



War Crimes Prosecution
Watch

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A Global Pro Bono Law Firm

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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

The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It (The New York Times) By David D.

Kirkpatrick

April 14, 2020

Early last spring, just before a planned American-backed peace conference between warring factions in Libya, the aspiring Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter arranged a phone call with John R. Bolton, then the White House national security adviser.

Mr. Hifter did not want to talk peace.

A former Libyan Army general and onetime C.I.A. client, Mr. Hifter wanted a White House blessing for a surprise attack to seize Tripoli, the capital, before the peace talks commenced.

Mr. Bolton did not say no.

The attack, launched last April 4, backfired badly. Mr. Hifter failed to capture Tripoli, overextended his forces and restarted a civil war — killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands more. The fighting has cut off the flow of Libyan oil, injected new volatility into the region and severely diminished Washington's influence.

But one apparent winner has emerged: the Kremlin. Russia has operated with cold-eyed cynicism, taking advantage of three years of muddled messages from the Trump administration to become a critical kingmaker in Libya, a geopolitical prize with vast energy reserves and a strategic location on the Mediterranean.

Mr. Bolton's call with Mr. Hifter — described by a former senior administration official as well as three Western diplomats briefed by both Mr. Hifter and American officials — appears to have played into the Russian machinations.

Days before the call, private Russian operatives in Libya reported to Moscow that Mr. Hifter was a flawed and outmatched military leader sure to fail if he ever tried to conquer the capital, according to secret Russian documents seized in Tripoli and viewed by The New York Times. The operatives saw opportunity in his weakness and suggested that Russia could win leverage over Mr. Hifter if it sent mercenaries to bolster his so-called Libyan National Army.

“Russia will maintain a loyal and strong ally in the structure of the LNA,” the operatives argued, “which Hifter will have to contend with.”

Washington's inconsistent position on Libya — officially supporting the peace process even as the White House has signaled that President Trump favors Mr. Hifter — has played a major role in prolonging the chaos. The absence of a strong American policy has opened the door to interference from competing American partners, including Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Yet it is Russia that is now best positioned to dominate Libya.

An arm of the Kremlin controls dozens of social media accounts promoting Mr. Hifter and other favored clients, including the eldest son of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Libya's former dictator, according to the operatives' report. The same Kremlin operation has acquired an ownership stake in a pro-Qaddafi Libyan satellite network and advised a pro-Hifter network as well, the operatives wrote.

At the same time, the Russian military has worked behind the scenes to surround Mr. Hifter with many of its old partners from the Qaddafi-era security forces, encouraging Qaddafi henchmen to return from exile. The Kremlin also has built ties to a

potential governing party-in-waiting, the documents show.

And the Kremlin followed the operatives' prescient advice. When Mr. Hifter's assault stalled, Moscow propped up his sagging advance with thousands of trained mercenaries who continue to operate in Libya.

Representatives for the White House and Mr. Bolton declined to comment.

But alarmed American lawmakers have begun asking how the White House appears to have ended up backing the same side as Moscow.

During a recent Senate hearing on Libya, lawmakers wondered how the United States could fault Russia for propping up a client when the White House appeared to like him as well. The president sounded "inclined to support Hifter" even as the State Department seemed to oppose him, said Senator Mitt Romney, the Utah Republican.

"Is there consistency?" Mr. Romney asked.

"I can say unequivocally," David Schenker, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, insisted with exasperation, "We do not support the Hifter offensive."

Courting the President

A campaign to get the White House behind Mr. Hifter started almost as soon as Mr. Trump was elected.

Mr. Hifter's most important patron, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, pitched Mr. Hifter to members of Mr. Trump's foreign policy team at a secret meeting in New York in December 2016, according to a person with knowledge of the meeting.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, whom Mr. Trump has jokingly called "my favorite dictator," also took up the Hifter cause five months later when he visited the White House.

"Hifter was a core talking point in every meeting with the Egyptians and Emiratis," said Andrew Miller, a former member of the National Security Council staff and now a researcher at the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Libya had foundered in chaos since a NATO air campaign helped oust Colonel Qaddafi during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Extortionist militias, militant extremists and migrant traffickers ran amok as the country was divided into fiefs. Officially, the United States recognized only the United Nations-sponsored provisional government in Tripoli.

But Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi told Mr. Trump that the provisional government was hopelessly weak and riddled with Islamists. They argued that only Mr. Hifter could prevent Islamists from taking power in Tripoli, which the Arab leaders said would create a domino effect across the region, according to two former senior administration officials.

Mr. Hifter had vowed since 2014 to eradicate political Islam and take power as Libya's new military ruler. Yet he had quietly formed an alliance with a rival faction of extremists, Saudi-style ultraconservatives known as Salafis.

As they lobbied Mr. Trump, Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi overlooked that contradiction. They were also simultaneously working closely with Russia. Egypt had opened a secret Russian base to supply Mr. Hifter's forces, to the alarm of Western officials worried about Moscow's expanding influence.

The two Arab leaders, though, found a sympathetic ear in Mr. Bolton, who became national security adviser in the spring of 2018 and had previously led a far-right think tank known for sweeping attacks on political Islam.

The Bolton-Hifter phone call last spring came at a critical moment. Even as the peace talks were approaching, Mr. Hifter had moved his forces into a strategic oasis town south of Tripoli and was poised for a surprise attack.

When Mr. Hifter asked for consent, Mr. Bolton's answer was "a yellow light," not a green or a red one, the former senior administration official said. Yet three Western diplomats briefed on the call by both Mr. Hifter and senior American officials described Mr. Bolton as less equivocal: If you are going to attack, do it quickly, he told Mr. Hifter, according to all three diplomats.

Mr. Hifter counted that as an explicit assent, all three diplomats said.

The April 4 attack stunned the world. The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, had just landed in Tripoli for the peace talks. He urged Mr. Hifter to pull back, a message endorsed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. American military

forces hurriedly left the city.

But as the fighting was underway, Mr. Hifter's powerful allies were lobbying Mr. Trump to show his support, White House officials said. Mr. el-Sisi pressed the president in person last year on April 9, and Crown Prince Mohammed over the phone on April 18.

The next day, the White House said in a statement that the president had called Mr. Hifter to commend his "significant role in fighting terrorism." A day after the call, Mr. Hifter's forces began shelling civilian neighborhoods of Tripoli.

"It seemed as if the Americans were switching sides in a way that didn't make sense," said Peter Millett, the British ambassador to Libya until 2018, noting that the Tripoli government had been the main Libyan partner to the United States military in counterterrorism.

"There was confusion and massive surprise in the international community," he said.

Col. Ahmed Mismari, a spokesman for Mr. Hifter, declined to comment on the call with Mr. Bolton but said the Libyan commander appreciated the president's support.

Russian Hedging

Even before the assault on Tripoli began, the Russians had concluded it would be a disaster for Mr. Hifter.

The Russian operatives in Libya worked for an obscure research center linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. Mr. Prigozhin is also described by American officials as the leader of a Kremlin-linked private security company, the Wagner Group. Their teams of mercenaries have overseen Russian efforts to meddle in the politics of Ukraine, Syria and several African countries.

The leader of the Libyan team, Maxim Shugaley, had been identified in news reports in 2018 trying to pay bribes and spread disinformation to turn elections in Madagascar. Tipped off by American intelligence, according to a person involved, a militia allied with the Tripoli provisional government eventually detained Mr. Shugaley and his interpreter. A third operative eluded capture, Libyan officials said.

After detaining Mr. Shugaley, the security agents found a report in his hotel room that his team had sent to Moscow in March of last year, shortly before the Hifter-Bolton call. Dossier, a London research center critical of Mr. Putin, obtained a copy of the seized report and provided portions to The New York Times. Senior Libyan officials authenticated the text independently.

For several years, Russia had provided military supplies to Mr. Hifter and printed millions of dollars in newly minted Libyan currency for him to distribute.

But the secret report showed that the operatives were much more skeptical of Mr. Hifter than were the Arab rulers advising the White House.

Mr. Hifter, now 76, had recurring health problems. He won few military victories and had instead gained territory by "buying off local tribal groups for the right to place the flag," so that he could "raise his significance in the eyes of internal and external players," the report stated.

Not only did the operatives conclude that any advance on Tripoli was almost certain to fail, as did an offensive in 2014, they also warned that Mr. Hifter was stubborn and had become increasingly "difficult" to his Russian advisers.

"Hifter is using Russian help to increase his significance," the operatives wrote, but "there is a serious basis to suggest that in the event of his military victory, Hifter will not be loyal to Russian interests."

The operatives recommended the Kremlin hedge its bets on Mr. Hifter by allying with Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, the eldest son of the former dictator. The operatives said their "company" had acquired a stake in a pro-Qaddafi satellite network and revitalized its broadcasts.

A longtime partner to Russia under his father, Mr. Qaddafi, now 47, was imprisoned in Libya in 2011 before somehow regaining his freedom. Now he is at large and plotting a comeback, according to Libyans close to him and Western diplomats familiar with intelligence reports on his movements.

But the Russians also identified a new opening with Mr. Hifter: The Kremlin should insert paid mercenaries loyal to Russia into his faltering military. Sudanese paramilitary forces were ready to do the job, the operatives insisted, and could give Moscow crucial leverage.

Game Changer

The contingents of mercenaries from the Wagner Group began arriving via Sudan last September, according to Western diplomats tracking their movements.

“That was the big game changer,” Ambassador Richard Norland, the American envoy to Libya, said at a recent briefing. “It’s clear the Russians see strategic advantage now in Libya — low risk and high gain.”

To deepen its influence, the Kremlin has also organized secret meetings in Moscow between Mr. Hifter’s supporters and former officers in the Qaddafi-era military and security services, according to Western diplomats and other analysts who have spoken to Libyan participants.

Musa Ibrahim, a former Qaddafi spokesman, declined to comment on specific meetings in Moscow but acknowledged that Russia had been “bringing together” the Hifter and Qaddafi officers, especially since the assault on Tripoli.

This month, on the anniversary of Mr. Hifter’s attack, the United Nations urged a halt to the fighting to respond to the coronavirus pandemic now spreading in Libya.

But Mr. Hifter has continued shelling Tripoli, even targeting a major hospital. And the Russian mercenaries have given Russia a de facto veto over any end to the conflict.

“This has been Russia’s dream since World War II,” said Fathi Bashagha, the interior minister of the Tripoli government, quoting Winston Churchill’s wartime statement that Moscow saw Libya as the “soft underbelly” of Europe.

“To get Russian feet on Libyan soil.”

UNSMIL voices concern over attacks on Tripoli and civilian casualties (The Libya Observer) By Abdulkader Assad
April 21, 2020

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) has expressed concern over rocket attacks on civilians in Tripoli as well as the deterioration of humanitarian situation in the capital and surrounding areas.

"UNSMIL is extremely concerned about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Tripoli and its surroundings as a result of the intensification of fighting in the past few days. At least 28 civilians were injured and five killed, including women and children, due to the dramatic increase of indiscriminate shelling on civilian-populated areas, including Ain Zara, Al-Swani, Tareeq al Shook, Souq Al-Juma,, Al-Krimya, Al-Furnaj and Arada." UNSMIL said in a statement on Tuesday.

It added that those attacks also resulted in renewed displacement and damage to civilian properties and infrastructure.

"On 17 April, the Royal Hospital in Tripoli was also hit, resulting in extensive damage to the intensive care unit and the evacuation of staff and patients." The statement reads.

UNSMIL said it was also alarmed by the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Tarhouna, due to the military escalation in and around the city, resulting in the fresh displacement of civilians.

It reminded all parties to the conflict that indiscriminate attacks, as well as the targeting of hospitals and other medical facilities, and intentionally cutting off electricity, fuel, water or food supplies are violations of international humanitarian law and could, depending on the circumstances, amount to war crimes.

"Attacks that damage or otherwise affect the regular functioning of healthcare facilities are even more deplorable in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, given that the country's health system is already over-stretched and under-resourced." UNSMIL indicated.

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Central African Republic

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

UN imposes sanctions on Central African Republic rebel leader (Al Jazeera)

April 21, 2020

The UN Security Council on Monday imposed sanctions on Central African Republic (CAR) former rebel leader Abdoulaye Miskine, who last year was one of the signatories of a peace agreement between the government and armed groups.

Under the terms of the February 2019 accord, Miskine, founder and head of the Democratic Front of the Central African People (FDPC), was offered a position as an adviser to the new government.

In the latest report by UN experts monitoring sanctions and an arms embargo imposed in 2013, the self-proclaimed general was said to be recruiting fighters.

Miskine had signed the peace agreement in Khartoum between CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadera and the heads of 14 armed groups.

Under the deal, rebel leaders were given senior government positions with the purported aim of helping to cement peace, but Miskine never took the post he was offered, according to Bangui. In November 2019, the CAR government said Miskine had been arrested in neighbouring Chad and demanded his extradition.

He has now been put under UN sanctions, which include an asset freeze and travel ban. One of the world's poorest countries, the landlocked CAR has been mired in conflict for years.

Most of the country is in the hands of armed groups that claim to represent religious or ethnic communities, and often fight over the country's rich mineral resources.

Miskine set up the FDPC in 2004, when the country first plunged into civil war, and gave himself the rank of general.

He joined the coalition of mainly Muslim militias that in 2013 overthrew then-President Francois Bozize - a revolt that sparked French military intervention and the holding of elections for a successor.

Since then, the CAR has been devastated by fighting between numerous rebel groups and government forces and also between the armed groups themselves. More than a quarter of the 4.7 million population have fled their homes.

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Sudan & South Sudan

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Democratic Republic of the Congo

More than two dozen killed in DR Congo armed attack (Al Jazeera)

April 15, 2020

At least 28 people die in two separate attacks in eastern DRC, raising fears of an ethnic conflict escalation.

More than two dozen people were killed in two separate attacks in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, a region in the grip of militia violence, officials said on Wednesday.

"CODECO assailants attacked the people of the village of Koli while they were asleep, killing 22 civilians," said Adel Alingi, head of the Djugu administrative region in Ituri province, referring to an armed group targeting the Hema ethnic community.

The raid took place overnight from Saturday to Sunday. "All [of the dead] were from the Hema community," Alingi told AFP news agency, adding the motive for the attack remained unclear.

"The people of the village have fled for their lives," he said.

In the second attack on Tuesday, two soldiers, a civilian and five members of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) militia were killed in Beni, in neighbouring North Kivu province, said the army's regional spokesman Anthony Mualushayi.

CODECO - whose official name is Cooperative for the Development of Congo - is an armed political-religious sect in Ituri drawn from the Lendu ethnic group.

Conflict between the Lendu, mainly farmers, and the Hema, herders and traders, has a long history in the gold and oil-rich province.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed between 1999 and 2003. According to the UN, most victims were targeted because they were Hema.

The conflict has reignited in recent years.

More than 700 people were killed in Ituri since late 2017, a UN report said in January, adding some of deaths might constitute a "crime against humanity".

The ADF began operating in Uganda in opposition to President Yoweri Museveni.

It then fell back to North Kivu, DRC's border province with Uganda, during the Congo Wars of the 1990s.

Since October 2014, the group has been accused of killing more than 1,000 civilians.

Hundreds died in violence that began last October, in apparent reprisal for an army offensive against the ADF.

The army has claimed a string of successes, saying it has "destroyed all the ADF strongholds" in the forest and jungle around Beni and killed five of six known rebel leaders.

The violence comes as new cases of Ebola were detected in the country in recent days, alarming international organisations that a new outbreak of the disease might take place amid the fighting.

The World Health Organization has said the Ebola outbreak in DRC still constitutes a public health emergency of international concern following the emergence of new cases.

The announcement on Tuesday came a day after the country had been expected to announce its outbreak - the tenth recorded in its history and by far its largest - was over.

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Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

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

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Mali

Mali: UN urges swift release of kidnapped opposition leader (Aljazeera)

April 8, 2020

The United Nations Security Council has called for the "swift liberation" of kidnapped Malian opposition leader Soumaila Cisse and urged the government of Mali and armed groups to accelerate the implementation of a 2015 peace deal.

Cisse was captured on March 25, days before Mali's legislative elections, while campaigning in the Niafounke electoral district in the Timbuktu region.

The council called for the 70-year-old's release in a statement on Tuesday, following its first open meeting in nearly four weeks using video conferencing because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Council members also condemned "the terrorist attack" on Malian government forces on Monday in which at least 25 people were killed and six wounded in Bamba in the northern region of Gao.

Mali has been in turmoil since a 2012 uprising prompted mutinous soldiers to overthrow President Amadou Toumani Toure, who had ruled the country for 10 years. The resulting power vacuum led to a French-led war that removed the military from power in 2013.

Large swathes of Malian territory are still outside of state control, and the military has endured months of deadly attacks by groups linked to al-Qaeda and the ISIL (ISIS) group.

The violence has spread to the centre of the country and to neighbouring Niger and Burkina Faso, where security has deteriorated over the past year amid a "fireball of conflict" involving multiple armed groups, military campaigns by national armies and international partners as well as local militias.

The Security Council called on Mali's government "to enhance its efforts to stem violence" in the country's centre and ensure that those responsible for human rights abuses and violations of international law are brought to justice.

The statement also urged the UN and the government to work together to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus in the country.

It said the 15,000-strong UN peacekeeping forces should "continue delivering on its mandate despite the pandemic while ensuring the safety and security of its staff and peacekeepers". Mahamat Saleh Annadif, the UN envoy for Mali, told the UNSC the country had recorded 46 positive cases of COVID-19, including one member of the UN peacekeeping forces, and five

deaths.

The council also repeated its previous calls for greater cooperation between the government and armed group signatories of the country's 2015 peace accord.

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Liberia

Liberia: Army Chief Recalls Soldiers After Curfew Rampage on Slip Way Neighbourhood (Front Page Africa) By Rodney Sieh

Apr 17, 2020

A group of soldiers from the Armed Forces of Liberia, who went on the rampage in the Slipway and Crown Hill communities Thursday, rampaging homes and injuring residents, will face the full weight of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Chief of Staff Major General Prince C. Johnson III, told FrontPageAfrica.

Eyewitnesses told FrontPageAfrica that the incident which started around 6:30 pm saw soldiers in two pickup trucks instilling fear in the community as residents ran to save their lives.

The soldiers entered the home of a woman pulled her outside and inflicted bodily harm.

The incident comes barely a week after President George Manneh Weah declared a three-week state of emergency beginning April 10 to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Under the State of Emergency all 15 counties are quarantined from 11:59pm, Friday, April 10 until further notice.

Movement between counties is strictly prohibited; no person shall be permitted to enter or leave the borders of any county to another county except for Montserrado County and Margibi County which are quarantined as a single unit.

Also, all residents within the borders of Montserrado County, Margibi County, Nimba County, and Grand Kru are to stay at home throughout the time of the quarantine.

“Throughout this period, residents may leave home only for essential journeys like reasons of health and food which should be restricted to your local communities only and be limited to a single person per household for a maximum of one hour,” the President warned.

In Slip Way Thursday, many of the residents in the close-knit neighborhoods were sitting in front of their homes while others were inside.

Eyewitnesses were able to identify one of the attacks by the name on his uniform as Lt. L.S. Koon.

FrontPageAfrica provided the information to the Chief of Staff who immediately dispatched medics on the scene to aid those injured from the attack.

Major General Johnson said all the men involved in the attack have been recalled and undergoing investigation. “We will investigate tomorrow. I need more information for my military police to conduct further investigation. For now, the commander for tonight patrol has been called to report to base for investigation. Trust me, they will face the full weight of the UCMJ. I have sent AFL Medic to treat the lady while the patrol commander was detained.”

Under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), soldiers are forbidden from engaging in attacks on civilians. Article 92 (failure to obey lawful order or regulation); Article 128 (assault); and Article 93 (cruelty and maltreatment).

The AFL has in recent time taken a zero-tolerance approach against soldiers running afoul of the UCMJ.

Last month, two soldiers – SSG Keita Musa and Cpl. Jugbe Peter were dishonorably discharged in line with Chapter 7, Section 7.7 (j) of the New National Defense Act of August 2008.

SSG. Musa and Cpl. Peter on February 22, 2020 were allegedly involved in circumstances that led to the assault, cruelty and maltreatment of a civilian, Dakia Woods in Gbarnga City, Bong County. Upon receiving this information, the AFL, as a force for good, through its Military Police Investigation Team immediately launched an investigation into the matter.

Corporal Collins will be punished in accordance with the uniform code of military justice.

Last June, the board of investigation of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL) found Corporal Sieh Collins guilty for a message he posted on his social media account, in which he threatened to kill people who might get on the streets on June 7 to protest in Monrovia and its environs.

Coronavirus kills Delco man convicted of hiding his role in Liberian war crimes, robbing victims of decades-deferred justice (The Philadelphia Inquirer) By Jeremy Roebuck

April 13, 2020

A Delaware County man who once served as a top lieutenant to Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, and whose 2018 trial for U.S. immigration violations drew headlines across the globe, died Sunday from complications of the coronavirus.

Juontee Thomas Woewiyu, 74, of Collingdale, had spent nearly two weeks in Bryn Mawr Hospital suffering from the disease.

