a plethora of nations, the pirates retained the upper hand, hijacking ships at an alarming rate. In 2009, the year that Combined Task Force 151, EUNAVFOR's Operation ATALANTA and NATO's Operation OCEAN SHIELD commenced coordinated operations, more than 75 vessels were attacked by pirates, of which more than 40 ships were successfully hijacked, with at least 850 seafarers being taken hostage for several months. It was clear that a sea area greater than 2,500,000 square miles was almost impossible to dominate without a significantly greater commitment of naval resources than were deemed available by contributing governments. The U.S. State Department and the British Admiralty had already made the point that "piracy" was a merchant navy problem, implying that

the industry should take measures to protect their own ships.

Consequently, the international shipping associations worked with the International Maritime Organization (IMO – the U.N. agency responsible for the safety and security of international shipping) to establish the Best Management Practices (BMP) for ship self-protection, establish the Internationally Recognized Transit Corridor (IRTC – a convoy route for ships escorted by warships) through the Gulf of Aden and define a voluntary reporting area (later referred to as the High Risk Area – HRA) of the Northwest Indian Ocean. The associations also worked closely with the naval coalitions to improve mutual understanding and collaboration.

As the number of attacks across the vast expanse of the High Risk Area increased, several ships per day on some occasions, ship owners were anxiously looking for a different way to reassure their crews against capture, and protect their ships and cargoes. Additionally, the growing number of attacks and successful hijackings also dramatically increased insurance premiums for ships transiting one of the busiest areas of sea in the world (at any one time, around 40 percent of the global commercial fleet are in the western Indian Ocean), significantly increasing costs for ship owners. Several shipowners were experimenting with using unarmed security advisors to support their crews during the transit to avoid pirate boardings.

The unprecedented use of private military and private security companies in Iraq and Afghanistan, led by the U.S. and UK, had demonstrated an innovative effective way to measurably improve “point” rather than area security, at a reduced financial and potential political cost to governments. While the use of private armed guards to protect ships was initially viewed by most of the commercial shipping industry as repugnant, several incidents, including the capture of the M/V Biscaglia in November 2008 (in which the unarmed guards jumped overboard to save their own lives, having failed to deter a pirate hijacking), forced shipowners to reconsider.

Embarking small teams of armed guards on ships transiting the High Risk Area became increasingly popular, especially when their use reduced the cost of insurance premiums, making it often a break-even decision. In 2011, this developing trend prompted the IMO, along with shipping associations and the Security Association for the Maritime Industry (SAMI the representative and regulatory body for armed guards) to issue guidance on the use of armed guards by flag states and shipowners. In 2012, the shipping industry defined a standardized contract for the employment of armed guards, while the IMO, shipping industry and SAMI stipulated how private maritime security companies should conduct their activities. This was soon followed by the introduction of a model set of “Rules for the Use of Force” for private armed guards protecting ships against attacking pirates, sponsored by flag States, shipping associations and SAMI.

The collective efforts of the naval coalitions and merchant shipping self-protective measures, including the use of armed guards, worked, spurring the Chief of Staff of EUNAVFOR’s Operation ATALANTA to state publicly that “armed guards are part of the solution, not part of the problem.” In May 2012, pirates successfully hijacked their last large commercial ship, in this most recent episode of piracy in the Northwest Indian Ocean. There have been several isolated piracy attacks in the High Risk Area over the past few years, but they have all been unsuccessful. The naval coalitions maintain a presence, albeit significantly reduced, BMP protection measures for ships have been improved and embarked private armed guard teams continue to be used in large numbers.

This unlikely triumvirate is effectively deterring pirate attacks. However, complacency is the greatest enemy. Pirates retain the capability and capacity to return to sea and, if they sense the opportunity of success, piracy will return. The best way to fight piracy at sea is to invest in Somalia as a nation because pirates may ply their trade at sea, but they live ashore and that is where the difference is made.