He leaves behind a complicated legacy as one of the leading voices of the Liberian diaspora in the United States and a champion for democracy in his home country, but also as one of the very few people held accountable for the perversion of that vision that led to documented atrocities during the West African nation's first civil war.

Over his career, Woewiyu rubbed elbows with State Department officials and figures like former Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, and at times held significant positions in the Liberian government.

And though a federal jury in Philadelphia convicted him in 2018 of lying to U.S. immigration officials about his role in war crimes committed by Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) — including acts of torture, ethnically targeted killings, and the conscription of child soldiers — Woewiyu died awaiting sentencing for his crimes.

For victims of the conflict, both in Philadelphia's sizable Liberian expat community and in Monrovia, the nation's capital, his conviction took on totemic stature, given their country's failure to hold anyone responsible for the sins of a war that left more than 200,000 civilians dead.

But news of his death Sunday left many of them feeling bereft. Political inaction had robbed them of justice for decades, said Hassan Bility, director of the Global Justice and Research Project. Now, the coronavirus has robbed them of closure.

"We are sorry for his family," Bility said Monday from Monrovia. "But I think justice needed to serve its full course. Unfortunately, [his sentencing] was never to be."

In an email notifying some of the witnesses who testified against him of his death, Assistant U.S. Attorney Nelson S.T. Thayer said that Woewiyu was just "as responsible for wiping out an entire generation of Liberia's youth" as any pandemic.

"The deadly virus he personally spread," Thayer wrote, "was one of ethnic and tribal hatred that cost the lives of thousands and thousands of Liberians."

Family members did not respond to requests for comment. But in a video prepared last year for his sentencing, they described Woewiyu as a pillar of his community, lion of the Liberian cause, and a doting father and grandfather.

"My father [was] like a guru at putting people together," said his eldest daughter, Hawa Zoe Dahnsaw. "No matter all the different activities that he had regarding his participation in his country, he never forgot about us. He always had a vision."

His son, U.S. Navy Lt. Monconjay Thomas Woewiyu, 34, credited his father as a mentor.

"It is because of him that I understand what it is to be a man," he said. "His dedication to the community inspired me to join the armed forces."

Born in 1946 as Thomas Juontee Smith, the seventh of 13 children, Woewiyu was delivered on a bed of cut banana leaves in Liberia's bush.

"I was born on banana leaves," he said in the video prepared last year. "But I've always sworn to myself that my kids would be born on a silk blanket.... I've always tried to do something to be worth the name of my family, my village, my country."

He came to America in 1969 and spent much of the next decade working odd jobs in New York City while earning an associates degree from Brooklyn College of CUNY, and then a bachelor's from Rutgers University at night.

But the execution of Liberia's president, William V.S. Tolbert, during a military coup in 1980 spurred Woewiyu, like many Liberians living in the U.S., into political action.

Along with Sirleaf and others, he lobbied the Reagan and Bush administrations to help oust the man who had seized control of the government by force, Samuel Doe. And when Doe began ethnic purges within Liberia, Woewiyu joined the NPFL, a group that advocated violence to overthrow him if necessary.

NPFL forces launched an invasion on Christmas Eve 1989 under Taylor's command that seized 90% of the country within months. Doe was assassinated soon after. But new factions arose in the aftermath, fueling a brutal ethnic conflict that would consume the nation for seven years.

Woewiyu emerged from that fray as Taylor's spokesperson and chief negotiator in Africa and the U.S. An erudite family man, he quickly gained the confidence of the State Department and the international press.

"He was very articulate — not as flamboyant as Charles Taylor, but in a bit of the same style," said Elizabeth Blunt, a former BBC West Africa correspondent, who testified at his trial. "If you were trying to put someone forward that gives the impression that yours is a serious political movement, he was a good PR man."

U.S. prosecutors described Woewiyu's "acceptable public face" as a facade meant to hide Taylor's worst excesses from the world. While Woewiyu spoke of a quick, democratic resolution to the conflict on nightly BBC broadcasts, the NPFL was routinely executing civilians, looting villages, and conscripting child soldiers by the dozens.

Woewiyu pursued illegal arms deals in the U.S. and the Netherlands to equip Taylor's army. And on trips to Liberia, witnesses testified at his trial, his convoys were escorted by drugged-out youths who had been kidnapped, pressed into service, and trained as killers.

In later life, Woewiyu denied playing a significant role in Taylor's fighting force, describing himself more as a diplomat. He maintained that he deplored the NPFL's dependence on child soldiers and never used them as escorts.

Still, in 2010, the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommended that he face political sanctions for his actions during the war.

By the time he was indicted in the U.S. in 2014, his life bore little resemblance to the stature he once maintained. He had become a grandfather many times over and was deeply involved in his church and politics in his home country.

When FBI agents arrested him at Newark Liberty International Airport, he had just returned from Liberia to launch a bid for that country's Senate.

Mark Wilson, who represented Woewiyu at his trial, described his death Sunday as a tragedy for his family.

"He became more than a client in a lot of ways," Wilson said. "I considered it a great honor to have met him."

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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

Rights Groups Deplore Conditions in Kenya COVID Quarantine Facilities (Voice of America) By Lenny Ruvaga
April 10, 2020

Kenyan authorities faced a backlash this week after extending by two weeks a mandatory quarantine for people held in centers where coronavirus has been detected.

Kenya has quarantined hundreds of arrivals since March to try to curb the spread of COVID-19. As of Friday, the country had recorded 189 cases of the disease and seven deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center. Rights groups say the government is treating those held in quarantine like prisoners, but health authorities say the tough measures are needed to prevent the virus from spreading unchecked. A signed statement released Tuesday by 24 Kenyan rights groups expressed concern after authorities extended the quarantine period. It noted that it was not clear how many people were in mandatory quarantine in Kenya and how many of those had been tested for the virus. "The civil society consortium is calling the government to action because the government has not been forthcoming with information to those who have been held in mandatory quarantine," said Allan Maleche, executive director at KELIN, a Kenyan group that advocates for health rights. "The government has not been clear on who is paying for the cost; the government has not been clear on when people are supposed to be tested." Kenya has designated 57 quarantine centers in Nairobi and Mombasa, which are hosting hundreds of people at their own cost. Who will pay? Jaylin, who for privacy reasons did not wish to use her real name, has been at a Nairobi quarantine facility for more than two weeks. While she has shown no symptoms, Jaylin said she would have to stay two more weeks because the center had a confirmed infection. "We haven't heard even a single word about whether or not the further 14 days will be paid for by the government," she said. Some have complained also about the sanitation in Kenya's quarantine centers. A resident at another Nairobi quarantine center, who asked that his name not be used, called the conditions "deplorable. In a floor, we are, like, 30 people sharing three toilets and three bathrooms. The toilets don't flush, so we have to use buckets. So if there's any place we can contract the disease, it's in these facilities." He said no one in his quarantine center had tested positive for the coronavirus. His claim could not be independently verified. In the public interest Kenya's Health Ministry said it was aware of the inconvenience of quarantine but maintained the practice was being done in the interest of protecting the public. Kenya's director general of health, Dr. Patrick Amoth, on Tuesday defended the extended quarantine period while speaking to the media in Nairobi. He said it was the government's responsibility to ensure anyone released was free of the virus. "We want to assure you again, especially those people who are in quarantine, to ensure that you follow the social distancing rules, the infection control prevention measures, the handwashing, and very soon we are going to check on you again after the 10th day, to check whether you are negative," he said. "Working together with the county government, we shall be able to release you to continue with self-quarantine."

Stampede in Kenya as slum residents surge for food aid (Associated Press) By Tom Odula and Idi Ali Juma
April 10, 2020

Thousands of people surged for food aid in a brief stampede Friday in Kenya's capital, desperate for help as coronavirus restrictions keep them from making a living. Police fired tear gas and injured several people, witnesses said.

Residents of Nairobi's Kibera slum, spotting a food distribution, tried to force their way through a gate outside a district office for their chance at supplies to keep their families fed for another day.

The scene in Kenya's largest slum reflected the fears of millions across Africa as nearly 20 countries have imposed full lockdowns and others have shut down cities or imposed curfews. A vast population of informal workers, with little or no savings, worries about the next meal as no one knows when the measures will end. Already, Rwanda and South Africa have extended their lockdowns by two weeks.

In the Nairobi chaos, men with sticks beat people back as they fought over packages of food, some with face masks dangling off their chins. Some people fell and were trampled. Dust rose. Women shrieked. Injured people were carried to safety and placed on the ground to recover, gasping for breath.

“The people who have been injured here are very many, even we cannot count,” said one resident, Evelyn Kemunto. “Both women and children have been injured. There was a woman with twins, she has been injured, and even now she is looking for her twins. ... It is food we were coming for since we are dying of hunger.”

The crowd had heard that popular opposition leader Raila Odinga had donated the food, said witness Richard Agutu Kongo, a 43-year-old who operates a motorcycle taxi. But in fact the distribution was from another well-wisher who had given selected families cards to turn in and receive aid, he said.

“They didn’t care about government restrictions that we were to stay 1 meter apart,” he added.

Kongo’s family, including six children, was given a card. They received two packets of maize meal, cooking oil and cereals.

People in the crowd “could see those with cards getting food and this caused the stampede as they tried to force their way in,” Kongo said.

He described his business as a standstill as Kenyans are discouraged from going out.

“Before, I used to make (the equivalent of) \$10 and now with the coronavirus restrictions I can barely make \$5,” he said. “It’s becoming hard to ensure my family gets three meals a day. Yesterday they missed breakfast.”

With Friday’s donation, his family now has enough for three meals, he said: “We are thankful for the donation, but it will only last two days.”

He lamented that Kenya’s government appears to have no plan to feed him and millions more.

Also on Friday, Kenya’s government objected to the treatment of its citizens and other Africans in the Chinese commercial hub of Guangzhou amid “stringent testing” for the virus.

A foreign ministry statement noted “unfair responses against foreigners, particularly of African origin,” especially from landlords. Some of the thousands of Africans who stay in Guangzhou as traders have reported being evicted.

The Chinese embassy has told Kenya that authorities in Guangzhou “have been tasked to take immediate action to safeguard the legitimate rights of the Africans concerned.”

In South Africa, the health minister said the nation has “parted ways with the countries with rapid spread” of the virus. South Africa has Africa’s most cases with just over 2,000, but the rate of new cases has slowed during the first two weeks of lockdown. The lockdown has been extended until April 1.

Zweli Mkhize warned that Africa’s most industrialized nation must keep up the hard work. He encouraged the widespread use of face masks but said surgical ones should be left to health workers.

In Somalia, the government ordered troops into the streets of the capital, Mogadishu, to clear out mosques during Friday prayers and enforce a virtual lockdown.

One religious leader, Sheikh Ahmed Ali, said they don’t know when the mosques will reopen. “There was no prior notice,” he said. Mogadishu’s mayor, Omar Mohamed Mohamud, on Thursday appealed for people to pray at home.

Somalia reported the biggest one-day jump in cases Friday with nine, for a total of 21. The country has one of the world’s weakest health systems. Major roads in Mogadishu have closed, and police have ordered many businesses to shut their doors.

People expressed concern about how they will survive. “The government should consider our situations and take care of us,” said a construction worker, Yusuf Sheikh Hassan.

Killing in the name of corona’: Death toll soars from Kenya’s curfew crackdown (Washington Post) By Rael Ombuor and Max Bearak
April 16, 2020

The coronavirus hasn’t devastated Kenya yet. Its ripple effects, however, have proved deadlier here than the virus itself.

Police have killed at least 12 people while enforcing a dusk-to-dawn curfew that began more than two weeks ago, making Kenya’s lockdown one of the deadliest in the world. But the true death toll is higher still: An untold number of others have died because of the curfew itself and the fear prompted by police batons and bullets.

That fear gripped Vidia Nduku Mati, 41, and her husband as the delivery date for their baby approached at the end of March. They prayed that she wouldn't go into labor in the overnight hours — but fate wouldn't cooperate. It was the deep of night, well into curfew, when the pain became unbearable.

First, the midwife refused to come, saying she feared the policemen in their rural community who a day earlier had beaten even the people who raced inside their homes, Vidia's husband recalled.

Their last resort to get to a hospital, a motorcycle taxi driver named Festus Nzuki, also declined, even though he was a close friend and could hear the pain in her voice over the phone. Police had beaten his mother-in-law simply for sitting outside her house — they were merciless to her in plain sight of her children, Nzuki said.

The couple resolved to wait until curfew lifted, but then Vidia's water broke, and blood gushed out instead.

"It was the longest wait of my life," said Mati Nyamai, Vidia's husband. "By the time Festus got us to the hospital in the morning, she was bleeding so much, she was drowning in blood."

While human rights groups and police oversight agencies collect and verify reports of those killed directly by police during curfew enforcement — a number that is already higher than the country's covid-19 death toll of 11 — more, like Vidia and her unborn child, are dying uncounted.

"At least one a night since curfew began," said Wilfred Olal, who coordinates a network of social justice centers in slums across Kenya that is trying to keep track of curfew-related deaths since the measure was put into place 21 days ago. "To be honest, we've lost count. It's dozens. There are many more."

The Kenyan government's Independent Policing Oversight Authority says it has recorded 35 "watertight" cases of police brutality related to curfew enforcement, 12 of which resulted in death.

"It is spreading all over this country," said Jonathan Lompodui, the body's vice chairman.

The police's national spokesman, Charles Owino, and the government's spokesman, Cyrus Oguna, did not respond to requests for comment on the circumstances that led to Vidia's death and on the documented police killings. Government officials have largely refrained from speaking publicly about the curfew crackdowns. President Uhuru Kenyatta briefly noted it in a news conference a day after the story of Yassin Moyo, a 13-year-old boy killed by police while on his own balcony, made headlines.

Tallies from independent groups point to a spike in incidents of police brutality on the first night of curfew, March 27, and sustained cases in the nearly three weeks since.

Police brutality is common in Kenya's slums and small towns, where corrupt officers act with impunity. Moyo's father, Hussein Moyo Motte, said that despite the uproar over his son's killing, he still sees the officer who shot him patrolling the street outside his house. The police did not respond to requests for comment on the officer's status.

A national survey in 2018 found that most Kenyans believed the biggest risk to their lives was violence by police. Since the inception of Kenya's police oversight body in 2011, less than 1 percent of the cases it has pursued have resulted in convictions.

"I want to apologize to all Kenyans, maybe for some excesses that were conducted, or happened," he said before moving on.

An Amnesty International report in 2017 said that of 177 reported cases of police killings in Africa, 122 of them were in Kenya. According to Amnesty, 624 Kenyans have been killed by police since 2007, including 49 already this year, with only 26 officers having been formally charged. Last year was the deadliest on record.

"The curfew is making the violence so much worse, because now they can be killing in the name of corona," Olal said. "They simply do not understand: You cannot fight corona with a baton and whip."

To some victims, the curfew is just a new pretext for the violence they are used to. Francis Otieno, 22, and his brother, Ibrahim Onyango, 18, used to scavenge scrap metal to get by, and Otieno said they would frequently get beaten by the police. On the first weekend of the curfew, Onyango was walking home after dark when policemen caught him and clubbed him repeatedly on the head with batons, his brother said. Onyango died in a hospital the next day.

"These are things that happen here in the ghetto," Otieno said. "There is nowhere to start for us to get justice, so it will be a waste of energy. All we want to do is to bury Ibra."

Almost all of the incidents have taken place in Kenya's most marginalized communities, where many aren't literate and don't have access to phones they could use to report the violence.

Cases such as Onyango's are not part of the police oversight body's official tally. Poor people in slums and small towns have for years turned to networks of human rights activists such as Olal to document the toll in their communities.

Lompodui acknowledged it was possible that many cases like Onyango's wouldn't come to the attention of his police oversight body without the help of activists. It doesn't help that many of the agency's employees are working from home and Kenya's courts remain closed because of the coronavirus.

Even in their attempts to help, police have triggered events that led to deaths and injuries. Last week, for instance, a food donation was organized at a police station in Kibera, a sprawling slum in the capital, Nairobi. But instead of creating an orderly distribution for the thousands who gathered there, the food was placed on the ground, and a stampede ensued, killing two and injuring many more.

"They made it so that getting the food depended on how strong you were," Roselyn Amboka, 52, said in an interview as she returned from a hospital, her legs swollen from being trampled on.

Near the border with Somalia, police intercepted a bus they deemed to be breaching travel and social distancing restrictions and put the 40-plus occupants, including 16 children, in quarantine in a government building.

The facility they used was so rudimentary that the passengers slept on the dirt outside and drank fetid, green water from a tank, said Adan, a traveler who spoke on the condition that he be identified only by his first name for fear of reprisal from the police. There were no toilets. They were given bread and tea for two days before at least a dozen of them escaped over a wall.

The rest were released three days into a 14-day quarantine. The incident raised similar concerns about the police's understanding of public health protocols as a police crackdown in the coastal city of Mombasa on the first night of curfew in which hundreds were detained in close quarters.

And on Tuesday, police inspector general Hilary Mutyambai announced that anyone moving about in public without a mask would be arrested, even though the Kenyan government has acknowledged it has nowhere near the 15 million masks it needs for its health-care workers alone.

The spiraling crisis means little to Vidia Nduku Mati's husband, who is not only grieving but now must raise his six children on his own. His fate already got tangled with the curfew, and it can't be reversed.

"If there was no curfew," Nyamai said between sobs, "my wife would be alive."

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Rwanda (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda)

Official Website of the ICTR

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Somalia

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EUROPE

The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, War Crimes Chamber

Official Court Website [English translation]

Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina confirms Judgement in Case of Radomir Susnjar for War Crimes in Višegrad (Sarajevo Times)

April 20, 2020

Following a public hearing on February 11th this year, the Appellate Panel of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina rendered a judgment dismissing the appeal of defense attorney Radomir Susnjar, who was charged with war crimes in Višegrad, as unfounded, and upheld the judgment of October 30, 2019.

In a first-instance verdict, Susnjar was found guilty of a criminal offense of War Crimes against Civilians, and the Court sentenced him to 20 years in prison for a criminal offense.

The defense counsel's defense counsel timely filed an appeal against the verdict. The Prosecution filed a response to the appeal, proposing that the Court dismiss the appeal as unfounded and uphold the first instance judgment. Having completed a trial in the case of Radomir Šušnjar, on 30 October 2019 the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Section I for War Crimes, pronounced a trial judgment finding the accused Radomir Šušnjar guilty of the criminal offense of War Crimes against Civilians under Article 142 of the Criminal Code of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) as read with Article 22 of the Code. The Court sentenced him to 20 years of imprisonment.

The time the accused spent in pre-trial custody from 24 June 2018 onwards shall be credited towards his sentence of imprisonment, as well as the time he spent in extradition custody from 18 June 2018 to 23 June 2018, as well as his arrest in relation to the criminal offense at issue by the French authorities on 4 March 2014.

The accused Radomir Šušnjar is guilty that, during the armed conflict and war in Bosnia and Herzegovina between the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Army of the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the territory of the Višegrad municipality, from early April 1992 to December 1995, he acted in violation of international humanitarian law, specifically Article 3(1), Subparagraphs a) and c), of the Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, of 12 August 1949, which prohibits injuries to life and limb, in particular any kind of murder, mutilation, cruelty and torture.

On 14 June 1992 in Višegrad, on Pionirska street, together with Milan Lukić and Sredoje Lukić, as members of a paramilitary group (convicted by final judgments for the same crimes before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia), all of them armed with automatic rifles, the accused Radomir Šušnjar took part in an attack, inhuman treatment and looting of civilian property. They came to the Memić family house, to which Bosniak civilians from the village of Koritnik had been previously brought, where Milan Lukić and Sredoje Lukić, while threatening to kill them all, with the intention to appropriate their money, gold and other valuables, ordered them to hand over such valuables, which they did, fearing for their lives. After that, the accused Radomir Šušnjar frisked the civilians in an adjacent room in a particularly cruel and degrading manner to make sure they did not hide anything.

In the evening hours, with the intention to kill them, under the pretext that their safety was at risk, they ordered the civilians to leave the Memić family house and move to Adem Omeragić's house, some 30 meters away, where they forced them into the ground-floor room. After the accused Radomir Šušnjar pushed into the room the last of the civilians he locked the door, thus preventing them from getting out and escaping. That is when Milan Lukić threw an inflammable explosive device into the room, thus causing fire, while they kept shooting at the house from their automatic rifles in order to prevent the civilians from fleeing, although aware that by so doing they could cause heavy injuries.

The attack resulted in the killing of 25 civilians and a 2-month-old baby whose mortal remains have never been found. As a consequence of the rounds shot, a civilian suffered heavy and light bodily injuries, while five of the civilians managed to escape. Also destroyed by the fire was Adem Omeragić's property.

Pursuant to Article 198(2) of the Criminal Procedure Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the injured parties in the case are

referred to pursue their redress claims in civil proceedings.

Bosnian Court Rejects Serb Soldier's Murder Indictment (Balkan Transitional Justice) By Haris

Rovcanin

April 21, 2020

The Bosnian state court told BIRN that it has rejected the indictment charging Tadija Mitrovic with crimes against humanity during the war in 1992 because there are not sufficient grounds to suspect that he committed the crime.

The court said that it "has not been able to determine that it stems from the evidence that there is a grounded suspicion that the suspect committed the crime of which he is accused". The prosecution had accused Mitrovic of participating in the persecution of the Bosniak civilian population during a widespread and systematic attack by the Bosnian Serb Army and police in the Bratunac area during wartime.

He was charged with going to the village of Glogova in May 1992 and searching for Bosniak civilians to kill, and of personally participating in the murder of one Bosniak civilian. The state court in January rejected two other indictments filed by the prosecution in the cases against Ljuban Ecim and Jugomir Marcetic.

Ecim was charged, as deputy and de facto commander of a special police unit in Banja Luka, with participating in a joint criminal enterprise alongside other Bosnian Serb army and police commanders and troops from early June 1992 to the middle of 1994.

The crimes committed by the joint criminal enterprise included several dozen murders, hundreds of unlawful detentions of civilians, including women, children, nuns and religious officials.

Marcetic was charged, as a Bosnian Serb Army soldier, with crimes against the Bosniak civilian population in the village of Zecovi, near Prijedor, in July 1992, when at least 150 people were killed and the entire population expelled and detained in the Omarska, Keraterm and Trnopolje detention camps.

He was also accused of personally participating in the forcible separation of men from women and children, as well as the persecution of around 20 Bosniak civilians.

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International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia **(ICTY)**

Official Website of the ICTY

Hague Court Denies Early Release to 'Unrehabilitated' Convicts (Balkan Insight) By Emina Dizdarevic

April 8, 2020

Bosnian war victims' representatives have welcomed decisions by Carmel Agius, president of the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals in The Hague, to reject requests for early release filed by war crimes convicts because he thinks they have not demonstrated rehabilitation.

In October 2018, before he became president of the UN court, Agius opposed a request from former Bosnian Serb Army general Radivoje Miletic to be released early after having served two-thirds of his 18-year sentence for wartime crimes against Bosniaks from Srebrenica.

Miletic is serving his sentence in a prison in Finland. According to Finnish law, as well as the longstanding practices of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, ICTY and its successor, the Mechanism for International Criminal Tribunals, MICT, Miletic had the right to seek early release, but the judges who sentenced him expressed disagreement with

his early release considering the severity of his crimes.

One of those judges, Carmel Agius, told then MICT president Theodor Meron that another reason to reject Miletic's request was because he had demonstrated "no signs of rehabilitation whatsoever".

"According to judge Agius, the fact that Miletic recognises the severity of his actions, as he has stated through his defence attorney, is by no means sufficient to demonstrate rehabilitation, particularly considering the fact that Miletic was 'cold, argumentative and uncompromising' throughout the first instance trial," Meron wrote in his decision.

At the beginning of 2019, only a few months after the decision in the Miletic case, Agius became the MICT's president and continued the practice of seeking evidence about rehabilitation when deciding on early release requests.

In January this year, he rejected a request from wartime Croatian Defence Council fighter Miroslav Bralo, who asked to be released early from a Swedish prison where he is serving his 20-year sentence for the killings of Bosniak civilians, including children, in the village of Ahmici, near Vitez, in 1993.

"I generally do not consider it appropriate to enable convicted persons to return to the affected regions before they have served their full sentence, without having demonstrated a certain degree of rehabilitation, including that their release will not endanger peace and security in the envisaged place of residence," Agius said in his decision.

Agius quoted a report by the Swedish prison medical officer, who said that Bralo "has no remorse for his acts".

Murat Tahirovic, president of the Association of Victims and Witnesses of Genocide, welcomed the new practice introduced by Agius.

"With the arrival of judge Agius, requests [for release] have been examined more thoroughly and all requests filed so far have been rejected. That is certainly positive for all victims, particularly witnesses," Tahirovic told BIRN.

Others were more sceptical about the apparent change.

"I think that the fact that convicts are obliged to admit the commission of crimes as a precondition for their early release is completely unacceptable, particularly if they pleaded not guilty to crimes they were charged with during their trials. In this way they are somehow forced to admit guilt," said Belgrade lawyer Aleksandar Lazarevic, who has represented clients at the Hague Tribunal.

At present, 16 people convicted by the ICTY of wartime crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina are serving their sentences, while two other convicts are waiting to be transferred to the countries where they will serve sentences- former Bosnian Serb political leader Radovan Karadzic and former Bosnian Croat military officer Milivoj Petkovic.

Last month, Agius rejected a request for the early release of Radoslav Brdjanin, the former political leader of the unrecognised, Serb-led Autonomous Region of Krajina, who was sentenced to 30 years for crimes against humanity.

In his decision, Agius said that "the severity of his crimes is an obstacle to his early release. Furthermore, Brdjanin has not demonstrated successful rehabilitation."

While he was the Tribunal president, judge Meron rejected requests for early release of Stanislav Galic, the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb Army's Sarajevo-Romanija Corps, Goran Jelusic, a wartime Bosnian Serb detention camp guard, and former Bosnian Serb general Radislav Krstic, but only because they had not served two-thirds of their sentences.

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Domestic Prosecutions In The Former Yugoslavia

Interpol Urges Arrest of Bosnian Serb War Rape Defendant (Balkan Transitional Justice) By Haris Rovcanin
April 9, 2020

A 'red notice' has been issued by Interpol to alert countries around the world that

former Territorial Defence fighter Dusan Spasojevic, who has both Serbian and Bosnian citizenship, is wanted in Bosnia and Herzegovina for war crimes against civilians.

Spasojevic went on trial in February last year, accused of raping a Bosniak woman at an elementary school that was being used as a detention facility in the village of Malesici in the Zvornik municipality in May 1992.

He allegedly entered a classroom in which detainees were being held and took the woman out under the pretext of bringing food for her baby. He then raped her behind the school building, the indictment claims.

Spasojevic is also on trial in a separate case, along with six other people, accused of committing crimes against humanity in the village of Jusici, near Zvornik between April and December 1992.

The indictment alleges that the men were involved in the murders of at least 48 people, and in attacking the village and persecuting its Bosniak residents.

Spasojevic failed to appear for a hearing in the rape case at the Bosnian state court in early March, and his defence lawyer Nenad Rubez said that he was told by the defendant's relatives that he had absconded.

"My opinion is that he is in Serbia," Rubez said.

Spasojevic then failed to appear for a hearing a week later in the other case against him.

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Turkey

Battles rage in Syria despite coronavirus cease-fires (Al-Monitor) By Fehim Tastekin
April 13, 2020

Clashes are raging between Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Syrian Kurdish groups east of the Euphrates River in what Syrian Kurds claim that is a Turkish effort to prevent displaced civilians from returning to their homes.

Despite the new challenges posed by the novel coronavirus outbreak, Turkey is pressing ahead with military deployments in Syria's Idlib and maintaining its tight grip east of the Euphrates River.

Ankara has transferred a number of military vehicles and munitions to Idlib, bringing its number of military posts in the last rebel bastion to 53 as of April 8. Turkey's increasing military activity in Idlib is no surprise, given possible looming operations in and around the enclave to reopen the M4 highway and to create a security corridor on both sides of the strategic road, as called for in a deal between Turkey and Russia. The deal, sealed in Moscow March 5, called for the cessation of hostilities, provided that the fight to eradicate terrorist groups continued. But there has been escalation on another front. Turkey-backed forces deployed east of the Euphrates to an area that came under the Turkish control in Operation Peace Spring are mounting attacks on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian government troops.

The coronavirus outbreak has topped the agenda not only in the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but also in Turkish-controlled Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain to the east of the Euphrates. The outbreak was expected to slow the fighting in the region. However, the attacks have not been disrupted by the pandemic, nor by internal disputes among Turkish-backed Syrian National Army factions. Syrian fighters discontent with Turkey's failure to pay them is also growing.

In March, as the pandemic sent the world into turmoil, clashes raged in the region, particularly around Tell Abyad, Ain Issa and Tell Tamer. April saw an uptick in violence. Turkish-backed forces based in Ras al-Ain are shelling villages in the predominantly Christian town of Tell Tamer, which lies on the M4 highway some 23 miles (37 kilometers) from Ras al-Ain. Ain Issa and Tell Abyad are also under fire.

The frequency of the clashes points to a low-intensity conflict strategy.

According to local reports, Turkish-backed rebels targeted several villages and towns near Tell Abyad and Ain Issa with mortar and artillery fire March 1-16. A civilian and a Syrian soldier were wounded by shelling near Tell Abyad and Ain Issa on March 15 and 16. The tension further escalated through the second half of March with the mainly Assyrian town of Tell Tamer coming under fire.

On April 1, the villages of Kafr Hamra and Umm al Kayf near Tell Tamer and Rabia near Ras al-Ain were bombed, wounding three civilian women. On April 2, the villages of Umm al Kayf, Abosh, Qabr, Rubaiyat and Tal al-Ward near Tell Tamer came under fire. According to local sources, two Syrian soldiers were killed and two others wounded during the clashes in Abosh and Qabr.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency gave a different tally, reporting that four SDF fighters and two Syrian army soldiers had been killed.

The Turkish Defense Ministry stated that 10 People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters had been "neutralized" in an operation conducted by Turkish "commandos" in the Peace Spring region.

The YPG is seen as an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the armed group that has been fighting Ankara since 1984. The PKK is listed as a terrorist group by Turkey and much of the international community.

"The terrorists were about to launch an attack aiming to disrupt the peace and stability in the region," the statement read, giving no further details. In another statement on the same day, the ministry announced four more YPG fighters had been "neutralized."

Attacks on the SDF positions in Tell Abyad and Tell Tamer kept up through the first week of April. In response, the influential Assyrian Military Council in Tell Tamer and the Habur Protection Units joined in the SDF's counterattacks.

The Defense Ministry announced April 4 that 24 fighters had been "neutralized," without providing any details about the time and locations of the operations. Naturally, the Kurdish sources have not confirmed these figures.

When Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 against the Syrian Kurdish-led groups, civilians escaping villages between Ain Issa and Tell Abyad took refuge in Raqqa while civilians escaping Tell Tamer scattered across Hasakah. Now that the operation is over, they are trying to return to their homes, but they are discouraged by the artillery fire and the recent clashes have allegedly led to new displacements from some villages.

"The region is being kept under fire to prevent civilians from returning to their villages. We were expecting the coronavirus outbreak to stop the clashes and bring some normality to the region, but the attacks are mounting," an official from the Kurdish-led administration in northeast Syria told Al-Monitor. "These attacks are affecting some 15 villages and undermining the autonomous administration's coronavirus [containment] efforts."

The attacks have also led to speculation on whether President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is still betting on his so far botched attempts to seize control of a corridor stretching for the entire 566-mile (911-kilometer) Turkish-Syrian border and oil fields in SDF-controlled Deir ez-Zor. Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in October had aimed to set up a safe zone along the war-torn country's northern frontier to resettle some of the 3.6 million refugees Turkey hosts. However, the deals Turkey reached with the United States on Oct. 17 and Russia on Oct. 22 to cease the operation limited the Turkish-control territory to an area 20 miles (32 kilometers) deep between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain. The escalation is considered an effort to keep Turkey's initial plans alive.

The Turkish Defense Ministry's decision to scale down the troop movements also appears irrelevant in the Syrian arena.

Meanwhile, discontent and disarray seem to be growing among Turkish-backed Syrian National Army factions. Some 60 fighters held a protest in Tell Abyad April 5 demanding Turkey pay their overdue salaries and allow fighters to cross into the area west of the Euphrates. Similar demands were raised back on March 17, when armed militia staged a sit-in, blocking the road linking Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain. They had also asked for a rotation of troops between forces deployed in the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch regions as well as the Peace Spring area.

Turkey has taken some measures at the Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ain crossings to stop the virus from entering the region and people still fear becoming trapped in the Peace Spring area, which lacks proper health facilities.

Rifts between the various Syrian National Army factions are standing out as another example of the disarray. A quarrel over the houses and businesses that the militia sees as spoils of war escalated into an armed conflict in the town of Kharabat in Ras al-Ain on the night of April 5. Hours of clashes left eight militia members dead. Episodes of looting similar to what happened in the formerly Kurdish-held enclave of Afrin are now unfolding in the Peace Spring region.

Ankara's efforts to keep the front lines active despite the deals it reached with Russia and the United States might be futile. The attacks on the SDF and Syrian government troops' positions have not yielded any territorial gains. In addition to the armed factions' discontent with Turkey, ongoing problems with the locals may be another harbinger of new trouble for Turkey.

New territorial gains, new financial resources, reconstruction opportunities and oil have been the main driving forces behind the armed militia's eagerness to participate in Operation Peace Spring. Under the new circumstances, however, Erdogan may not be able to use similar leverage to entice these forces, given its budget crisis, international isolation and dependence on the Russian game plan. Thus, the unfinished drama in northeastern Syria appears to be a looming headache for Turkey.

Turkey Presses on With Military Campaigns in Iraq and Syria Despite Coronavirus Woes (Newsweek) By Tom O'Connor

April 17, 2020

Turkey has pressed on with military campaigns against Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria despite the novel coronavirus compounding the troubles of local populations in both conflict-torn countries.

Turkey has fought for decades with the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that has established positions in neighboring Iraq and Syria. On Wednesday, the Turkish Defense Ministry announced that its forces had "neutralized" 18 PKK fighters operating in Iraq's northern Qandil Mountains.

The Iraqi Foreign Ministry challenged this account, however, summoning the Turkish ambassador after what it said Thursday was "a Turkish army fighter plane violating Iraqi airspace, and bombing a refugee camp near Makhmur that claimed the lives of two women." Baghdad's top diplomat Mohamad al-Hakim urged his Turkish counterpart "to stop such serious violations and respect the principles of good-neighborliness."

The following day, however, Turkish forces again reportedly attacked across the border, this time in northern Syria.

Both the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency and pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported Friday that Turkish troops and allied Syrian rebels launched rocket attacks near villages in the Hasakah province, a region under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led, U.S.-backed militia that Turkey considers to be an arm of the PKK.

Both Washington and Ankara—members of the NATO Western military alliance—consider the PKK to be a terrorist organization due to its guerrilla campaign against Turkey, but the group has complex relations with Iraq and Syria, both of which seek to balance Turkish and Kurdish ties. The U.S. has also allied with Kurdish forces that consider themselves separate from the PKK to fight the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) in both countries.

The jihadi group's lighting gains across the region prompted interventions from various international forces, including Iran, Russia and a U.S.-led coalition. With ISIS largely defeated, war-torn Iraq and Syria face a new, rapidly-spreading foe: COVID-19.

The novel coronavirus that has infected more than 2.2 million across the globe poses major challenges for even the world's most developed health care systems and has put those in Iraq and Syria at especially dire risk. While Iraq has confirmed only 1,482 cases and Syria a mere 38, the real figures are believed to be higher due to lack of testing.

Turkey, a population more than twice that of Iraq and nearly five times that of Syria, has recorded over 78,000 cases of the disease. Only Iran, with a comparable population and just over 79,000 cases, registered higher in the Middle East where Turkey was not the only actor to continue clashes.

ISIS has ramped up attacks in Iraq and Syria in an effort to reassert itself on the battlefield. The militants targeted both the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian military in positions across Syria's southeastern desert, and have stepped up ambushes against both Iraqi troops and militiamen as well, drawing U.S. strikes against the jihadis south of Kirkuk on Monday.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has also reported on repeated rival Syrian and Turkish strikes in Syria's northwestern Idlib province, where insurgents and militants have both attempted to advance against government positions supported by Russia and Iran. The coronavirus pandemic has prompted international appeals for peace. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres called last month for an "immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world."

"It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives," he added in a video appeal. "To warring parties, I say: Pull back from hostilities. Put aside mistrust and animosity. Silence the guns; stop the artillery; end the airstrikes. This is crucial to help create corridors for life-saving aid. To open precious windows for diplomacy. To bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19."

Also taking up the cause was French President Emmanuel Macron. The leader told Radio France Internationale on Tuesday he had secured the support of U.S. President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping and U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson—who was treated for COVID-19—in calling for a global truce. He said he expected the backing of fifth U.N. Security

Council leader, Russian President Vladimir Putin, as well.

In a statement published Wednesday, the Syrian Democratic Forces voiced their support for these efforts.

"We, in the General Command of the Syrian Democratic Forces, at a time when we affirm that this initiative serves humanity and is in the framework of supporting efforts to combat the coronavirus, we also affirm our commitment to any resolution that supports the United Nations call launched by Mr. Antonio Guterres on March 23, 2020, in which he called for an international truce," the group wrote.

"These worthy efforts led by President Macron will have an effective role in combating the pandemic, and we hope that it will be an essential step for establishing a sustainable global peace based on dialogue, not wars," it added.

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MIDDLE-EAST

Iraq

Grotian Moment: The International War Crimes Trial Blog

EU, UNITAD to support Digitization of Evidence of IS Crimes (menafn)

April 9, 2020

The European Union and UNITAD Sign Agreement to support Digitization of Evidence of ISIL crimes in Iraq.

The United Nation Investigative Team to Promote Accountability for Crimes Committed by Da'esh/ISIL (UNITAD) and the European Union (EU) have announced the signing of a Contribution Agreement through which the EU will fund a project to support the digitization and archiving of evidentiary materials of ISIL crimes held by Iraqi authorities.

The EU's contribution of 3.5 million EUR to this project represents the largest extrabudgetary contribution received by UNITAD to date.

Through this project, UNITAD will provide technical assistance and support to national authorities and those in the Kurdistan Region, to establish a comprehensive, indexed inventories of evidence relevant to ISIL crimes committed in Iraq.

This will strengthen the evidentiary basis for UNITAD and Iraqi national authorities in developing comprehensive case-files supporting domestic proceedings brought against ISIL members for crimes that may constitute crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide, in line with international standards.

UNITAD is implementing this project with support from the government of Iraq and in consultation with the Iraqi National Coordinating Committee. As an initial step, UNITAD will conduct detailed mapping of existing evidentiary material, before developing a detailed digitization plan.

Special Adviser Karim A. A. Khan QC (pictured), Head of UNITAD, thanked the EU for its generous support and underlined:

"The preservation and organization of evidentiary material in relation to ISIL crimes will serve to deepen the evidential foundations available for ISIL prosecutions. By establishing a comprehensive documentary record of these acts, we also contribute to global efforts to promote peace and security by ensuring that the ideologically bankrupt nature of ISIL is exposed."

The Special Adviser added that doing all this will help ensure justice and that the gravity of these crimes - and the sacrifices

made by Iraqi citizens - are not forgotten. He concluded:

"The victims, survivors - and indeed humanity - deserve no less. Accordingly, I record my gratitude to the EU for its generous contribution and to the Government of Iraq for its support of this project."

The EU funding for the project will run for 18 months, starting on March 26, 2020.

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Syria

Turkey Says Syria Violating Truce in Rebel-Held North (The New York Times)

April 20, 2020

Turkey's president on Monday accused the Syrian government of taking advantage of the world's preoccupation with the coronavirus pandemic to increase attacks in rebel-held northwestern Syria in violation of a truce.

In an address to the nation following a Cabinet meeting, Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to take action if the alleged Syrian government violations in Idlib province continue.

"Turkey remains committed to an agreement that it reached with Russia and will not give way to the (Syrian) regime's aggression," Erdogan said.

"Should the regime, which has violated the cease-fire and other conditions of the agreement, continue in this way, it will pay a price with heavy losses," he added.

Erdogan's comments came amid reports of limited Syrian violations and exchanges of fire between troops and Turkey-backed opposition forces, though the truce appeared to be mostly holding.

The cease-fire deal was brokered on March 5 between Russia and Turkey, which back opposing sides in the Syrian conflict. The deal halted a three-month Syrian government offensive into the country's last rebel stronghold. That Russia-backed offensive killed hundreds of civilians and displaced nearly a million people in Idlib province. Turkey backs some of the opposition groups in Idlib.

In addition to stopping the fighting, the agreement called for pushing militants out of a buffer zone on either side of a vital highway that runs through rebel territory.

Syria: Focus New Working Group's Efforts on ISIS Kidnappings (Human Rights Watch)

April 21, 2020

A new working group to help find the thousands of detained and missing people in northeast Syria is an essential first step toward accountability for what happened to them, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities in northeast Syria and a United States-led military coalition should provide the working group with complete support and access to information to find what happened to people kidnapped by the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).

On April 5, 2020, the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), the civilian authority governing areas that its armed forces captured from ISIS in northeast Syria with the support of the US-led Global Coalition Against ISIS, announced the creation of a civilian working group consisting of lawyers, activists, and relatives of the missing people. In a letter on April 20 to the SDC, Human Rights Watch said that creating the working group was a positive step and recommended steps to ensure that the group's work is effective.

"Families who have long waited for answers to what happened to their missing loved ones will be buoyed by this announcement," said Michael Page, deputy Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "Local authorities and the US-led coalition should do everything in their power to ensure that the working group has the support it needs to get these answers."

The announcement said that the group's mandate includes "collecting all necessary data and information as it pertains to the detentions file, and putting in place plans required to fulfill the dreams and aspirations of Syrians on this issue." The group is authorized to communicate and coordinate with all local, regional, and international bodies on this issue. The SDC pledges its full support and capacity at various levels to ensure that all detainees, missing, and kidnapped people are identified and, if detained, released.