Since the peak of piracy in the Horn of Africa region in 2010 the number of hijackings in last few years has virtually come to a standstill. This does not mean that seafarers can lower their guard on the high seas. As long as ships go to sea, there will be piracy. Off the west coast of Africa in the Gulf of Guinea there has been a major increase in piracy and armed robberies. The pirates in the Gulf of Guinea have a far more combative nature than the pirates of Somalia. The Somali pirates stick to the “pirate code” and in only a few rare cases have injured their captives. This is not the case in the Gulf of Guinea. These pirates are going after the oil rich cargo and have little regard for human life.

The most remarkable outcome in the history of piracy is that the entire maritime community came together to find a solution regarding Somalia. Starting with the United Nations Security Council, to the coalition forces working jointly together, the merchant community investing in its own protection and heads of state providing the funding to improve the lives of the average Somali citizen. The unabridged Horn of Africa counter-piracy operation has been a text book success for future international conflicts.

Lagos Water Record Highest Piracy Attacks In 2019 Q3 – IMB (Nigerian Tribune) By Tola Adenubi-Lagos
October 17, 2019

(IMB) has stated that in 2019, Lagos waters recorded the highest piracy attacks, recording 11 attacks in all, the highest number for any port.

“There were fewer incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships than the first nine months of 2018.”

119 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships have been reported to the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB PRC) in 2019, compared to 156 incidents for the same period in 2018. Overall, the 2019 incidents include 95 vessels boarded, 10 vessels fired upon, 10 attempted attacks, and four vessels hijacked. The number of the crew taken hostage through the first nine months has declined from 112 in 2018 to 49 in 2019.

“While the overall number of incidents has dropped, incidents involving guns and knives remain consistent. There have been 24 knife-related and 35 gun-related incidents reported in 2019, compared to 25 and 37 for the first nine months of 2018.

These statistics confirm IMB’s concerns over continued threats to the safety and security of seafarers.

“The Gulf of Guinea remains a high-risk area for piracy and armed robbery. The region accounts for 86 percent of the crew taken hostage and nearly 82percent of crew kidnappings globally.

“In July a general cargo vessel was hijacked approximately 120nm South West from Brass. Ten crew members were kidnapped from the vessel and released four weeks later.

In August a bulk carrier and a general cargo vessel were boarded within hours of each other at Douala anchorage, Cameroon and a total of seventeen crew were kidnapped from the vessels.

West Africa: the center of maritime piracy, armed robbery and kidnap (American Shipper)] By Jim Wilson
October 21, 2019

Nearly all maritime kidnappings and hostage-takings in the nine months to the end of September this year took place in or near the Gulf of Guinea, said global maritime piracy watchdog the International Maritime Bureau (IMB).

New data from the IMB shows that worldwide there have been 70 actual kidnappings of seafarers and 49 hostage-takings year to date. The West African country of Guinea alone saw 23 hostage-takings, Nigeria a further 12 and the West African country of Togo an additional seven. Cameroon and Nigeria were hot spots for kidnapping, too.

The IMB says about 86% of all maritime hostage-taking and 82% of all actual kidnappings happen in or near the Gulf of Guinea. The body adds that there were at least 119 incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships from January through September. That’s a 31% decline compared to the 156 incidents recorded in the same period in 2018.

“Although incidents are down, the Gulf of Guinea continues to be a concern for piracy and armed robbery-related activities, with kidnappings of crew members increasing in both scale and frequency,” said Pottengal Mukundan, a director of the IMB.

That said, the IMB freely concedes that there’s a high degree of under-reporting. The assistant director of the IMB, Cyrus Moody, told FreightWaves that the IMB’s own research indicates there’s roughly a 50% under-reporting of incidents.

Possible reasons why include the fear that insurers will hike rates if it is known that a ship was attacked. There are also fears that if an attack on a ship is reported then criminals may “go harder on the crew,” the next time the same ship is attacked. Some operators may worry that local authorities could hold or delay the ship.

The Gulf of Guinea lies between West Africa and Central Africa. It’s the sea-space at zero degrees longitude and zero degrees latitude. There are different definitions what constitutes the Gulf of Guinea. The international “Guidelines for Owners, Operators and Masters for protection against piracy and armed robbery in the Gulf of Guinea region,” a document issued by the major global maritime shipping organizations, applies to the waters off the countries of Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Cameroon.