The working group's eight members include Majdoline Hasan, a prominent northeast Syrian lawyer, and Fadwa Mahmoud, a founder of Families for Freedom, a Syrian group seeking to learn what happened to missing and detained Syrians and free those still alive.

Human Rights Watch urged the SDC and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the council's military arm, to ensure that the mandate primarily focuses on the missing and disappeared in areas under their control, particularly those ISIS kidnapped. In February, Human Rights Watch published a report documenting cases of people kidnapped by ISIS. While the full scale of the missing has not been confirmed, the Syrian Network for Human Rights has reported more than 8,143 cases of people detained by ISIS whose status remains unknown, many of them taken in areas now under SDF control.

Creating the working group is an essential first step to begin addressing what happened to people who went missing or were detained or kidnapped but to be effective, it should have the authority to request information from regional and local authorities, including the SDC, the SDF, the Asayish police in the region, civilian councils, and intelligence services, Human Rights Watch said.

The authorities should provide the working group access to all formal and informal prisons under their control as well as to international organizations with a mandate to monitor detention facilities. As Human Rights Watch has documented, some of those ISIS detained or kidnapped may have ended up in SDF or SDC-run detention facilities for ISIS suspects in northeast Syria.

The authorities in control of the prisons should ensure that everyone detained there is held under a clear legal basis and has been taken before a judicial authority to determine the necessity and legality of their detention. The authorities should assess whether any detainees are suspected ISIS members or were detained or disappeared by ISIS. This is particularly relevant for detained children.

The US and the US-led coalition, as allies of the SDF, should support this initiative, including by providing access to detention facilities it controls and information the working group may request to aid in their efforts.

The success of the working group will depend on its ability to conduct outreach both within and outside of northeast Syria, Human Rights Watch said. The group includes members from both inside and outside the region and has a mandate to cover the entirety of the northeast area under SDC control. The new group should immediately designate a spokesperson and provide regular public updates on its work and progress.

Since the territorial defeat of ISIS in the region, multiple efforts to find out what happened to people ISIS kidnapped had been hindered by the lack of political will and support from local authorities, as well as the lack of coordination of their efforts. The working group should work with and build on the efforts of other teams trying to learn what happened to those kidnapped by ISIS. Among these groups are the First Responders Team in Raqqa, which spearheaded efforts to excavate mass graves found in the area as early as 2017, and Jawab, a coalition of families of those kidnapped by ISIS.

"ISIS kidnapped thousands of people, including human rights activists, doctors, and community leaders, to cement its reign of terror in Syria," Page said. "The SDC needs to follow this positive first step with a sustained commitment to this long-neglected issue."

Syria refugees to face their torturers in German court (ABC News) By Frank Jordans
April 21, 2020

Six years ago Wassim Mukdad fled Syria, demoralized and fearing for his life as the country spiraled ever deeper into all-out war.

This week, the 34-year-old will come face-to-face with the man accused of running a government detention center where Mukdad and thousands of others were tortured during the early months of the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Together with more than a dozen other witnesses, Mukdad will testify before a German court in the trial of Anwar R., a former member of Syria's secret police suspected of overseeing the abuse of detainees at a notorious jail near Damascus known as Al Khatib, or Branch 251.

German prosecutors last fall charged the 57-year-old R., whose full surname wasn't released for privacy reasons, with crimes against humanity, murder and rape in a case that human rights activists say marks the first time worldwide that a former Syrian official is being held responsible for such serious crimes during the long-running conflict.

As a senior member of Syria's General Intelligence Directorate, R. is accused of overseeing the "systematic and brutal torture" of more than 4,000 prisoners between April 2011 and September 2012, resulting in the deaths of at least 58 people, federal prosecutors said.

A second suspect, identified as Eyad A., will also go on trial accused of contributing to crimes against humanity by enabling the torture and imprisonment of at least 30 protesters in late 2011. The 43-year-old was allegedly part of a unit that arrested people following a demonstration in the city of Douma and took them to Branch 251, where they were severely mistreated.

"I was taking part in demonstrations, demanding freedom and civil society, liberties and democracy. Exactly the same as the whole demonstration movement in that time," Mukdad recalled in an interview with The Associated Press.

"The second time I was detained, it was in the same branch where (R.) allegedly used to work," he said. "I faced torture there, during the interrogations."

For legal reasons, Mukdad can't talk about the details of his case before the trial opens. But he said what happened to him wasn't unique.

"We were three friends and we all suffered the same procedures from the beginning till the end," he said. "And other people in the cells I met also suffered the same. So I knew that it wasn't only me."

None of the inmates knew why they were being detained or whether they would make it out alive.

"We were not allowed to contact any lawyers, family members or friends," Mukdad said. "Nobody tells you anything. It's not only a physical torture, it's also psychological torture."

The defendants' lawyers could not be reached for comment.

After being released, Mukdad volunteered as a medic in a refugee camp in southern Damascus, only to get detained by al-Nusra, an Islamist armed group linked to al-Qaida, and then again by government forces.

"Starting from 2013, the situation was going very clearly into a full-scale civil war," Mukdad said.

The government had begun to use chemical weapons. "You think: What could I do anymore? There is no place for any reasonable voice in in [sic.] this time of total mania."

He decided to flee Syria a year later, first to Turkey and then, in 2016, to Germany.

Like hundreds of thousands of Syrians who found refuge in Germany, Mukdad tried to create a new life for himself, learning the language and concentrating on music, unaware that human rights groups in Europe were building a case against Syrian officials. It wasn't until last year that he happened to cross paths with a lawyer in Berlin who asked him to testify against Anwar R.

"This trial is of considerable importance worldwide. The trial will provide an overall picture of the crimes committed by the Syrian government. This knowledge can then be used by others and in other trials," said Wolfgang Kaleck, head of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights that supports 16 Syrians in the case, eight of whom will be present as co-plaintiffs.

The group said the case is the result of a series of criminal complaints submitted over the past four years by almost 50 Syrian torture survivors, relatives, activists, and lawyers in Germany, Austria, Norway and Sweden.

With efforts to bring war crimes cases to the International Criminal Court in The Hague blocked by Russia and China, victims have increasingly looked to courts in Europe to apply the principle of 'universal jurisdiction' that allows them to try crimes committed elsewhere. Both France and Germany have issued international arrest warrants for Jamil Hassan, the former head of Syria's Air Force Intelligence Service implicated in widespread torture.

To Mukdad, the trial that opens Thursday in Germany's western city of Koblenz is a way to "raise the voice of the victims, the living and the dead."

"If there is any process to restore part of this dignity for the victims, to acknowledge the suffering, to just say clearly and loudly, this is not acceptable, it's a gain for the whole of humanity," he said.

Mukdad said he hopes the defendants receive the fair trial he was denied in Syria. The men, who themselves left Syria for Germany before their arrest in February 2019, remain in jail.

“If they are innocent, I want them to be free. If they are guilty, I want them to face just punishment,” said Mukdad. “All that I can hope is that the system works properly.”

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Yemen

Briefing Security Council on Yemen, Special Envoy Calls upon Parties to End War, Tackle COVID-19 Threat (United Nations)

April 16, 2020

As military escalations and the onset of COVID-19 threaten to wipe out hard-won gains in Yemen, an opportunity has emerged to bring peace, Special Envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council in a 16 April videoconference meeting*, stressing that there could be no better moment for parties to silence the guns.

Indeed, he said the threat of the novel coronavirus has galvanized efforts towards peace among Yemenis and the international community alike, recalling the Secretary-General’s appeal on 25 March for parties to end hostilities and focus on reaching a political settlement. Government and Ansar Allah leaders welcomed that call, as did other Yemeni political leaders and civil society. “They want this war to end and they want their leaders to agree to resolve their differences through dialogue,” he assured.

Updating on recent events, he said the Saudi-led coalition on 8 April announced a unilateral ceasefire for an initial two weeks, aiming to create an environment conducive for the success of United Nations-led peace efforts. Governments in the region and beyond have helped behind the scenes with timely advocacy. “All eyes are now on the parties to the conflict,” he said. “This is the time for hard decisions.” The demands on the leaders of both parties are of existential importance. “I know that both the Government of Yemen and Ansar Allah want to end this conflict on the basis of a fair and just peace,” he added.

Describing three proposals he presented to the parties, he said the first concerns a nationwide ceasefire. The second centres on humanitarian and economic measures — among them, releasing prisoners and detainees, opening Sana’a International Airport, paying civil servant salaries, opening access roads and ensuring the entry of ships carrying essential commodities into Hudaydah ports — all of which will help in the fight against COVID-19.

The third proposal provides for the urgent resumption of the political process, he added. He has been in constant negotiations with the parties on details and wording to be included in these agreements, with the expectation that they will soon formally adopt these documents. Describing conversations with the two parties and those with the Saudi-led coalition as continuous, detailed and constructive, he said “we are moving towards a consensus over the proposals — particularly on the principle of a nationwide ceasefire.” Efforts are ongoing to bridge differences before convening at a virtual meeting where agreements will be tabled, confirmed and published.

Meanwhile, military activities persist and he expressed fear that the war will continue until agreement is reached on the proposals. While the governorate of Marib remains the centre of gravity, he drew attention to the “senseless” attack on the women’s section of the Central Prison in Taiz city on 5 April. In Hudaydah, ceasefire violations continue daily, and following the sniper shooting of a Government Liaison Officer, the Redeployment Coordination Committee and joint mechanisms to implement the 2019 Hudaydah Agreement have ceased to function. The Head of the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA) continues to engage with parties to prevent a spillover of the fighting.

“Yemen cannot face a war and a pandemic simultaneously,” he insisted. The battle against the virus will be all consuming. “We can do no less than to stop this war and turn all our attention to this new threat... I know that the leaders of both parties, as well as those in the region, understand this as well as anyone.”

Also briefing the Council, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock said a similar sense of urgency must be brought to the humanitarian crisis, as Yemen confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on 10 April. Five years of war have

severely degraded the health infrastructure, exhausted people's immune systems and increased acute vulnerabilities. Epidemiologists warn that COVID-19 could spread faster, more widely and with deadlier consequences in Yemen than elsewhere. "We are, in other words, running out of time," he stressed.

Outlining five priorities, he first underscored the need to protect civilians, pointing out that in the first quarter of 2020, civilian casualties rose each month, with more than 500 people killed or injured. One in every three civilian casualties has been a child. In Al Jawf — where hostilities escalated in mid-January — that rate is now one in two. Hostilities persist mainly in Marib, Al Jawf, Al Bayda and Taiz. Since January, 60,000 people have fled conflict in Al Jawf, most of them arriving in Marib, where 800,000 displaced people have sought refuge since 2016. If conflict expands deeper into Marib, more than 1 million people could suddenly be on the move.

He said the second priority — humanitarian access — is a requirement of international humanitarian law. While the precautions taken against COVID-19 are not slowing aid operations in a major way, restrictions on staff and cargo movements — mostly in the north — continue to limit delivery. In Government-held areas, bureaucratic impediments and insecurity pose problems, with humanitarian organizations awaiting Government approval for 43 projects that would assist 2.3 million people.

In the north, access challenges remain severe, he said. Progress is not moving fast enough. Restrictions are so onerous that aid agencies are being forced to calibrate programmes and delivery to levels where they can manage the risks associated with such a non-permissive environment. While Ansar Allah authorities have approved 13 aid projects since early March, 92 agency requests are pending. Local officials arbitrarily refuse missions, while humanitarian staff experience severe movement restrictions and long delays at checkpoints, even when paperwork is in order. In a particularly serious event, United Nations international staff have been prevented from moving from field hubs to Sana'a. "This is unacceptable," he insisted, and there has been no progress in accessing the SAFER oil tanker.

To be sure, there have been positive steps, he said, noting that a principle governing framework for non-governmental organizations has been agreed upon and — after months of negotiations — there is finally confirmation that the World Food Programme's long-planned biometric registration exercise can start. All the while, humanitarian operations remain a lifeline, helping 13 million Yemenis each month. In 2019, humanitarian agencies supported 3,100 health facilities and conducted 17 million medical consultations, enabled access to clean water and sanitation for more than 11 million people and treated a million acutely malnourished children.

However, of the 41 major United Nations programmes, 31 will start closing in the coming weeks if the Organization cannot secure funding. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 80 per cent of health services provided through the response could stop at the end of April, disbanding health teams that have successfully contained disease outbreak.

"The world's largest aid operation cannot afford extended cuts during this unprecedented emergency," he said, estimating that it will need \$900 million to carry it through July. Noting that the United Nations-led response has received \$800 million in 2020, he said the equivalent 2019 figure was \$2.6 billion and he urged donors to pledge and immediately release funds. He also called for bold action to stabilize the economy "before it's too late" — including with regular foreign exchange injections and "doing whatever we can" to immediately increase quantities of affordable food and consumer goods in markets.

Indeed, COVID-19 presents an opportunity to reinvigorate the political process and move towards peace, he said. "It is, though, also promising severe repercussions if that does not happen," he warned.

In the ensuing discussion, Council members welcomed the unilateral ceasefire announced by Saudi Arabia, on behalf of the coalition forces, as well as Yemen's commitment to uphold it, calling on the Houthis to do the same. Several pressed parties to engage in talks under United Nations auspices, stressing that COVID-19 presents an epic challenge to already trying conditions.

The United Kingdom's representative said a ceasefire and cooperation with the United Nations-led political process "is the best defence we have" against COVID-19. Noting London's \$930 million contribution to the global coronavirus response and \$1 billion in support to Yemen since the conflict began, he said the parties must now also improve humanitarian access to mitigate the worst effects of the outbreak. Saudi Arabia's ceasefire is a rare opportunity to deliver peace, he said, urging the parties to make it a permanent end to hostilities.

The representative of the United States — welcoming Saudi Arabia's unilateral ceasefire and urging the Houthis to make the same commitment — said all parties in Yemen must recommit to de-escalation and resumed talks. She urged all Member States to fully comply with the arms embargo, voiced concern over reports of Iran's interference in the conflict and called out Houthi obstruction of humanitarian efforts. The Houthis must stop blocking a solution to the SAFER oil tanker problem and permit United Nations officials to carry out repairs on the vessel.

The representative of Saint Vincent and the Grenadines said recent flash floods in Sana'a and the COVID-19 pandemic have added layers of complexity to the dire humanitarian situation, requiring regional and global collaboration. Welcoming recent ceasefire announcements alongside WHO efforts and cooperation with Yemen authorities on a response to the novel coronavirus, she said sustaining humanitarian aid is critically important at this juncture.

Belgium's representative voiced concern that aid is being obstructed and urged all parties to comply with their international law obligations. They must also prevent grave violations of children's rights by implementing an action plan with the United Nations, and a memorandum of understanding of time-bound activities with the coalition. For their part, the Houthis allow access to the SAFER tanker.

China's representative said all parties in Yemen must strengthen their political will, engage in broad dialogue and consultations, implement the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements, cease violence and build trust. Describing the humanitarian situation as grim, he expressed hope that the international community, including the Council and humanitarian agencies on the ground, will focus on the possible impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Estonia's representative said only an immediate ceasefire and collective response in cooperation with the United Nations can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. He urged all parties to stop attacks on civilian infrastructure, comply with international human rights law, engage with the Special Envoy and guarantee safe, full and unhindered access for aid delivery. He also reiterated the call on the Houthis to allow United Nations officials access to the SAFER oil tanker to prevent an environmental disaster.

Viet Nam's representative voiced regret that some donors have cut funding for humanitarian work in Yemen. Calling on parties to uphold an immediate ceasefire — and on the United Nations, Member States, international organizations and donors to support humanitarian efforts — he echoed the appeal for full implementation of the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements.

"Yemenis must seize the momentum for political settlement", added Indonesia's representative. He called on all parties to avoid impeding humanitarian assistance, emphasized the importance implementing the Stockholm, Hudaydah and Riyadh agreements and urged the Houthis not to hinder access by the United Nations Mission to Support the Hudaydah Agreement patrols.

Offering the national perspective, Yemen's representative expressed support for peace efforts based on the Gulf initiative and its implementation mechanism, the outcomes of the Comprehensive National Dialogue Conference and Council resolution 2216 (2015), which represents the essence of peace. Having complied with all calls to de-escalate, Yemen has worked to combat COVID-19 and create an environment for the success of the Special Envoy's efforts. It has worked to save Yemenis from the humanitarian catastrophe created by the Houthi militia and welcomed the unilateral ceasefire by the "Coalition to support Legitimacy".

He said the Government maintains an unwavering focus on humanitarian issues "according to the logic of priorities". Such a pledge by the Houthis could lead to discussions on other issues — and ultimately a comprehensive settlement that meets aspirations to restore the State, end the coup, hand over weapons and resume the political process. "The situation in Yemen demands a complete cessation of all forms of escalation," he said, a united stand with global humanitarian efforts and the urgent establishment of mechanisms to prevent the Houthis from exploiting the truce for military gains. He urged the international community to exert pressure on the Houthis to comply with these calls without preconditions.

Detailing various acts committed by Houthi militias — including the targeting of civilians in Marib, Hudaydah and Taiz, in service of the "destructive Iranian project" — he said global disregard for these crimes only encourages Houthis to violate international law. He urged the Council to condemn death sentences issued by the Houthis against four journalists who have been detained since 2015. Fighting COVID-19 — the Government's top priority — has required it to equip quarantine centres, enhance hospital preparedness in all governorates and do everything possible to save lives. The Supreme National Emergency Committee for Coronavirus is working to obtain medicines and ventilators in adequate numbers, he said, and thanking Saudi Arabia for its support to Yemen's health-care sector.

The Russian Federation's representative expressed support for the Council press statement adopted in line with the Secretary-General's call to end the conflict and combat COVID-19. Yet, reports indicate that hostilities continue, he observed, pressing the parties to cease hostilities and chart a path towards political settlement. Dialogue is essential. Moscow will continue to support United Nations efforts, he said, citing humanitarian aid and the response to the novel coronavirus as priorities. Recalling that Yemen's people already have experienced cholera, diphtheria and hunger, he underscored the importance of unimpeded access for humanitarian and health-care workers to all areas of the country.

Niger's delegate called on the "wisdom and responsibility" of the parties in Yemen to cease hostilities immediately. They must honour their commitments, resume peace talks and respect past agreements. He called for a halt to recurring restrictions on

the movement of humanitarian aid and urged all sides to focus on the fight against “our common enemy”, the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the extreme poverty of its people and its precarious health system, the coronavirus outbreak could be particularly disastrous for Yemen, he added.

The representative of South Africa encouraged parties to continue their cooperation with the Special Envoy to reach an inclusive Yemeni-led and -owned political settlement. He called for the full participation of women in all aspects of that process. Underscoring the need to fully implement the Hudaydah Agreement, he expressed concern that the number of deaths from the war has exceeded 100,000. As Yemen is critically under-equipped to address COVID-19, he welcomed measures taken by the National Government of Accord and the Houthis to curb its spread, highlighting the ability of both sides to work together. He also urged them to ensure unhindered passage of humanitarian and medical supplies to those in need.

Germany’s representative, recalling the Secretary-General’s appeal for a global ceasefire, said the situation in Yemen speaks to that need, yet “the promises we have heard have been empty”. The Saudi-led coalition’s announcement that it would cease all hostilities for two weeks has had no discernible effect on the ground. Nor has there been a similar commitment by the Houthis. He urged all parties to immediately stop hostilities, return to the negotiating table and translate their professed willingness into action by agreeing to a nationwide ceasefire as a first step towards a comprehensive and inclusive political solution to the conflict. All actors must work to limit the spread of COVID-19 and ensure full entry for aid workers, medicine and medical supplies into Yemen. UNMHA also must be given the necessary access and free movement to ensure its operations.

Tunisia’s representative expressed full support for ending hostilities and ramping up efforts to counter a potential COVID-19 outbreak in Yemen, pointing to the Special Envoy’s proposals for a ceasefire, resumed political process and both economic and humanitarian action. He likewise called for full implementation of the Stockholm and Riyadh agreements to enhance confidence-building measures. Only through dialogue will parties be able to reach a comprehensive settlement, in line with the Gulf Cooperation Council initiative, outcomes of the national dialogue and relevant Security Council resolutions, he said.

France’s representative called on Yemeni parties to fully engage in negotiations to “silence the guns” based on the Special Envoy’s proposals. While welcoming the coalition’s announced cessation of air strikes, he said Yemeni parties meanwhile have intensified hostilities, which he condemned in the strongest terms. He called on them to commit to a cessation of hostilities and ensure safe, unhindered humanitarian access. United Nations efforts to fight COVID-19 in Yemen must be supported and all obstacles to such access lifted. France remains fully mobilized and engaged to find a political solution to the crisis and respond to the coronavirus pandemic, he said, noting more broadly its work to de-escalate regional tensions.

The representative of the Dominican Republic, Council President for April, spoke in his national capacity to urge all parties to immediately halt fighting, implement the ceasefire, release all detainees and those forcibly disappeared, activate prisoner exchange agreements and work with the Special Envoy to restart inclusive political negotiations. He underscored the importance of women’s meaningful participation in that regard, stressing more broadly that early action can still prevent a full outbreak of COVID-19 in Yemen. He urged authorities to allow health-care and humanitarian workers full access into the country — and to communities in need — so they can help slow the infection rate.

* Based on information received from the Security Council Affairs Division.

Three Yemeni civilians killed in Saudi-led shelling despite ‘ceasefire’ (Shiite News)

April 20, 2020

At least three civilians have been killed and another sustained injuries when militiamen loyal to the country’s former president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, shelled a residential neighborhood in Yemen’s southern province of Ta’izz despite a two-week ceasefire declared by the Saudi-led coalition.

Local sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Arabic-language al-Masirah television network that the Saudi mercenaries fired projectiles at Wadi Hanash village in the At Ta’iziyah district of the province Sunday afternoon.

The sources added that two women and a child were killed whilst a man was injured when their house was struck in the shelling.

Separately, Saudi units launched artillery rounds and mortar shells at residential areas in the Razih district of Yemen’s northwestern province of Sa’ada.

There were, however, no immediate reports about possible casualties and the extent of damage caused.

Saudi-led warplanes also carried out eight airstrikes against the Khabb-wa ash-Sha’af district in the northern Yemeni province of Jawf. No reports of casualties and damage were quickly available.

Elsewhere in the Sirwah district of the central province of Ma'rib, Saudi-led warplanes pounded several areas on three occasions. There were no casualties and damage immediately reported though.

Last week, Mohammed Abdul-Salam, the spokesman for Yemen's Houthi Ansarullah movement, roundly rejected as fraudulent the Saudi-led coalition's ceasefire, saying the declaration deceitfully targets the world public opinion.

He said Yemen has seen an escalation in fighting and airstrikes carried out by the coalition at the same time that the siege of Yemen continues.

"The declared ceasefire is deceitful and meant to mislead the world public opinion. If there were a serious intention and absolute willpower towards peace, the UN Security Council should have passed a formal resolution to stop the absurd war on Yemen and lift the unjust siege; rather it sufficed to a worthless statement in order to appease the [Saudi-led] alliance," Abdul-Salam added.

The US-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), a nonprofit conflict-research organization, estimates that more than 100,000 people have been killed since Saudi Arabia and a number of its regional allies launched the devastating war on Yemen in March 2015.

The UN says over 24 million Yemenis are now in dire need of humanitarian aid, including 10 million suffering from extreme levels of hunger.

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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

Fears over most vulnerable Palestinian prisoners amid coronavirus (Al Jazeera) By Maram Humaid
April 17, 2020

Noureddine Sarsour was not surprised when his test for COVID-19 came back positive. He received the news a day after his release from an Israeli prison on March 31.

During his two-week detention at Israel's Ofer prison in the occupied West Bank - on charges of throwing stones and firebombs at Israeli forces - the 19-year-old said he underwent two blood tests and a throat swab. A day later, the charges against him were dropped and he was released, although he was not informed of the test results.

"Usually, before the prisoner is released from Israeli prisons, he should meet the prison manager," Sarsour, who in 2017 has previously been detained and released without charge, told Al Jazeera from isolation in a hotel in Ramallah.

"When I went to see him, the manager was wearing an anti-static uniform with a face mask and spoke to me while standing about three metres away. At that moment, I felt there was something wrong," he said.

Sarsour's suspicion that he had been infected with the new coronavirus increased when the guards who escorted him to the car

as he was leaving kept their distance.

"I myself opened the car door and closed it behind. They didn't approach me until I was dropped near a checkpoint," he said.

Upon his arrival at the checkpoint, he was transferred by Palestinian medical crews to a Ramallah hospital and tested for coronavirus. The test returned positive the next day, and in the following days, he began showing mild symptoms, including a headache, fever and throat pain.

"My big fear is about the prisoners in Ofer prison. I mixed with about 30 to 70 prisoners while staying in Ofer prison, as the Israeli prison service keeps moving new prisoners between sections."

He said the authorities did not take special precautions to prevent infection inside the prison, such as enforcing social distancing. According to Sarsour, the prisoners asked the Israeli prison service multiple times to place new prisoners in a 14-day quarantine, before allowing them to mix with other prisoners.

"All these calls went unheard," Sarsour said.

In the days after his release, some of the inmates at Ofer held a demonstration to call for testing for the inmates who had been in contact with Sarsour. The Palestinian Prisoners' Society said about nine prisoners who were known to have mixed with Sarsour were placed in quarantine. The Israeli Prison Service (IPS) said in a statement on April 2 that "every new detainee" was held separately for 14 days before being absorbed into a regular part of the prison.

Thaer Shretieh, head of the media unit for the Commission of Detainees and Ex-detainees' Affairs, told Al Jazeera the commission sent a letter to the IPS calling for an investigation into Sarsour's case. The letter also called on the prison service to implement preventive measures, especially with prisoners who had been in recent contact with Sarsour, he added.

"The Israeli side totally denied that the prisoner was infected inside their prisons. Despite that, Israel has confirmed that three guards at Ofer prison and al-Ramleh prison tested positive for coronavirus," Shretieh said.

The IPS said on March 31 that prison guards at Ofer who had tested positive for COVID-19 were placed into isolation and investigations showed they had not been in direct contact with prisoners.

As of April 16, Israel has reported more than 12,000 cases of coronavirus infections and 143 deaths linked to it. The Palestinian Authority has confirmed a total of 295 cases across the West Bank and Gaza, of whom two people have died.

Calls for release

The detainees' commission has called on the Red Cross and the WHO to intervene to release prisoners who may be more susceptible to the coronavirus. According to the commission, there are 5,000 Palestinians currently held in Israeli prisons, including 700 who are sick.

On April 17, Palestinians mark Prisoners' Day to remind the public of the plight of those thousands of Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli military jails.

Yehia Masawdeh, spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Jerusalem and the West Bank, told Al Jazeera that "non-public meetings" are carried out weekly with the Israeli authorities to discuss the conditions of prisons. "We made sure that the infected Israeli guards were put in quarantine," he said.

"We urge the Israeli authorities to commit to the prevention and sterilisation standards, in accordance with international humanitarian law," he added.

Masawdeh said the ICRC has stopped family visits and is holding weekly meetings with Israeli authorities to inspect prison conditions through visits by an international doctor.

"We have received many demands for the release of prisoners, and the ICRC, in turn, has demanded the Israeli authorities to release prisoners over the age of 65 in addition to those suffering from chronic diseases."

On April 16 the IPS announced it had begun a programme of coronavirus testing for prisoners and staff. "The testing process began on April 14 and will initially be conducted by 100 prisoners and staff serving in the IPS Medical Center (ROSH)," the statement said.

"Further, and according to the rate of issuance of test kits from the Ministry of Health, the sample testing procedure will continue for the entire IPS population", it said.

'My son is dying slowly'

For the relatives of the most vulnerable Palestinian prisoners currently held in Israeli jails, the outbreak has been agonising. Sabbah al-Jerjawi's son Iyad is currently serving a 9-year sentence for multiple charges in Gilboa Prison in northern Israel. Iyad is 34 years old and was diagnosed with a cancerous brain tumour two months ago.

Iyad, originally from Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, was detained in June 2011 at the Israeli-controlled Erez crossing, on his way back from receiving medical treatment in Israel.

"My life has turned upside down two months ago, after the medical check-ups of my son, Iyad, showed that he suffers from a brain cancer," 58-year old Sabbah said. "Since then, we called all bodies and the Red Cross to intervene to release my son and to let him receive the proper treatment outside the prison, but in vain. My son is dying slowly in prison."

"Since the outbreak of coronavirus, we're not sleeping due to our anxiety and fear. The conditions of prisoners in Israeli prisons are very deteriorated. They don't have the immunity to confront this pandemic that spreads across the world," she added.

"Only 60 days are remaining for the release of my son, but my joy turned into horror, because every day that passes without intervention increases the risk of a coronavirus outbreak inside Israeli prisons."

Israel demolished 18 Palestinian structures despite appeals to stop this policy (Wafa)

April 18, 2020

Israel demolished, seized or dismantled 18 Palestinian-owned structures in Area C of the occupied West Bank in the first two weeks of April citing the lack of building permits despite large scale appeals to stop this policy in light of the coronavirus outbreak, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in the occupied Palestinian territories.

It said in its biweekly report on Protection of Civilians in the occupied territories covering the period between 31 March and 13 April that of particular concern was the ongoing demolition of water and hygiene-related structures, which could undermine efforts to contain the spread of coronavirus disease, COVID-19.

"Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Israeli authorities have largely halted the demolition of inhabited homes, but continued targeting livelihood and service-related structures," said OCHA.

During the reporting period, the Israeli authorities requisitioned two mobile latrines and damaged two water tanks in the herding community of al Taybe in the Hebron district in the south of the West Bank, and demolished three water cisterns in Kafr Nimeh village near Ramallah. During the latter incident, Israeli forces also uprooted about 1,200 trees, on grounds that the land was declared 'state land'.

OCHA also said the during the reporting period, eight Palestinians were injured and extensive property, including more than 670 trees, was vandalized by assailants believed to be Israeli settlers. The injuries occurred in three incidents: in the Israeli-controlled H2 area of Hebron city, where two men, one of whom is mentally disabled, were pepper-sprayed; near Kobar village in the Ramallah district, where three farmers were beaten with rifles while working their land; and in the Ramat Eshkol settlement of East Jerusalem, where three Palestinian workers were physically assaulted, including one stabbed and severely injured.

Another four incidents entailed the uprooting or vandalizing of over 670 olive saplings and trees in al Tuwani in Hebron district, Turmus Ayya in Ramallah district and al Khader in Bethlehem district. In the latter village, since the beginning of the year around 1,450 trees belonging to farmers from al Khader village have been vandalized.

Residents from Umm al Kheir herding community reported that settlers poisoned over 20 almond trees. In Ein Qiniya village near Ramallah, settlers ran with motorbikes over land planted with cucumbers, while in Yanun in the Nablus area and al-Jaba in the Bethlehem district, they herded sheep on, and damaged, cultivated land. In another two incidents, settlers raided the outskirts of Qusra village in Nablus district and al Mazra al Qibliya village in Ramallah district and vandalized property. Since the beginning of March, the weekly average of settler attacks resulting in Palestinian injuries or damage to their property increased by 80 per cent and reached nine incidents compared with an average during January-February of five incidents, said OCHA.

It said that Israeli forces carried out 53 search and arrest operations across the West Bank and arrested 45 Palestinians. Half of these operations and around 60 per cent of arrests were registered in East Jerusalem, 10 in the Israeli-controlled area of Hebron city (H2) and nine in the Ramallah governorate. This represents an over 50 per cent decline compared to the bi-

weekly average of such operations in the first quarter of the year.

In the Gaza Strip, said OCHA, on 6 April Israeli airplanes sprayed herbicides on agricultural land near the border fence, east of Gaza city, the third such incident reported this year, resulting in damage to crops.

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Gulf Region

Canada lifts freeze on military exports to Saudi Arabia amid COVID-19 pandemic (Global News) By

Andrew Russell

April 9, 2020

Canada has lifted its ban on military exports to Saudi Arabia amid the COVID-19 pandemic despite concerns over widespread human rights abuses by Riyadh.

Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne and Finance Minister Bill Morneau announced the lifting of the freeze, put in place in 2018, in a statement released just before the long weekend.

“Following the conclusion of the review of export permits to Saudi Arabia conducted by officials from Global Affairs Canada—including those related to this contract—we have now begun reviewing permit applications on a case-by-case basis,” Champagne said.

The Trudeau government had announced a review of all Canada’s existing arms sales to Saudi Arabia in 2018, after reports emerged that the Saudi government was behind the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The moratorium, however, did not affect the controversial \$14-billion deal with the Kingdom to export more than 700 combat vehicles, produced by General Dynamics Land Systems-Canada at its plant in London, Ont.

The statement said the federal government would have had to pay up to \$14 billion if it had cancelled the contract or disclosed its terms.

“We can confirm that the cancellation of this \$14-billion contract—or even the mere disclosure of any of its terms—could have resulted in billions of dollars in damages to the Government of Canada, with potential damages amounting to the full value of the contract,” Champagne said.

“This would have put the jobs of thousands of Canadians at risk, not only in Southwestern Ontario but also across the entire defence industry supply chain.”

NDP Foreign Affairs Critic Jack Harris said although Saudi Arabia has “one of the world’s worst human rights records,” it’s important to stand up for Canadian workers.

“We can stand up for Canadian jobs and stand up for human rights,” Harris said in a statement.

“The Canadian Armed Forces have our own LAV needs and these vehicles and the people who build them should be supported with sales to other jurisdictions that respect human rights.”

Thursday’s announcement comes after Global Affairs said last September it found no evidence that Canadian exports of military exports to Saudi Arabia were contributing to human rights violations.

Experts and human rights advocates have warned there is ample evidence of Canadian made weapons, including photos and video of light armoured vehicles (LAVs) and rifles, in areas of the Kingdom and in Yemen, where human rights violations are occurring.

A Sept. 17, 2019, memo from Global Affairs to former foreign affairs minister Chrystia Freeland acknowledged the Kingdom had been accused of “gross violations of international human rights and humanitarian law due to its role leading a military

coalition in Yemen.”

The memo claimed there is no proof Canadian weapons were being used to commit war crimes in Yemen.

“There is no evidence or credible reporting that would link any Canadian exports (eg. ground vehicles, sniper rifles) to contraventions of international humanitarian law in Yemen,” the memo said.

“This is in marked contrast with exports from [REDACTED] whose military exports can be directly traced to the Saudi coalition air campaign and naval blockade.”

The UN’s Timid Responses to War Crimes Against Children (Human Rights Watch) By Bill Van Esveld
April 10, 2020

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons concluded in an April 8 report that Syria’s air force had carried out three chemical weapons attacks against its own people, including children, on the orders of senior military commanders. The European Union demanded that the Syrian officials responsible “be held accountable” and said it is considering “restrictive measures” against them.

The United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, was far more equivocal. Later that day, his spokesperson said that the secretary-general “took note” of the report and condemned the use of chemical weapons, but declined to say if he condemned the Syrian perpetrators.

It’s not the first time Guterres has been reluctant to identify perpetrators. On April 6, he published a summary of an investigation into seven attacks on civilian facilities in Syria – where the joint Russian-Syrian military coalition has repeatedly attacked schools and killed children – that failed to mention Russia’s involvement in a single incident.

The summary found it “highly probable that the Government of Syria and/or its allies” bombed a school in Qalaat al-Madiq in April 2019 but lacked enough evidence “to reach a conclusive finding.” Yet last December, the New York Times used flight logs, witness statements, and cockpit recordings to pin the attack on a Russian warplane.

Last June, Guterres rightly identified the coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as responsible for the majority of child casualties and unlawful attacks on schools and hospitals in the armed conflict in Yemen. But, inexplicably, the secretary-general’s annual “list of shame” for grave violations against children included the coalition on a sub-list of violators supposedly improving.

The UN secretariat isn’t the only UN body seemingly reluctant to name names of abusers. Also on April 8, the Security Council’s working group on children and armed conflict published a statement that rightly condemned Yemen’s Houthis for abuses but declined to mention Saudi Arabia or the UAE at all. Instead, the working group called on the coalition to investigate its own violations, whatever those might be – none were cited. Past investigations by the coalition have been a whitewash.

It’s a mistake to tiptoe around the truth about war crimes against children. By refusing to name perpetrators, important international bodies undermine chances to protect the vulnerable, advance justice for atrocious crimes, and prevent their recurrence.

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ASIA

Afghanistan

ICC Afghanistan Torture Investigation Likely to Turn on Criminal Intent (Just Security)

April 15, 2020

The recent decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to authorize Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda to investigate alleged war crimes in Afghanistan includes allegations that U.S. personnel committed torture when interrogating prisoners there and in other ICC member countries. The prosecutor has identified the potential defendants as CIA and Department of Defense (DOD) officials who devised, authorized, or oversaw the interrogations. Whether those officials are ultimately charged will likely turn on whether they had the required criminal intent or whether they justifiably relied in good faith on assurances by the Justice Department that the so-called “enhanced interrogation techniques” they participated in were lawful.

Article 30 of the ICC’s Rome Statute requires that the defendant had the mental state of intent and knowledge. Article 32 acknowledges that some mistakes of law may negate that mental state. Therefore, U.S. personnel who relied on the Department of Justice’s (DOJ’s) legal advice may not be criminally responsible even if that advice turned out to be wrong.

This notion of reliance in good faith to negate criminal responsibility is not new. The U.S. Detainee Treatment Act of 2005, adopted by a vote of 90-9 in the Senate, provides that:

it shall be a defense that such officer, employee, member of the Armed Forces, or other agent did not know that the practices were unlawful and a person of ordinary sense and understanding would not know the practices were unlawful. Good faith reliance on advice of counsel should be an important factor, among others, to consider in assessing whether a person of ordinary sense and understanding would have known the practices to be unlawful.

In 2009, President Barack Obama said that “it is our intention to assure those who carried out their duties relying in good faith upon legal advice from the Department of Justice that they will not be subject to prosecution.” Attorney General Eric Holder later affirmed that “the Department of Justice will not prosecute anyone who acted in good faith and within the scope of the legal guidance given by the Office of Legal Counsel regarding the interrogation of detainees.” And the Senate’s May 2018 confirmation of Gina Haspel as CIA director was an implicit endorsement of her explanation that “CIA personnel involved with the detention and interrogation program relied on ... legal guidance, and adhered to it in good faith.”

CIA Reliance on Legal Guidance

When CIA Director George Tenet was first presented with a proposal to use enhanced interrogation techniques in April 2002, he did what international humanitarian law wants a superior to do: he asked if it was legal. Despite intense pressure to prevent a second attack on the United States after 9/11, Tenet waited four months for DOJ to answer that question. He authorized the use of proposed interrogation techniques only after he was assured that they were legal. During the next two years, whenever any doubt was raised over the legality of those techniques, Tenet said the CIA would not continue using the techniques unless DOJ found them to be legal. In each instance, DOJ affirmed the techniques’ legality.

The original advice of DOJ attorneys John Yoo and Jay Bybee that the techniques were legal was reaffirmed, in one form or another, throughout Tenet’s tenure by DOJ attorneys Jack Goldsmith, Daniel Levin and Steven Bradbury, and consistently supported by Attorney General John Ashcroft. Ashcroft briefed Vice President Dick Cheney, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin Powell. They endorsed the techniques. President George W. Bush wrote in his book that he, too, approved the interrogation techniques.

Of course, a defendant cannot claim to have relied on DOJ advice if he knew DOJ was misled or if he authorized or condoned interrogation techniques materially different than those approved by DOJ. The Senate Intelligence Committee’s 2014 report claims that the CIA’s use of enhanced interrogation techniques in the field diverged from what the CIA requested to use and later reported to DOJ. To overcome the defense of good faith reliance on DOJ opinions, the ICC prosecutor will have to examine such claims as to each potential defendant, as well as whether the acts known to that defendant were so egregious that a person of ordinary sense and understanding would know the practices were unlawful, despite the legal advice.

Not Yet Tested at the ICC

Although good faith reliance on advice of counsel is a well-established defense in American criminal law, it has not yet been tested at the ICC. The advice at issue in the Afghanistan investigation context was that the enhanced interrogation techniques should not result in the infliction of severe pain. The ICC statute’s accompanying list of elements of crimes provides that it is not necessary for the prosecution to prove that the perpetrator intended that the pain would be severe. However, the ICC will likely not be prosecuting the actual persons who inflicted the pain, but rather higher-level officials. So any prosecution of top officials would have to be brought under a theory of co-perpetration, which requires that the remote defendant had to be

aware that his conduct would bring about the elements of the war crime of torture, which includes the infliction of severe pain.

Now that the Appeals Chamber has settled the question of jurisdiction, the criminal intent issue appears to be the ICC prosecutor's greatest obstacle in bringing charges against U.S. personnel.

The ICC also has a requirement to ensure that it is the court of last resort (admissibility). It can only bring charges where national authorities are unwilling or unable to prosecute the case themselves (complementarity) and where the crimes are sufficiently important (gravity). Since the United States has decided not to prosecute those who devised, authorized, or oversaw the interrogations, the defendants cannot benefit from complementarity. And the ICC's bar for gravity has been set very low in the recent Appeals Chamber decision in the Al Hassan case, likely dooming the argument that the number of torture victims is too few for the ICC.

Bensouda already has shown her willingness to assign some of her limited resources to investigating those crimes. Having devoted those resources, she or her successor would not, in the end, decline to bring charges against U.S. personnel simply for fear of alienating the United States and its allies or because the defendants may not be easily arrested. While U.S. nationals accused at the ICC may never be arrested unless they travel to an ICC member country, threats and bluster by a U.S. administration will not deter the prosecutor from seeking an arrest warrant. It also is unlikely that the fractured United Nations Security Council will bail out the United States by ordering the Afghanistan investigation be deferred, as it has the power to do under Article 16 of the ICC Statute, or outright ban prosecution of non-party nationals, as proposed by Senator Ted Cruz.

Instead, if charges are not brought at the ICC, it will likely be based on the inability to establish the criminal intent of those U.S. officials most responsible for the enhanced interrogation techniques.

Afghanistan: The detention centre for teenage Taliban members (BBC News) By Secunder Kermani
April 21, 2020

In a dusty courtyard, behind a tall mesh fence, a group of teenagers are playing a frenetic game of football, while others stand around watching from the sidelines.