However, the Guidelines also say pirate attacks have occurred as far south as Angola and as far west as Sierra Leone, so the area of threat is enormous.

The Gulf of Guinea is an attractive area of operations for marine criminals for several reasons.

Firstly, it has many high-value targets.

There are many ships because there are numerous ports and a great deal of cargo. And, because vessels are entering or leaving port, ships may be traveling slowly. They may be sitting low in the water, and are therefore easier for pirates to board, because

they are fully laden. Or they may be at anchor waiting for commercial instructions or repairs or for any number of other reasons. As Moody pointed out, ships are constantly entering and leaving, or waiting around or in, the area of high threat.

Secondly, the targets are poorly defended because of certain provisions of international law. That is also the reason why experts talk of “piracy” and “armed robbery against ships,” and why there is a distinction between the two in statistical tracking, even though they’re physically the same crime.

A summary of Article 101 of the UN Convention on the International Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) indicates that maritime piracy is any illegal act of violence committed for private ends by the crew or passengers of a private ship and directed on the high seas, or in a place outside the jurisdiction of any country, against another ship.

The International Maritime Organization, a specialized body of the United Nations, uses the international definition for piracy to define “armed robbery against ships” but with the difference that the crime happens within the borders of a country.

The key parts are the concept of “high seas” and “outside the jurisdiction of any country.” Or, to put it another way, whether a maritime crime is “piracy” or an “armed robbery against a ship” depends upon where the crime happens in relation to the international/territorial border. So a crime against a ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is piracy. But a criminal attack on a ship in, say, the Port of Long Beach, California, is armed robbery against a ship in the U.S.

On land, a man-made barrier, or a natural barrier such as a river, often marks the location of the border. While there are no visible barriers or landmarks at sea, nonetheless, there is still a border. Under UNCLOS, a country’s sovereignty can extend from the coast out to sea up to a limit of 12 nautical miles (about 13.8 U.S. miles). This sea-space is known as the territorial sea. Just as crimes against crew and ships in U.S. territorial waters are subject to U.S. law, crimes against crew and ships in the waters off Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria and Cameroon are subject to the criminal laws of those countries. The close proximity of all those sovereign nations poses several challenges.

Law enforcers have a right of “hot pursuit” under article 111 of UNCLOS. Marine police (or navies) can chase and capture criminals who flee out of a country’s jurisdiction and onto the high seas. But if the criminals cross the border into a neighboring country, the chasing police lose that right. And, just as happens with neighboring countries the world over, police and criminal investigators cannot wander freely back and forth across borders to tackle crime. A few years ago there was a big problem with Somali pirates attacking ships as they sailed through the Gulf of Aden. Deployment of armed guards aboard ships was the primary means of tackling Somali piracy along the east coast of Africa. Unlike ships in the Gulf of Guinea, however, ships sailing off the coast of Somalia were attacked in international waters and therefore the law of the local coastal state did not apply. So armed guards were a legally sensible response.

But that wouldn’t work in the Gulf of Guinea. Ships have to enter and leave the territories of the coastal states to visit the local ports. Nations jealously guard their monopoly on the right to use armed force in their jurisdictions and generally do not allow large numbers of openly armed foreigners to enter and hang around in their territory. So ship-borne foreign armed guards would not be allowed.

National sovereignty presents a further problem to deterring or stopping pirates because not every country has a well-developed law enforcement and judicial system. There’s a good reason there’s no piracy epidemic immediately off the coast of, say, the state of Oregon. U.S. law enforcement would take decisive action against repeated acts of organized piracy or armed robbery in that area. And the U.S. has prosecutors, courts, judges and a penal system to try, convict, sentence and imprison pirates and other maritime criminals.

That’s not so in the Gulf of Guinea.