These are some of Afghanistan's most vulnerable and most troubled children. Inmates of Kabul's Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre.

A small, excited crowd of boys press their faces up to the fence to talk to us.

"Some of us killed people... some of us are thieves," one lanky teenager tells me when I ask what they are accused of.

They're smiling and laughing but they aren't the most serious cases here. The centre generally holds approximately 300 inmates, aged between 12 and 18. On average, around half are accused of being in militant groups: the Islamic State (IS) or the Taliban.

The Taliban control or contest around half of Afghanistan, they've been waging a deadly war against the Afghan government and US-led international forces since being overthrown in 2001.

The staff try and keep the categories of detainees separate, to avoid fights between those linked to the Taliban and to the Islamic State group - which have clashed with each other in the outside world - and to prevent the boys accused of "general crimes" from becoming radicalised.

The boys talking to me in the courtyard all live on the ground floor of the bright green accommodation block. The Taliban and IS members are held in the two floors above them.

"They're terrorists, we are not," says one dismissively.

'Kill to survive'

The BBC was given rare access to the centre, surrounded by high concrete walls, with watchtowers and armed guards dotted around the periphery. In a quiet corner, a social worker introduces us to three alleged IS members. The group is newer, and far less powerful in Afghanistan than the Taliban, but has been responsible for dozens of deadly suicide bombings.

One, wearing an electric blue salwar kameez, and with a glare in his eyes, claims he was wrongly arrested. Many of the boys in the centre are wary about revealing their past activities, even though we are keeping their identities anonymous. Nevertheless, he gradually opens up about his extreme views.

"The foreigners haven't done anything wrong to me, but the Prophet has said jihad against them must continue until the Day

of Judgement."

The extent of his radicalisation becomes even clearer as he explains why he hates the Afghan government - allied to US-led international forces.

"This is an Islamic country, but look at Kabul, it's full of brothels. There is so much adultery and homosexuality. There are musicians and, god forbid, there are even people having sex with their own mothers and sisters."

He's from a province in the east of the country, and his description of the Afghan capital Kabul as a pit of debauchery bears no resemblance to reality. Yet it's clear it's something he deeply believes.

At the same time, there's a softer side to him too. Despite only having the beginnings of a beard growing on his face, he's a father to a one-year-old girl.

"I don't want her to see me here, she will cry," he says.

As the interview ends and we walk off, we pass the cells of the accommodation block. In one, a group of boys are dangling their legs out between the blue metal bars of the window, singing a song and hammering out a beat on a small plastic jug.

They giggle as they tell me the song is about "love", but I notice many of them have tattoos scratched onto their wrists, arms or ankles.

Some are crude images of guns or daggers, one - in Persian - reads "have a bad life, and an even worse future"; another, "kill to survive".

Kabul suffers from high levels of crime, with kidnappings and violent robberies common. Unemployment amongst young people is at more than 30% according to the World Bank.

"Kill to survive?" I ask. "Is that what you feel life is like?"

The mood has momentarily grown more serious.

"If you work as a labourer you only earn 200 Afghani (£2) a day, how can you feed your family?" one asks. "You have to steal and rob."

Then, another strikes up his song again, and we leave them giggling in their cell.

'I will join the Taliban again'

The following day, we meet a dizzying stream of boys, an IS recruit who joined up after seeing their propaganda on social media, a 17-year-old Taliban fighter who smilingly asserts that he has killed "lots" of American soldiers - a claim that's almost definitely not true.

One of the boys that stands out is Zakir, a tall, gangly 14-year-old. He looks like a rather dopey teenager, whose deep voice seems too old for his youthful face. But he's proud of his links to the Taliban.

"My job was to plant explosives," he tells me. "The Taliban used to come to the village at night time and I would give them reports about what was going on."

Zakir says he joined the group after seeing "how they prayed and looked after people" when visiting relatives in areas under their control, and watching Taliban propaganda videos.

He tells me he joined "secretly" and that his family never knew. In fact, his father and elder brother were fighting on the other side of the conflict, as members of the Afghan intelligence services.

Was he never worried the explosives he planted could end up killing his own father? He insisted he operated in areas his father never visited, targeting instead local pro government militias who he accused of "raping and stealing".

Zakir, like many of the boys, seemed to have a good relationship with the staff at the centre. But he was clear that he wanted to join the Taliban again.

"Here, we pray five times a day, and have lessons. But when I'm free I will look after my parents, and then I will join the Taliban again. They are fighting for the truth."

Some of his words sounded as if they were copied from propaganda videos. But there were also glimpses of how child-like he

was.

What would he do if his parents forbade him from rejoining the Taliban?

"Then I won't... but when they die, I will."

Fighting back

The staff try to deradicalise the boys. There's a school in the centre, with lessons taking place behind thick metal doors, in what used to be cells.

One of the most popular subjects is Islamic studies.

Mubashir Nazari is a heavy set man, with a cropped beard. He's leading a class of around 25 boys - many accused of being in the Taliban or IS - who are reciting Quranic verses.

He admits it's not easy to change their minds, but says the lessons do make a difference.

"When they first come to the centre, and they hear that there's been a suicide attack in Kabul, they are happy and say, 'do you see how many people we have killed? This is jihad'.

"Then we ask them, 'what is the sin of those children killed in the blast? Or the people just going to work?'. And we say, 'where in Islam does it permit you to kill innocent people?'. By the end, when they hear of a suicide attack they get upset."

There are also lessons in academic subjects, with basic literacy taught for those who have never been to school before.

Abdullah, a slim 16-year-old, with bright eyes, and a small traditional cap perched atop his head, tells me he spent two months with the Taliban, and was arrested on his way to a shootout between the group and security forces in western Afghanistan.

He was inspired to sign up when he and his friends began attending a madrassa, or religious school, in his area, which was under the control of the Taliban.

"The preacher said it's your duty to fight and die in the name of Allah," he says.

But now, Abdullah is one of the centre's best students, despite having little to no formal education in the past.

"I'm in Class 10, and waiting for my results so I can move into Class 11," he says with pride. "The Taliban just put ammunition in your hand and tell you to fight, but when I am released from here I want to keep studying."

Traumatised

For staff trying to form relationships with boys like Abdullah, one of the biggest problems is the high turn-over in inmates.

Detainees are regularly released or transferred, whilst there's a constant stream of fresh arrivals.

One morning, we watch as the intelligence services drop off a small boy, his head shaved, wrists still in handcuffs.

He looks extremely nervous as he's taken to the medical centre to be registered. In an almost inaudible voice, he tells them he's suffering from psychological problems.

The doctor taking down his details says mental health issues are common.

He tells me he often sees boys who have self harmed, cutting their bodies or faces.

"Every week there's two or three cases.... They do it with whatever they can find - pieces of glass or metal."

"I think almost all of them have gone through something traumatic and haven't had the ability to process it, so their response to it is fighting," Lyla Schwartz, a foreign psychologist with the Etidal Foundation, explains. "Finding something to be a part of in order to get their anger and frustration out, instead of actually acknowledge how much loss they've experienced."

Ms Schwartz tries to get the boys to address their underlying trauma, but she's stretched for time.

"We always address the crises first - suicide attempts, fighting, riots - but there are some kids that we really have built relationships with. If we had the support and resources, we could go more in depth."

'Killing children'

Fourteen-year-old Mohammad looks particularly nervous

He led a small group of friends running away from an IS camp they were forced into, and is worried about other boys - with extremist views - overhearing us.

His parents both died, and he ended up in the care of his sister and his brother-in-law. The brother-in-law joined IS, and took Mohammad with him to the group's stronghold in the east of Afghanistan.

There, he enrolled him in a madrassa.

"They pretend to be good Muslims," he says, "but they are not doing good things."

"Like what?" I ask.

"Killing children," he replies. It's not clear what he witnessed himself, and what he's simply heard about - he doesn't want to go into details - but later in the conversation, he again refers to IS "killing kids".

Mohammed says he tried to run away with a handful of others. "But we were arrested by IS and put in jail... They beat us and said, 'you want to join the infidels'."

When they could, they tried to escape again.

"We knew if we were discovered we would be killed... We walked all night through the hills and the next day we handed ourselves in."

But while Mohammad is relieved he's no longer in the madrassa, he's frustrated that he's being kept in the detention centre. "We thought we would go home, but instead they put us here."

'My father was wrong'

Aside from lessons in the morning, and a short period in the courtyard, the boys spend their days in their rooms.

Zakir, the 14-year-old Taliban member, shares his cell with nine others, all accused of being in the militant group.

Their favourite pastime? Beadwork.

Zakir shows me a tiny pair of sandals he's made for his younger sister, using red and white beads that are stuck together, others have decorated pens or made prayer beads for their parents.

I use the opportunity to ask Zakir more about life growing up in a warzone.

"I've been seeing dead bodies ever since I can remember," he tells me in a flat tone.

One episode stands out for him. When he was eight, one of his friends was killed by his own parents, for getting involved with local criminals. It's a reminder that the violence in Afghanistan isn't just restricted to the war.

How and why Zakir ended up joining the Taliban is confusing.

His father, whilst working for the intelligence services, was injured in an attack by the group when Zakir was 13. He remembers his parents trying to hide the fact from him. "My father said he was bitten by a dog, but later on I found out that wasn't true."

But despite what happened to his father, Zakir says he began to support the Taliban. "I knew my father was in the wrong, for supporting the foreigners," he tells me.

One of the main reasons he joined the group, he says, was because he was being harassed by local pro-government militia forces.

"If you are dressed like a religious Muslim with a skullcap, they arrest you, beat you and humiliate you."

Once with the Taliban, he felt "safer".

"Before joining the Taliban, I would get upset when I was beaten and ask why is this happening to me? But when I was with

the Taliban, it was better, because at least then there was reason - we were enemies."

It's hard to know if all that is true, but Zakir seems genuine. He's conflicted about what he wants to do with his future. He's "proud" of his time with the Taliban, but adds: "Perhaps I won't do it again, as there are other fighters... I want to continue my jihad, but not if my parents are unhappy."

The centre does try and prepare the boys for life on the outside - there's a tailoring workshop for example.

But once they've been released there's no system for checking up on them.

It's a source of frustration for Ms Schwartz.

"There are supposed to be social workers who follow up with them," she says, but security concerns make it difficult for that to happen. "Support, school, jobs, alternatives to what they've come from, is extremely lacking."

Justice Minister Abdul Baseer Anwar - who ultimately has control of the centre - recognises the need to rehabilitate the boys. "The psychologists," he says, "are even more important than the clerics" in fighting against the "brainwashing" done by militants.

Mr Anwar adds that he's looking at introducing new regulations that would make it easier to help find the detainees stable jobs after release. He hopes the international community can help both with more funding and expertise.

'I'll slit your throat'

Abdullah, the former Taliban member who has excelled in his studies, is due for release and worries about what will happen next.

"I won't go back to my village," he tells me. "The Taliban would kill me."

But others in the centre show little sign of changing their views. On our final day, one peering out of the window of his cell on the third floor, points to me and runs his fingers across his neck.

"I'll slit your throat," he shouts down.

It's a reminder of the challenges faced by the Afghan authorities in reintegrating those with extremist views into the rest of society.

The Taliban and US signed an agreement in February aimed at beginning to bring an end to the conflict. In the next stage of the peace process, talks between the insurgents and the government about the future of the country are due to begin, though fighting between them continues.

The boys in the centre linked to the Taliban celebrated the deal as a victory, staying awake late at night offering special prayers. Many hope now to eventually be released as part of a prisoner exchange that belatedly began earlier this month, although both sides have accused each other of not fully abiding by its terms.

Zakir, with a mixture of stubbornness and innocence, insists that the war in Afghanistan will end when American troops leave as Afghans are all "brothers". But he acknowledges he wants the Taliban's interpretation of an Islamic state established in the country, despite the fact many other Afghans clearly don't. Other boys I speak to make clear they believe their "jihad" will continue until sharia law is established.

When we ask Zakir what he thinks about democracy, he's instantly dismissive.

"Nonsense," he replies.

All the teenagers' names have been changed

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Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal

The quest for justice in Bangladesh (ORF) By Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty
April 15, 2020

On April 12, Abdul Majed, one of the assassins involved in the killings of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family was hanged in Dhaka. A former army captain, Majed was reportedly hiding in Kolkata. In 1998, a trial court had sentenced him and 11 others to death, and in 2009, the Bangladesh Supreme Court upheld the sentence. When his last recourse, the clemency plea to the president, failed, he was finally executed just after midnight.

In 2010, five others convicted of taking part in the assassination conspiracy were sent to the gallows. One among the twelve convicted, Major Aziz Pasha died in 2002 in Zimbabwe while in hiding. The rest five are still absconding. Bangladesh will not be able to achieve closure on Bangabandhu's assassination until the five conspirators still alive are brought to justice.

When Majed was arrested last month, Bangladesh's home minister hailed the development as the "biggest gift" for his country, which has had to postpone a year-long birth centenary celebration of Bangabandhu, on account of the coronavirus. Prime Minister Narendra Modi was scheduled to attend the celebrations.

Bangabandhu's assassination changed the course of the country's history. In 1977, soon after the assassination, the country came under the military dictatorship of General Ziaur Rahman, the then army chief, after he ousted President Khondoker Mostaq Ahmad. Zia was a reluctant "freedom fighter" and deserted the Pakistan army when he realised that Pakistan's defeat was inevitable.

He, however, showed his true colours after the assassination of Bangabandhu. As soon as he grabbed power, he pardoned Bangabandhu's assassins and rewarded them with diplomatic postings. He permitted leaders of organisations — such as the Jamaat-e-Islami (JeI) and the Razakars — that collaborated with the Pakistani army in the genocide to return. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had banned these organisations, and declared them war criminals after Bangladesh's war of liberation.

Zia passed an indemnity law in 1975, granting amnesty to those who were part of the assassination conspiracy (The indemnity law was revoked when Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996). He also allowed many to form political parties and contest elections in the 1980s. He patronised pro-Pakistan politicians and organisations. With other politicians, he cobbled together the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), whose leadership was passed on to his widow, Khaleda Zia, after army personnel, in a coup attempt, assassinated him in 1981. Khaleda Zia, in coalition with Pakistani collaborator, JeI, served as the country's prime minister for two terms. During her rule, Bangladesh-India ties had hit rock bottom.

Only two family members survived the assassination of Bangabandhu and his family: Sheikh Hasina, the incumbent prime minister, and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana, who were in Germany on August 15, 1975, the day the killings took place.

As prime minister, Sheikh Hasina has shown remarkable determination and tenacity in pursuing the killers. In 2008, she included the issue of the war crimes tribunal in her manifesto. She persisted despite domestic and international criticism, and the tribunal eventually completed the job entrusted to it. Several assassins and JeI leaders were convicted and hanged.

Sheikh Hasina has always believed that Zia was a party to the assassination conspiracy and played a key role in it. This fact is at the core of the bitterness and rivalry between her and Khaleda Zia.

Intelligence sources point to the role of Zia and his army colleagues in the assassination conspiracy, which was encouraged and financed by Pakistani generals and the Inter-Services Intelligence, smarting from their defeat and humiliation in the 1971 war. Zia, trained under the Pakistani army, had imbibed its ethos and instincts. Military coups were part of its DNA. This led Zia to anchor the country's nationalism in Islamic and anti-Indian terms, as opposed to the secular values of the War of Liberation, espoused by Bangabandhu and his colleagues in the Awami League. General Hussein Muhammad Ershad, Zia's successor as the army chief, who later served as the president of the country, amended the Constitution to make Islam the State religion of Bangladesh.

Majed's arrest led to speculation over the reasons and circumstances under which he returned to Bangladesh. He may have been located and identified by India's intelligence agencies and handed over to Bangladesh. Earlier, the agencies had launched a failed manhunt to find Risaldar Muslehuddin, another assassin, who was also reportedly hiding in India.

The hunt for the killers will continue. Intelligence cooperation between the two countries has improved during Sheikh Hasina's regime. She will not give up on bringing the assassins to justice. India must give her unstinted support in this endeavour.

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War Crimes Investigation in Myanmar

Myanmar Artillery Shells Kill 8 Civilians in Rakhine, as War Displaced Face Food Shortages (Radio Free Asia)

April 13, 2020

At least eight civilians were killed and 17 injured Monday by artillery shells fired by Myanmar forces in conflict-ridden Rakhine state, with wounded villagers forced to wait at military checkpoints for two hours before receiving permission to go to hospitals for treatment, local residents and relief volunteers said.

Government soldiers launched the assault on Kyauk Seik village in Ponnagyun township at about 8 a.m., killing seven men and one woman, all between the ages of 11 and 26, while the injured included two children aged three and seven, they said.

"People who were walking by the road were killed and injured by artillery blasts," said Myint San Oo, father of one of the injured. "The military's battalion No. 550 fired the artillery."

Clashes between government soldiers and the rebel Arakan Army (AA) occurred near the village along the Sittwe-Yangon Highway about 2.5 miles north of Ponnagyun town. The township has seen fierce fighting between the warring sides and is one of nine townships in Rakhine and neighboring Chin state where the government has imposed an internet blackout as a security measure.

Relief volunteers helping the affected villagers said four villagers were killed on the spot, two people died in Ponnagyun Hospital, and two others died on the way to Sittwe General Hospital.

Maung Naing from the Free Funeral Service Society, who helped the injured get to the hospital, said military and police forces at a security check points stopped their vehicles and refused to let them proceed.

"The doctor told us the injured patient was fighting for his life and needed emergency care," he told RFA's Myanmar Service.

When Maung Naing and his colleagues told this to the security forces at the checkpoint, they responded that they had to interrogate everyone, regardless of their condition.

"The patient was sinking fast as we were held at the security gate," Maung Naing said. "We begged them to let us pass, but they would not."

Combined military and police have set up several security checkpoints on the highway connecting the capital Sittwe with Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, and Mrauk-U townships, so they can check passing vehicles for any evidence linking their drivers and

passengers to the AA.

Zeyar Lynn from the Shwe Yaung Myittar Humanitarian Group which is also helping the injured villagers said the authorities have a responsibility to help ensure that the injured receive timely medical treatment.

“Their superiors should have relaxed the rules for critical situations,” he told RFA. “I would especially like to appeal to them to allow emergency patients to pass quickly through security stops after minimal checking.”

Of the 13 injured villagers, 10 are currently in Ponnagyun Hospital, while the others were sent to the Intensive care Unit at Sittwe General Hospital.

Don't target civilians

Thein Maung Aye, uncle of one of those killed, told RFA that civilian casualties are unacceptable.

“I want to appeal to the leaders of the state,” he said. “The conflicts between the military and the AA have nothing to do with local civilians. They don't cause the conflicts.”

“If these people were killed during the armed fighting, it would make sense. But this time, they [Myanmar soldiers] fired into the village on purpose. This is totally unacceptable,” he said.

Khine Thukha, spokesman for the AA, which seeks greater autonomy for ethnic Rakhine people in the state, denied any battles had taken place in the area.

“There were no battles between the AA and the military today,” he said, adding that the incident in Ponnagyun is proof that Myanmar troops are targeting Rakhine civilians.

RFA could not reach the Myanmar military for comment, though Army spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun told the Myanmar Times that clashes in the area have occurred since April 11.

Two days earlier, he told RFA that government soldiers never target civilians during military operation unless there are AA soldiers disguised as civilians in the community.

Fighting since the beginning of 2019 has killed hundreds of civilians and displaced about 157,000 others in northern Rakhine state, according to the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, a local humanitarian relief group.

Soldiers block food aid

Civilians displaced by the conflict in some townships meanwhile continue to face food shortages in temporary camps because of blockages of by the Myanmar military.

Soldiers have even deterred donors from supporting internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, said Khine Myo Aung, administrator of the government-recognized Naungchaung camp in Kyauktaw township, which houses about 2,500 displaced civilians.

“Now donors dare not come to help the refugees due to army's blockade, [so] we're facing food shortages, especially rice,” he said.

The World Food Programme (WFP), the food-assistance agency of the United Nations, tried to deliver rice to the camp on April 8, but the Myanmar Army deterred the humanitarian aid workers and they turned back to Sittwe, he added.

RFA could not reach the WFP for comment.

Four days before the failed WFP delivery, 15 displaced people from the camp went to the local administrator's office to collect bags of rice donated by the state government, but Myanmar soldiers detained them on suspicion of having ties to the AA, which the central government has declared an illegal association and terrorist organization.

The state government itself has tried to donate about 250 bags, by the army has blocked the move, he said.

About 560 families in the camp require 25 to 30 bags of rice daily.

“Donors now dare not visit the displacement camps because even government donations have been blocked by the army,” said Nyi Pu from the Phyu Sin Myittar NGO Group.

Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun denied that Myanmar forces are preventing humanitarian groups from assisting displaced

civilians in camps.

“[We’re] not blocking any assistance to refugees. Organizations such as the Red Cross are being allowed there. We’ve even helped them,” he said.

He also said that the military charged seven of the 15 people who tried collect the bags of rice because they had ties to the AA.

Teenager Killed, Civilians Injured in Crossfire of Battle in Myanmar’s Rakhine State (Radio Free Asia)

April 17, 2020

A teenager was killed and a dozen other civilians were injured Thursday amid crossfire as government soldiers responded to landmine attacks in western Myanmar’s war-ridden Rakhine state, where civilians are dying violent deaths even as their region braces for the contagious coronavirus, local residents said.

Myanmar troops fired at rebel Arakan Army soldiers following explosions of remote-controlled mines near Kishpanadi Bridge in Kyauktaw township, killing the 13-year-old ethnic Rakhine boy and injuring the six ethnic Rakhines, five Rohingya Muslims, and one Burmese construction worker, they said Friday.

The deceased teenager’s father, mother, sister, and uncle were among the injured, and three construction workers at the scene are missing, locals added.

Among the injured Rohingya were three women and two men. One woman was sent to Apaukwa Hospital in Kyauktaw township, while the others are being treated at a village clinic, they said.

The Burmese man, who was injured while working at a construction site near the bridge, was sent to Sittwe General Hospital, said Soe Min of the Phyu Sin Metta Social Services, a civil society group.

Locals said they heard the sounds of light and heavy weapons fire around 4 p.m. Thursday, which lasted for an hour.

“We heard noise from the bridge. Our village is close to it. Five villagers got injured due to fighting near the bridge yesterday evening,” said a resident of Pikethe village who did not want to be named out of fear for his safety.

Another villager who also requested anonymity of the same reason confirmed the artillery fire.

“We heard noise from opening fire first, and then two explosions from heavy cannons around 4:30 p.m. yesterday,” the villager said

“Some boys ran into the village and said that the government army opened fire from the bridge,” he said. “Three Rakhine construction workers are now missing.”

Military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun said the remote-controlled mine attacks on government soldiers occurred near the bridge at about 4:30 p.m. and near a highway station from where the AA had fired on government soldiers about four or five times in the past.

In response, the army began a counteroffensive against the Arakan Army (AA) in response at the highway military station, he said.

Zaw Min Tun also said that government army has serviced Rakhine since the 1990s and that fighting in the region only began after the AA was formed in 2009.

AA blames Myanmar Army

Khine Thukha, spokesman for the AA, a mostly ethnic Rakhine force seeking greater autonomy for Rakhine people in the state, said there had been no clash between the AA and Myanmar soldiers in the area.

“There was no fighting in that area yesterday,” he said. “The government army is doing targeted attacks on Rakhine ethnics, and it is war crime.”

Khine Thukha ignored a question about whether AA forces had disguised themselves as civilians to attack Myanmar soldiers near villages.

Myanmar and Arakan forces have been engaged in intensified hostilities for the past 15 months in northern Rakhine state, leaving hundreds of civilians dead and displacing about 157,000 others, according to the Rakhine Ethnic Congress, a local

humanitarian relief group.

During that time, 34 civilians have died and 166 have been injured in Kyautkaw township alone, according to list compiled by the Arakan National Party (ANP), a political party representing the interests of the ethnic Rakhine people in the state.

In March, the Myanmar government declared the AA an unlawful association and terrorist organization.

The AA and two other armed ethnic organizations declared a temporary cease-fire during the month of April as the country battled the spread of the coronavirus, but the Myanmar military rejected it.

Death of WHO Driver Sparks Calls For Cease-fire in Myanmar's Rakhine State (Radio Free Asia)

April 21, 2020

Humanitarian groups called for a cease-fire in Myanmar's war-torn Rakhine state on Tuesday after a World Health Organization driver died from wounds sustained when gunmen fired on him and another health worker as they drove from the conflict zone to the major city Yangon carrying coronavirus test samples, health officials said.

The vehicle was attacked Monday after the pair drove over a suspension bridge in Minbya township, though it is unclear whether Myanmar soldiers or rebel Arakan Army (AA) troops were behind the shooting. Both sides blamed the other for the ambush that killed local WHO employee Pyae Sone Win Maung and injured health department worker Aung Myo Oo.

The killing prompted 16 international humanitarian organizations to call for the two armies to lay down their arms and for the government to allow aid workers widespread and unfettered access across Rakhine state and elsewhere, so they can reach communities to help counter the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The incident in Minbya township on April 20 demonstrates the urgent need for armed actors in Myanmar to lay down their weapons, heeding the call of the U.N. Secretary General for a global cease-fire," the groups said in a joint statement issued Tuesday, referring to U.N. chief António Guterres' early April appeal for a cessation of armed conflict around the world during the coronavirus crisis.

"The ongoing conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine and Chin states between the Tatmadaw [Myanmar military] and the Arakan Army is causing an increasing number of civilian casualties, while severely hampering access to health care as well as other efforts to reach communities with much needed assistance in the midst of a global pandemic," the statement said.

New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) appealed to the Myanmar government and the military to allow U.N. investigators to access the scene of the shooting to conduct an independent investigation.

"The death of this WHO staff member as he was driving COVID-19 swabs to be tested illustrates the travesty of continuing war amidst a global pandemic," said Phil Robertson, HRW's deputy Asia director, in a statement.

"Since it's unclear who killed Pyae Sone Win Maung, it is imperative the Myanmar civilian government and Tatmadaw immediately give U.N. investigators unfettered access to Minbya township so they can conduct an independent and impartial investigation," he said.

Intense fighting between Myanmar forces and the AA, which seeks greater autonomy for the state's ethnic Rakhine population, has raged for more than 15 months. The conflict zone is under lockdown, and the government has suspended mobile internet service there as a security measure.

Pyae Sone Win Maung, 28, and Aung Myo Oo left Rakhine's capital Sittwe in a U.N.-marked vehicle Monday morning to take the test samples to Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon.

Htay Win Maung, the deceased man's father, told RFA that he had received news that the vehicle his son was driving had been hit by gunfire.

"We were told that there were artillery blasts, and that they had been hit," he said. "It was my son, the driver, and another person who is a health official."

"The health official was just injured on the arm," he added, "I don't know the details of how my son got hit and killed."

Tun Wai, health coordinator of nearby Min Ywa village, said a group of unfamiliar men in plainclothes brought the pair in a small vehicle to the local clinic.

"I had been looking for two WHO staffers when the vehicle arrived around 6:30 p.m.," he said. "They said that the two patients

they had transported were health department employees.”

Dr. Soe Win Paing, assistant director of Rakhine state’s Public Health Department, said the attack occurred at 5:30 p.m. and the two men were taken to Minbya Hospital 90 minutes later.

Both were treated at the hospital, but Pyae Sone Win Maung, who was hemorrhaging from his wounds, died just before 1 a.m., Soe Win Paing said.

Hospital staff would not permit RFA to speak with Aung Myo Oo.

On Tuesday afternoon, members of the Myanmar Red Cross transferred Aung Myo Oo and Pyae Son Win Maung's body to Sittwe.

Army, AA trade blame

Local authorities in Rakhine’s Minbya township said that Myanmar troops stationed near the Ramaung ferry port during the past year have been checking vehicles before they cross the suspension bridge.

A statement issued by the AA Monday night said Myanmar forces fired at the U.N. vehicle around 5:40 p.m. as it was driving across the bridge after guards at the security checkpoint allowed it to pass.

AA troops found the WHO vehicle stranded on the side of the road about an hour after the shooting and rescued the two injured men inside, the statement said.

AA spokesman Khine Thukha told RFA that Arakan soldiers had nothing to do with the fatal shooting and that government soldiers who opened fire on the vehicle have implicated the AA to cover up their crime.

“The gunfire came from Myanmar military side,” he said. “They let that vehicle pass the security gate and opened fire on it from behind. This has nothing to do with us. ... It is an attempt to implicate us for the crime they committed.”

Myanmar military spokesman Brigadier General Zaw Min Tun said AA troops opened fire on the vehicle after it passed through the security gate and drove along the road, and that national soldiers had no reason to shoot at it.

“Only AA troops open fire on vehicles driving on the road,” he said. “The military has never done that. The military has no reason to do that. There are both civilian vehicles and cargo trucks on the road. This was intentional.”

Zaw Min Tun said there had been a recent battle in the area near the bridge and that the AA frequently attacked Myanmar soldiers stationed there.

RFA could not independently confirm which side was responsible for the gunfire.

Lack of clear information

As of Tuesday, Myanmar registered 121 confirmed COVID-19 cases and five fatalities.

Journalists and NGO workers said the same day that the government has failed to provide clear and concise information to the public in its daily COVID-19 press releases and in recent announcements.

They pointed to the government having waited until 8 p.m. local time on April 19 to announce that factories would reopen the next day following mandatory shutdowns during the Buddhist New Year holiday.

The Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population then issued a murky notification that it would first make necessary inquiries at factories and companies between April 20 and 30, leaving workers uncertain as to whether they should return to their workplaces and whether they would be compensated if they did not.

“Because of this situation, conflicts between workers and factory owners arose,” said Thet Thet Aung, director of the worker help group Point of Future Light. “Many questions were raised, [and] the owners said there were no official statements.”

Journalist Thiha Thway noted that ordinary citizens often have difficulty understanding printed government announcements even if they reread them.

“Many people don’t understand the statements of government ministries after reading them just once,” he said. “They may read them many times, but they still don’t understand, and then they become confused and angry.”

This can lead to “rumors, more fear, and more anger,” he added.

AMERICAS

North & Central America

America's Abandonment of Syria (New Yorker) By Luke Mogelson
April 20, 2020

By the time Turkey invaded northern Syria, in October, the Ain Issa refugee camp—twenty miles south of the Turkish border—resembled a small city. In recent years, some fourteen thousand people had moved there, displaced by isis, Russian and American air strikes, or the repressive regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The camp had evolved from a few tents in a muddy field into a sprawling grid complete with shops, cafeterias, falafel stands, schools, clinics, mosques, a full-time administration, and offices of more than two dozen local and international N.G.O.s. As news spread of the Turkish offensive, Nashat Khairi, a camp mukhtar, or selected representative, urged the roughly thirty families in his section to remain calm. A fruit vender before the war, Khairi had fled his village, in the eastern province of Deir Ezzour, with his wife and seven children, after isis captured it, in 2014. They reached Ain Issa three years later. Since then, the camp had come to feel like home. Khairi knew everyone in his section, oversaw the distribution of food rations, registered every birth, and seldom missed a wedding or a funeral. His children received an education and had access to health care. His wife earned a salary as a cleaner. They never went hungry. In cold weather, the camp provided kerosene for their stove, and during the summer they kept their tent cool with a fan powered by a generator. Outside their entryway, Khairi tended a small garden, with neat rows of radishes and bell peppers.

Most important, they were safe. The camp stood on a strategic intersection of the M4 highway, which traverses Syria from the Mediterranean Sea to its border with Iraq. The town of Ain Issa, less than a mile away, was the headquarters of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led army that had vanquished isis in northern and eastern Syria. Also nearby were two large U.S. military bases, which housed hundreds of American troops, contractors, and Foreign Service workers, who had supported the S.D.F. throughout its anti-isis campaign. One of the bases, at the former Lafarge Cement Factory, served as the joint-operations center for Kurdish and American commanders.

Khairi assured his fellow-refugees that someone surely had a plan to protect them. A fenced-off part of the camp held more than eight hundred wives and children of killed or captured isis militants: if nothing else, Khairi reasoned, the U.S. forces down the road would never let so many high-value detainees escape.

As the Turkish forces approached, however, an alarming development inside the camp deepened the communal panic. Without informing anyone, the management staff, armed guards, and aid workers had all disappeared.

In town, meanwhile, about fifteen hundred S.D.F. members had been frantically organizing a defense. One of the commanders was a twenty-eight-year-old Kurd from Aleppo Province who went by the nom de guerre Brousque—Lightning, in Kurdish. Brousque had been fighting isis alongside American troops for six years; his four siblings, including his twenty-one-year-old sister, also served in the S.D.F. In 2017, when the S.D.F. conducted a gruelling urban assault on Raqqa, isis's global capital, U.S. Special Forces provided Brousque and other Kurdish commanders with tactical guidance while keeping a safe distance from the combat. Two months into the battle, an S.D.F. fighter a few yards in front of Brousque stepped on a mine and was killed, as was a fighter behind them. The blast knocked Brousque unconscious. He woke up in a hospital, blind, his chest, neck,

and face burned and lacerated by shrapnel. By the time he recovered and regained his vision, at the end of 2017, Isis had been defeated in Raqqa. Brousque was deployed to Tell Abyad, in the far north, where he was assigned five hundred fighters to secure a fifty-mile stretch of the border with Turkey.

Tensions on the border were already high. The S.D.F. had grown out of the P.K.K., a Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey that had waged a decades-long insurgency. The U.S. military's collaboration with the S.D.F. enraged Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. "A country we call an ally is insisting on forming a terror army on our border," Erdoğan declared, shortly after Brousque arrived in Tell Abyad. "Our mission is to strangle it before it is even born." Turkey had twice carried out major cross-border operations to seize Kurdish towns and cities in Syria, and further attacks seemed inevitable.

Then, last August, the U.S. brokered a deal between Turkey and the S.D.F. A demilitarized buffer zone along the Syrian side of the border required Brousque to dismantle all his fortifications, seal a tunnel system that his fighters had constructed, pull out of Tell Abyad, and move ten miles deeper into S.D.F. territory. In exchange, Erdoğan pledged not to invade. Brousque was skeptical of this promise, but he had faith in the Americans, who, according to the agreement, would act as guarantors. "We'd become good friends," he told me, during a visit I made to Syria this winter. "I assumed that the advice they were giving us was in our interest."

After the S.D.F. withdrew from the border, Turkish and American forces began conducting patrols and aerial surveillance together. Though no Kurds crossed into Turkey, Erdoğan soon dismissed the buffer zone as inadequate, and insisted on expanding it. In September, before the United Nations General Assembly, in New York, he announced his intention to annex more than five thousand square miles of Kurdish land, creating a "peace corridor" where two million Syrian refugees living in Turkey could be resettled. The refugees would be overwhelmingly Arab and from other parts of Syria. The southern edge of the corridor would encompass Ain Issa, Khairi's refugee camp, and the Lafarge Cement Factory. International observers denounced the scheme as a flagrant attempt at demographic engineering that was certain to produce conflict and humanitarian disaster.

Two weeks later, the White House issued a press release stating that President Donald Trump and Erdoğan had spoken on the phone. While the details of the conversation have not been made public, it was a triumph for Erdoğan. "Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria," the press release explained, adding that American troops "will no longer be in the immediate area."

After the U.S. vacated the buffer zone, Turkish jets, drones, and artillery pummeled Tell Abyad and other border cities. The S.D.F., which has no air assets, petitioned the U.S. to impose a no-fly zone, but the Americans refused. Turkey's ground forces consisted mostly of Syrian Arab mercenaries, many of whom had previously belonged to jihadist groups with a profound animosity toward the Kurds. As these militias pushed south, in armored vehicles, nearly two hundred thousand civilians fled from their path. Reports of war crimes, such as summary executions, followed the advance. Later, the senior American diplomat in Syria, William V. Roebuck, wrote an internal memo lamenting that U.S. personnel had "stood by and watched" an "intention-laced effort at ethnic cleansing."

On October 12th, a Turkish-backed militia reached the M4, where it intercepted an S.U.V. carrying Hevrin Khalaf, a prominent female Kurdish politician. She was beaten to death. Videos posted on Twitter show the militants murdering a second unarmed passenger as well. "Another fleeing pig has been liquidated," one of the assailants proclaims.

The next day, Turkish forces in the open desert north of the highway began shelling Ain Issa, where Brousque was told to hold the line.

"The only thing between us was the camp," he recalled.

In Nashat Khairi's section, a troubling rumor had begun to circulate. The Kurds were said to have turned in desperation to the Assad regime, which was now sending reinforcements to Ain Issa. For many of the refugees, who'd come to the camp seeking asylum from the regime, this was as distressing as the Turkish offensive. Still, most people were reluctant to leave without their I.D.s, which were locked in the camp's administrative offices.

As the sound of shelling and machine-gun fire neared, another danger materialized. The Isis-affiliated detainees had somehow got out. The S.D.F. later blamed the breach on a riot provoked by Turkish air strikes. But I met multiple witnesses who claimed to have seen S.D.F. fighters arrive in a pickup and release the detainees. This seems plausible. Much of the Western criticism of the Turkish invasion focussed on the possibility that tens of thousands of Isis militants and relatives might escape Kurdish custody. The S.D.F., realizing that the world cared more about the spectre of terrorists on the loose than about the killing of Kurds, promoted false accounts about Kurdish prison guards being sent to the Turkish border. Although these stories were untrue, an S.D.F. spokesman told me, they "made the international community pay attention."

From Ain Issa, most of the detainees ran north, toward the Turks. Others stayed in the camp, infiltrating the regular

population and adding to its paranoia and confusion. Several people told me that some of the fleeing isis wives cried out, “The night is coming!”

Not long after this, a convoy of armored vehicles flying American flags approached on the highway, from the Lafarge Cement Factory. When the convoy stopped in front of the camp, relief washed over Khairi. “We were so happy,” he remembered. “We thought they were coming to save us.” Khairi told his children that everything was going to be O.K. Then the convoy started moving again.

Khairi and the other refugees did not know that Trump had ordered an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Syria, and that the convoy now receding out of sight was headed for Iraq. But they understood that it wasn’t coming back. “Everyone went crazy,” Khairi said. “It was total anarchy.” People swarmed the administrative offices, shattering the windows, breaking down the doors, and lighting them on fire. Fighting persisted between the Turks and the S.D.F., and at some point Khairi’s eight-year-old niece, Amal, was struck by a stray bullet. Her older brother, Ali Mohammad, took her to the hospital in town. The incident aggravated the hysteria, and soon nearly everyone poured out through the camp’s main gate. Unlike the detainees, most of the refugees went south—some in cars, others on foot—unsure where they were going or what they would do. When Ali Mohammad returned to the camp with Amal, she was dead.

Khairi and his relatives stayed to bury her. In a clearing outside a mosque, they dug a grave and marked it with a stone on either end. The sun was setting. No one had eaten in several days. Khairi set out to scavenge for food. It looked as if a tornado had descended on the camp. He marvelled at how quickly everything had changed.

The next day, he hired a truck. “It was very difficult for me to leave,” he told me. “It was the same as when we left our village, in Deir Ezzour.” As the truck headed south—in the same direction from which, five years earlier, they had fled—Khairi and his family found themselves, once again, homeless and running from the war.

The departing Americans, after their brief pause outside the camp, proceeded east on the M4, through the middle of the battle, with Turkish forces on their left and the S.D.F. on their right. Both sides stopped fighting to let them pass, then resumed.

In the end, Brousqe and the S.D.F. held on to Ain Issa, preventing the Turks from crossing the highway. It took the Americans three days to transport all their equipment and heavy weaponry out of Syria. Locals hurled rocks at them and called them traitors. After the Lafarge Cement Factory was abandoned, two American F-15s launched missiles at it. A U.S. Army spokesman explained that the purpose of the strike was “to reduce the facility’s military usefulness”—a stunning conclusion to what had arguably been America’s most successful military partnership in the post-9/11 era.

That partnership had begun in 2014, when isis stormed across northern Syria and the only meaningful armed resistance it encountered was a small band of Kurdish men and women who called themselves the People’s Protection Units, or Y.P.G. (The Syrian government had pulled most of its troops out of the region two years earlier, to quell uprisings elsewhere in the country.) Thousands of isis militants eventually besieged Kobani, the home town of the Y.P.G.’s commander, Ferhat Abdi Sahin, better known as Mazloun. A massacre appeared at hand. When I met Mazloun, in February, he recalled telling his fighters that under no circumstances were they to let isis advance beyond the street where he grew up. isis captured his house twice, and, according to Mazloun, both times the Y.P.G. took it back. By then, the U.S. had begun providing air support to the embattled Kurds; Mazloun said that American commanders advised him to surrender Kobani, and offered to cover his retreat. He refused. When isis seized his house a third time, he radioed its coördinates to the Americans and asked them to destroy it. “That was when the momentum changed,” Mazloun said. “After they bombed my house, we retook the neighborhood, and from there we kept advancing.” The Kurds eventually pushed isis out of Kobani, at which point the U.S. proposed to continue backing them from the air, as long as they pursued isis on the ground.

This must have been a strange moment for Mazloun, because the U.S. had once considered him a terrorist. He was born in 1967, shortly after the creation of the Syrian Arab Republic, which institutionalized the repression of Kurds. At the age of thirteen, he was imprisoned for reading a book in Kurdish, and as a student at Aleppo University he was arrested four times, for “political activities.” Meanwhile, in Turkey, whose government had enacted severe anti-Kurd policies of its own, the P.K.K. had launched a guerrilla war against the state. The group’s founder, Abdullah Ocalan, was forced to flee to Syria, where Mazloun’s father, a physician, befriended him. Some Turks now refer to Mazloun, derisively, as Ocalan’s “spiritual son.”

After graduating with a degree in architecture, Mazloun joined the P.K.K. He rose through its ranks during the eighties and nineties, while the group carried out kidnappings, assassinations, bombings, and suicide attacks in Turkey. The U.S. officially designated the P.K.K. a terrorist organization in 1997, and a year and a half later the C.I.A. helped Turkey capture Ocalan. He was imprisoned on a small island in the Sea of Marmara, where he remains today.