“Nigeria did not even have piracy as a crime,” Moody explained to FreightWaves. So piracy (if outside the territorial sea) or armed robbery against ships couldn’t even be prosecuted as such in Nigeria. However, Moody pointed out that Nigeria has more recently enacted laws against piracy.

“You always have maritime crime where the response from law enforcement and the judicial system is not adequate or robust,” Moody told FreightWaves.

However, Moody added, there is a sense that Nigeria acknowledges there is a problem and is taking the first steps to tackle offshore violence.

Moody said there was a regional law enforcement conference recently to discuss the issue, and local authorities are thinking about partnerships to carry out security exercises and safeguard local waters.

And, in the last few days, the Nigerian Navy has announced that it will use designated maritime courts to handle cases of piracy and maritime armed robbery. Moody also said the Nigerian Navy will respond to calls for help.

“We have good cooperation with the Nigerian Navy and the local maritime administration. We’ve relayed information to the Nigerian Navy who have gone to assist,” Moody stated. But there are other obstacles to enforcement.

Africa is huge. And the Gulf of Guinea sea-space is vast. The straight-line distance from the western border of Ghana to the southern border of Cameroon is about 910 U.S. miles. If a mariner were able to sail the same distance in a north-northeast direction in a straight line from the southern tip of Florida, he or she would finish at roughly the same latitude as Richmond, Virginia.

Moody pointed out that if a navy does respond to a distress call in the further reaches of the Gulf of Guinea, “it’s a few hours of sailing. Pirates have been, done what they need, and have left”. That’s a problem because pirates often kidnap and hold crew in some pretty inhospitable terrain. Nigeria alone saw 23 kidnappings and 12 hostage-takings of seafarers, and Cameroon saw another 23 kidnappings. Areas where hostages are held include marshes, rivers, swamps and jungle. So there are physical as well as jurisdictional barriers to tracking down pirates and robbers who have kidnapped crew.

Shipping industry executives do not discuss how much they pay in ransoms, and the crew are held hostage during the negotiation period for, on average, about four to 12 weeks.

Unlike their Somali counterparts, West African pirates kidnap crew, rather than hijack ships, because local law enforcement agencies would be able to track down and recapture a large ship. The Somali pirates were able to hijack and seize ships because they operated from a failed state with no local law enforcement. The typical attack by West African pirates and robbers involves the pirates climbing aboard to loot the ship of small property and the crew’s personal effects and to kidnap the crew.

“There’s lots of violence,” Moody explained. “There have been no fatalities this year, but crew do tend to get injured. The typical criminal activity is yelling, shouting and slapping to intimidate and get compliance from the crew. With the slightest resistance from the crew, they tend to get roughed up.”

West African pirates tend to be armed with knives for cutting ropes, crowbars for breaking open doors and lockers, and heavy-caliber automatic firearms.

Apart from ransacking the ships and kidnapping the crew, the pirates also want to steal cargo. Typically, they seize smaller quantities of refined products of crude oil, such as gasoline, that can be sold in the local markets around the Gulf of Guinea.

Indonesian marine police crack down on local pirates (American Shipper) By Jim Wilson
October 23, 2019

Aggressive action by Indonesia’s marine police is putting pressure on Southeast Asian pirates and the number of local attacks is falling, the crime-fighting International Maritime Bureau has reported.

“Recent meetings and continued dialogue between the Indonesian marine police and the IMB PRC resulted in positive actions by the Indonesian authorities which have so far brought incidents down. With the assistance and actions of the IMP, the incidents appear to be decreasing each quarter,” the IMB has stated.

Cyrus Moody, the assistant director of the IMB, told FreightWaves that about 95% of maritime crime in Southeast Asia is of the “armed robbery against ships” variety, which usually takes place in ports and in anchorages. Under global and national laws, a “pirate” attacks ships on the high seas, whereas an “armed robber” attacks ships inside the maritime boundaries of a country. Although it’s physically the same crime, because of that legal difference there are numerous real-world consequences.

Moody added that that there is a “robust response” from Indonesian marine police when maritime robberies are reported and that the drop in piracy and armed robbery numbers can be attributed to their actions.

Incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships around the archipelago nation of Indonesia has plummeted over the last five years, according to the latest statistics by the International Maritime Bureau. There has been a 76.7% fall between 2015 and the year to September in the numbers of actual and attempted attacks by pirates and ship-targeted armed robbers.

“The reason is that the Indonesian marine police and us [the International Maritime Bureau] have exchanged information. We’ve identified 11 areas of concern. The police have put in patrol boats and the incidents have tapered off. The patrol boats can respond very quickly and the perpetrators are caught. It’s about identifying areas of concern and putting in assets,” Moody told FreightWaves.

Between January and September this year in the region of Indonesia, there were 17 actual boardings of ships by marine robbers and three attempted boardings, according to IMB data. Indonesian pirates favor boarding ships that are anchored

(eight ships actually boarded; 47% of the total number of actual boardings) or berthed (six ships actually boarded; 35% of the total). There were only three ships (18%) that were actually boarded while underway.

The Indonesian ports and anchorages that saw the most attempted and actual pirate and maritime attacks this year between January and September are Belawan (three), Taboneo (three) and Tanjung Priok/Jakarta (three).

Moody explained the typical method of attack used by Indonesian pirates. "It's a very different crime," he said, referring by way of contrast to West African maritime armed robbery and piracy. "People board [ships] in the hours of darkness to get their hands on what they can. Usually if they are confronted by the crew they will evade. But sometimes crew are in the wrong place at the wrong time," Moody told FreightWaves.

Although Indonesian and other Southeast Asian pirates typically will flee when confronted by crew, being boarded by Southeast Asian pirates can lead to violence. During the January to September timeframe, there were two assaults during pirate and armed robberies in or near Indonesia, three hostage takings, one person was injured and one person was threatened.

While the majority of reports to the IMB do not state exactly what type of weapons are used, there is a clear trend in Indonesia for "knives" to be used. It is not stated exactly what type of "knives" these are but the everyday use of machetes in rural villages is widespread in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific Islands. The IMB does refer in its commentaries to "knives and/or machetes." There was one incident in which a gun was used in Indonesia.

"During hijackings, there are reports of firearms seen and not used. Still, it's a threat," Moody commented.

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WORTH READING

Reparations at the ICC: The Need for a Human Rights Based Approach to Effectiveness

Carla Ferstman

University of Essex - School of Law

September 19, 2019

This chapter focuses on the effectiveness of reparations at the ICC. It analyses the work of the ICC and the Trust Fund for Victims in awarding and implementing reparations to victims. It considers the process as well as the outcomes on reparations in those cases where reparations orders have been made as well as the assistance mandate of the Trust Fund. It does not review all aspects of the reparations process, but instead focuses on key trends from which patterns can be ascertained and goes on to consider what steps might be taken to improve

effectiveness.

The chapter concludes that the competing approaches to the purpose of reparations have led to vastly different perspectives on what would constitute effective reparations. These different perspectives have made it difficult for the Court to adopt a unified vision to improve reparations outcomes. The lack of unity has hampered the kind of strategic thinking and decision-making necessary to make reparations work effectively, taking into account the built-in constraints of the Statute. The more the failings become evident, the more pressure is on the system to find quick fixes or to narrow the objectives which ultimately reduce the prospects for effectiveness further. This is a cyclical problem which does not end well for the victims who continue to await – with growing impatience – reparations.

Adopting a human rights based approach to effectiveness would help the Court to develop victim-centred thinking, which is essential for effective reparations. It would also assist to inculcate a culture of institutional accountability and transparency towards the victim stakeholders of reparations. Despite the sui generis character of ICC proceedings, recognising that victims should have a right to expect effective reparations procedures and clear outcomes, and that the ICC is accountable to deliver them, may help reorient the process.

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War Crimes Prosecution Watch is prepared by the
International Justice Practice of the **Public International Law & Policy Group**
and the **Frederick K. Cox International Law Center** of
Case Western Reserve University School of Law
and is made possible by grants from the **Carnegie Corporation of New York**
and the **Open Society Institute**.

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