In 2011, at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, Mazloun founded the Y.P.G. as a Syrian branch of the P.K.K. Three years later, when American officials offered to support the Y.P.G., they insisted that it break ties with its parent group. Mazloun says that his organization is not connected to the P.K.K. That is preposterous; what is debatable is the nature of the

connection. As the Y.P.G. recaptured more territory from isis, it absorbed tens of thousands of non-Kurdish fighters—Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, and Turkmen—and, in 2015, it rebranded itself as the Syrian Democratic Forces. Recruits were still indoctrinated in Ocalan’s anti-Turkish ideology, however, and P.K.K. leaders quietly installed themselves in Syria, consolidating a shadow authority in both the S.D.F. and the emerging bureaucracy responsible for liberated areas. This bureaucracy—the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria—now governs about a third of the country, garnering considerable revenue, from taxes and trade, which, many experts believe, directly finances the P.K.K.

For the Americans, the S.D.F.’s proficiency against isis eclipsed concerns about antagonizing Turkey, a nato ally. As the war against isis progressed, the Kurds, despite their fidelity to a designated terrorist organization, developed an extraordinarily copacetic relationship with U.S. troops and personnel. At the command level, this symbiosis seems to have been largely thanks to General Mazloum, whose competence and reliability permitted American officials to overlook his political associations. Brett McGurk, a former special Presidential envoy for the coalition fighting isis, told me, “Mazloum proved himself to be incredibly effective militarily—and diplomatically, bringing tens of thousands of Arabs into the force. The results spoke for themselves.” Notwithstanding a lifelong devotion to Kurdish rights, Mazloum was crucial in uniting the S.D.F.’s diverse non-Kurdish factions, especially rivalrous Arab tribes. “He’s pragmatic and subtle,” McGurk said. “He became a trusted interlocutor.”

Today, Mazloum commands more than a hundred thousand fighters, fewer than half of whom are Kurds. His astonishing trajectory, from the leader of a fledgling militia to the general of a multiethnic army controlling a large swath of Syria, has endowed him with an almost mythical stature. “People see him as a kind of prophet,” a Kurdish friend of mine said. Some Americans express a similar awe. “Mazloum is the George Washington of the Kurds,” a U.S. Army major told me.

Erdoğan, for his part, has issued a warrant for Mazloum’s arrest through Interpol, and placed a bounty on his head. For my meeting with General Mazloum, I was instructed to show up at an S.D.F. base; I was then escorted to a remote compound on a hill overlooking wetlands. Guards paced the terraces of a luxurious residence with patios and an expansive swimming pool—the Hollywood version of a narco mansion, except that everyone was nice. Mazloum, the only person on the property in uniform, received me in a small, austere room with a few couches and coffee tables. Soft-spoken and clean-shaven, with graying black hair and an open face, he radiated the guileless enthusiasm of an idealist and the imperturbability of a veteran commander.

It is a sign of the insular and secretive culture of the P.K.K. that, until last year, few people outside Syria had ever heard of Mazloum. Throughout the Raqqa offensive, he avoided the press and remained sequestered with his American counterparts inside the Lafarge Cement Factory. His first public appearance came last March, after the S.D.F. captured Deir Ezzour, isis’s last redoubt in Syria, erasing from the map a caliphate that once encompassed more than thirty thousand square miles. At a choreographed ceremony, Mazloum briefly addressed international media outlets that had covered the battle. When we spoke, he explained to me that it would have been inappropriate for a subordinate of his to have declared such a momentous victory. But his decision to step into the spotlight was also tactical: in addition to declaring victory, he implored the U.S. not to abandon Syria prematurely. Warning that isis and Al Qaeda still posed a danger to the “whole world,” he asked for continued military support, “in order to begin a new phase in the fight against terrorism.”

His worry was understandable. Three months earlier, in December, 2018, while the S.D.F. was still engaged in brutal daily combat in Deir Ezzour, Trump had declared, on Twitter, “We have won against ISIS.” Praising the “soldiers who have been killed fighting for our country,” he directed the Pentagon to withdraw all its forces from Syria within thirty days. (Two U.S. service members had been killed in Syria, compared with more than ten thousand men and women in the S.D.F.) Defense Secretary James Mattis resigned in protest, as did Brett McGurk. After Republican senators joined the backlash, Trump relented on his timetable. But he never rescinded his order to withdraw.

When I asked Mazloum if U.S. military and civilian leaders had begun preparing him for their departure after Trump’s announcement, he said absolutely not. “Basically, they told us it wasn’t going to happen,” Mazloum said. The first official warning he received to the contrary came in October, when the ranking U.S. general for the Middle East called to inform him—on the same day the rest of the world found out—that a Turkish incursion was imminent and that the U.S. would do nothing to impede it. (A U.S. Army spokesman said, “We decline specific comment on prior conversations between senior leaders.”)

The disaster that subsequently befell northern Syria has been widely attributed to Trump’s capitulation to Erdoğan, which many people view as a gross betrayal of the Kurds. Senator Mitt Romney, raising the prospect of a congressional investigation into Trump’s decision, called it “a bloodstain on the annals of American history.” Such criticism hinges on the seemingly self-evident notion that the Kurds, after defeating isis at great cost, had earned a debt of loyalty from the U.S. Certainly, this was Mazloum’s understanding. Trump, however, never suggested that it was his understanding. Rather, it appears that U.S. commanders and diplomats made commitments that contradicted his explicit statements—imparting a false sense of security to the Kurds that ultimately harmed them. Mazloum told me that last summer, when he agreed to pull back his forces from the Turkish border, the Americans on the ground in Syria assured him, “As long as we’re here, Turkey will not attack you.”

By all accounts, these Americans genuinely believed in their partnership with the Kurds and were anguished by the way it ended. The question is whether they did the Kurds a disservice by not adequately explaining to them that the collective will of U.S. institutions could be instantly abrogated by a Presidential tweet—and that the posting of such a tweet was likely. In Syria, perhaps more than anywhere else, the unprecedented friction between the White House and its foreign-policy apparatus is on stark display. Almost every Kurd I met, including Mazloum, distinguished between the U.S. military and its Commander-in-Chief. “After all the fighting we did together, we had lots of trust in the Americans,” Mazloum said. “We never imagined everything could change in just two days.” After a pause, he qualified the criticism: “We know this was a political decision. We still have confidence in our American brothers-in-arms.”

In 2015, when Bashar al-Assad appeared to be losing his grip on the country, Vladimir Putin came to his aid. A prodigious Russian air campaign turned the tide of the civil war. In addition to enabling regime atrocities, Russia has killed thousands of Syrian civilians. Russian security contractors have also committed horrific crimes. A 2017 video showed Russians murdering a Syrian with a sledgehammer, then decapitating him and lighting his corpse on fire. However problematic the U.S. intervention in Syria has been, it would be specious to equate Russian and American conduct in the country.

Assad and the Russians have made it clear that their long-term goal is the return of “total state control” in Syria, including in the territory captured from Isis by the S.D.F. Nevertheless, the day before Turkey attacked Brousqe’s forces in Ain Issa and U.S. troops began leaving the Lafarge Cement Factory, Mazloum met with representatives from Russia and the Assad regime. The next afternoon, government military units returned to parts of northern Syria for the first time in seven years. In an editorial in *Foreign Policy*, Mazloum described his choice as one between “painful compromises” and “the genocide of our people.”

During the next week, a cascade of events upended the strategic balance in Syria and, by extension, throughout the Middle East. Putin invited Erdoğan to Sochi, where the two leaders signed a treaty that halted the Turkish offensive while implicitly ceding to Turkey the land it had already taken—nearly a thousand square miles. (An earlier ceasefire, negotiated by Vice-President Mike Pence, had been neither respected by Turkey nor enforced by the U.S.) Mazloum agreed to relinquish his remaining border positions, and Russia replaced the U.S. as the neutral mediator of the buffer zone. Russian troops also joined regime forces on the S.D.F.’s new front line along the territory annexed by Turkey. Near Ain Issa, Russian soldiers commandeered the largest U.S. airbase in Syria. Russian state television broadcast video footage of American medical supplies, empty bunkhouses, and shipping containers marked “property of u.s. army.”

When I visited Ain Issa, in February, Russian military vehicles entered and exited a former U.S. outpost on the edge of town. A large Russian flag waved on the roof of a former U.S. guard tower. It was visible from the building where I met with Brousqe, who now coördinates with Russian soldiers instead of with U.S. Special Forces. It wasn’t the same, Brousqe said: “We fought alongside the Americans. They ate with us. They laughed and joked with us. We had the feeling that we belonged to the same team. It’s not like that with the Russians.” Brousqe recalled a celebration at the end of a training exercise, during which American troops sang and danced to traditional Kurdish music with their S.D.F. comrades. Smiling at the memory, he said, “The Russians would never do that.”

Earthen berms and trenches lined the north side of the M4. A few hundred feet beyond them were the Turkish-backed militias. Before October, downtown Ain Issa had been a bustling souk. Now it was deserted. Regime soldiers walked by shuttered stores, garages, barbershops, and restaurants. When I introduced myself and tried to ask them questions, they nervously hurried off. They wore mismatched uniforms and tattered sneakers, and several of them looked underfed. Of the handful of soldiers I managed to interview, all but one had been conscripted. None was armed, and I later learned that the S.D.F. had prohibited them from carrying weapons in town.

The regime forces that Mazloum allowed back into Kurdish territory are restricted to the frontiers and pose little danger to the S.D.F. By stopping the Turkish offensive, securing Russian protection, and limiting the deployment of regime troops, Mazloum prevented northern Syria from descending into chaos. But this emergency diplomacy grants only a temporary reprieve. The longer the Kurds must contend with an existential threat from Turkey in the north, the less able they will be to defend their Arab satellites in the south—Deir Ezzour and Raqqa—from Russia and Assad. This secondary effect of the U.S. withdrawal has the potential to become yet another catastrophe, for yet another population.

To the extent that Trump has articulated a coherent policy in Syria, it reflects his view that the country is irredeemably doomed and therefore no longer our concern. “Syria was lost long ago,” he said last year. “We’re talking about sand and death.” Trump is not the first President to cite the scale and the complexity of the Syrian war as a justification for American inconstancy. In 2013, when the regime killed more than a thousand civilians with sarin gas, Barack Obama, leery of being drawn into the conflict, backed away from punitive strikes, despite having declared a “red line” on the use of chemical weapons. The regime, uninhibited by a fear of American repercussions, has since conducted additional gas attacks and wantonly slaughtered tens of thousands of its citizens by other means. One could argue that Obama’s painstakingly considered inaction enabled more violence and misery than any of Trump’s carelessly impulsive actions. At the same time, Trump’s repudiation of American responsibility to Syria is harder to rationalize, given that during his time in office the U.S., in its zeal

to exterminate isis, has reduced parts of the country to wasteland. Nowhere is this more true than in the city of Raqqa.

The truck that Nashat Khairi hired to take his family away from Ain Issa stopped ten miles north of Raqqa. Khairi, his wife, and their seven children unloaded their belongings on the roadside: mattresses, blankets, pots and pans, their fan and stove. All around them, thousands of refugees from the camp had pitched tents in empty fields, amid grazing livestock. Khairi told his family that they would not be staying there. After a night under the stars, he hitched a ride to Raqqa to look for someplace with a roof.

He discovered a city whose utter decimation might be unique in this century. As a candidate, Trump had vowed to “bomb the shit out of” isis, and, almost as soon as he entered the Oval Office, Raqqa afforded him the opportunity. By the summer of 2017, the S.D.F. had encircled the city, which isis militants prepared to defend with suicide bombers, an elaborate tunnel system, and ubiquitous I.E.D.s. Because the S.D.F. lacked heavy weaponry and armored vehicles, the offensive relied on U.S. air strikes. For four months, the U.S. deployed thousands of munitions, ranging from laser-guided Hellfire missiles to one-ton unguided bombs. U.S. artillery battalions complemented the barrage with more than thirty thousand shells. An adviser to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff later told the Marine Corps Times, “Every minute of every hour, we were putting some kind of fire on isis in Raqqa.” I was shocked, while covering the battle, by what seemed to be a strategy of physical annihilation applied against a city that still harbored a significant civilian population. One front-line S.D.F. commander told me that he called in U.S. air strikes on solitary gunmen.

When the last isis holdouts surrendered, the layout of the city was unrecognizable. Months of labor were required just to uncover the streets. The effort was overseen by the Raqqa Civil Council, a municipal authority established by the Kurds which currently operates under the Autonomous Administration. The U.S. supplied excavators and paid the salaries of more than six hundred local workers. Large rig-mounted jackhammers smashed the vast mountains of concrete into manageable pieces, which were then used to fill in craters, seal isis tunnels, and reinforce levees on the Euphrates River. Smaller slabs were pulverized and repurposed as cement. Thousands of bodies were extracted, as were tens of thousands of mines. Once the main arteries were passable, water stations and basic plumbing were installed. People started moving back.

“It changed from a dead city to a city with a pulse,” Ibrahim Ibn Khalil, the former director of the Civil Council’s reconstruction committee, told me this winter. We met in a small café in downtown Raqqa, near the central roundabout where isis once performed public beheadings and crucifixions. Ibn Khalil, in a wheelchair, held a hookah pipe in his left hand and a cappuccino in his right. In January, 2018, an assassin had entered his house and shot him six times in the chest; isis claimed responsibility. Doctors saved Ibn Khalil’s life, but three bullets remain lodged in his back, and no hospital in Syria is equipped to take them out. Ibn Khalil told me that the American officials who had encouraged the development of the Civil Council had promised to secure him a visa so that he could undergo surgery in the U.S. But they never followed through. “It’s very disappointing for me,” he said. “This happened because I was working with the Americans.”

His personal disappointment echoes a larger one. Because the U.N. respects the sovereignty of the Syrian regime, and the regime does not authorize aid delivery to areas controlled by the S.D.F., the U.S. initially assumed the financial burden for Raqqa’s recovery. But, seven months after Ibn Khalil was shot, Trump suspended the Syria budgets of the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development. “Let the other people take care of it now,” he had said. “We’re going to get back to our country, where we belong.” Although Gulf states and European nations made up for the shortfall, which totalled around two hundred and thirty million dollars—about a quarter of what’s been raised to repair Notre-Dame, in Paris—the disruption hampered progress, and many locals lost their jobs. Five months later, when Trump first threatened to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, the Americans advising Ibn Khalil’s team—public-health, water-sanitation, and demining experts—were evacuated from the country. Those who eventually returned were confined to U.S. military bases far from Raqqa, and in October they left Syria for good. Rubble, bombs, and bodies still litter the city—unexploded ordnance continues to kill and maim people every week, typically children—and no government has offered any support for the monumental undertaking of fixing damaged buildings and erecting new ones. In Ibn Khalil’s opinion, “The world has betrayed the people of Raqqa.”

The comprehensiveness of the destruction can be visually disorienting. It’s as if the cumulative energy of the American bombardment had scrambled the normal order of things, leaving behind an Escher-like reality to which the mind needs time to adjust. Concrete staircases dangle vertically from twisted rebar; cars lie upside down; roofs jut at weird angles; slabs of concrete undulate like rumpled cloth; trees cower from old blasts. On every surface, projectiles have gouged holes of different shapes and sizes; entire blocks are sheared off at the top. Some buildings appear to defy physics, frozen mid-fall. Others have been trucked away, the only trace of them a square of dirt.

And yet, remarkably, the obliterated city abounds with activity. Because most of Raqqa was wrecked from above, the ground levels of taller structures often survived more or less intact. Many streets are lined with shops and restaurants that have reopened under multiple gutted floors. Less obvious is where everybody lives. For several days, I couldn’t figure it out. Then one evening, while we were driving around, my translator—a friend from Iraq who’d never been to Raqqa before—said, “Look at all the people.” Although solar-powered L.E.D. lamps illuminate a few main boulevards, and commercial enterprises run

diesel generators, Raqqa is eerily dark at night. But now I saw what he was talking about: scattered throughout the city, dim points of light.

One of these belonged to Nashat Khairi. Three days after his family left Ain Issa, he found a cinder-block room on Raqqa's northern outskirts, near train tracks whose rails had been removed by scavengers, and rusty freight cars converted into shelters. The room was too small for his seven children, so Khairi installed the family's tent outside, and linked the two entrances with a tarp, thereby doubling the square footage. Between the stakes, he planted another garden with radishes and bell peppers. "This tent is dear to my heart," he told me when I visited.

As we discussed what had happened in October, Khairi kept referring to a compact agenda that he kept in his pocket. The agenda, so old and weathered that most of its pages had detached, contained copious notes from his years as a mukhtar at the Ain Issa camp: the names, ages, and phone numbers of everyone in his section; the rations to which each family was entitled; the locations of tents with infants needing formula; dates of marriages and deaths. Between the pages were battered business cards—contact information for N.G.O.s and aid workers who had long since quit the region. Picking up a card that had fallen out, Khairi told me it belonged to a doctor who used to perform circumcisions for newborns in the camp. He carefully returned the card to its place.

Khairi had found a job helping a Raqqa merchant sell secondhand blankets, and earned around three dollars a week. (I had first met him, by chance, while he was unfolding his wares on the sidewalk one morning.) Although he often had to choose between food and kerosene—winter temperatures frequently dropped below freezing—he considered himself lucky. Thousands of refugees who had fled Ain Issa were still living in the fields north of Raqqa. The former manager of the camp told me that there is no plan to help them. When my translator and I visited the makeshift settlement, a crowd of women swarmed our car, shouting, "We're dying of hunger!" and "Why isn't anyone coming?" We had to drive away when they tried to force open our doors. A villager who lived nearby later told me, "They don't even have water. Their husbands are in Raqqa looking for work." He added, "When it rains, these fields will all be flooded."

The reason none of these people had moved into Raqqa was that the city was already full. Around a hundred thousand people are thought to live there. In addition to former residents returning home, and people fleeing the Turkish invasion, the city has been inundated with Syrians displaced by the regime—from Aleppo, Hama, Deir Ezzour, and elsewhere. Every habitable niche has been claimed. After a week or so, I learned to identify signs of human life within the ruins: drying laundry, bricked-up holes, plastic-covered windows, and small gray satellite dishes affixed to half-collapsing walls. (The Civil Council sells generator-powered electricity for about two dollars a week, and everyone, no matter how destitute, seemed to have a television with several hundred channels.) Sometimes tower complexes were so thoroughly damaged that only a single apartment retained a modicum of structural integrity. One day, I noticed a man sweeping debris from the roof of a three-story building whose top and bottom floors had no exterior walls; he lived in the middle. When he invited me inside, I found the living room impeccably restored, with plush carpets and decorative plaster molding. A polished wood-and-glass display cabinet had survived the battle; on its shelves, porcelain figurines and delicate teacups were arranged on lace doilies.

Most people in Raqqa live in far more squalid and hazardous conditions. Large families are often crowded into one or two rooms with bowed ceilings and bulging walls—masses of blasted concrete literally pressing in on them. Given the state of these apartments, I was surprised to discover that there are few squatters in Raqqa. Almost everyone I met, including Khairi, paid rent.

At one of the dozens of real-estate offices downtown, Hassan Yassin, a middle-aged agent wearing a kaffiyeh and traditional tribal robes, told me, "We've never seen such a high demand." Yassin said that property owners can usually be tracked down, and if they are dead, imprisoned, or abroad, relatives suffice. Prices range from about ten dollars a month, in the suburbs, to as much as thirty dollars a month in the popular Al Firdous neighborhood. (Al Firdous is no less damaged than anywhere else, but it boasts the Electric Park of Raqqa, whose Ferris wheel and bumper cars withstood two air strikes, and Rashid Stadium. A former ISIS torture center, the stadium has a synthetic track that people now jog around.) Yassin waved a stack of papers—his backlog of would-be tenants seeking accommodation. "It's like that everywhere in Raqqa," he said.

During the day, the city resonates with the din of banging hammers, power tools, and machinery. Wood shops fabricate furniture; boom trucks and bulldozers clog the roads; vendors hawk salvaged brick, tile, metal, and marble. But almost none of this industry is geared toward creating new structures. At a high school flattened by an air strike, a crew of workers contracted by the Civil Council explained their work to me. As backhoes clawed through heaps of concrete, raking out gnarled rebar, laborers fed the steel rods through a straightening machine. Earthmovers then exhumed the foundation, so that the school could be resurrected on its original footprint. This final step, however, was merely theoretical: no building had occurred on any of the sites the crew had prepared.

The U.S. and its allies have refused to fund construction projects in Syria as long as Assad remains in power. "It's become a collective consensus among donors that we will not do reconstruction in Syria," a senior humanitarian officer told me. "Reconstruction is a dirty word." The ostensible reason for withholding such assistance is to incentivize the resolution of a

U.N.-sponsored peace process. But the process has been stalled for years, and few people expect it to succeed. The Western aversion to durable investment in Syria more likely arises from a broad but unspoken recognition that Assad is winning the war. “It’s political,” the humanitarian officer said. “We don’t want to do anything that will eventually benefit the regime.”

Even though the State Department and U.S.A.I.D. no longer have personnel in Syria, they still determine how the majority of foreign funding is spent there. The U.S. government distinguishes between “stabilization” and “reconstruction,” allowing the former and proscribing the latter. Stabilization projects are subject to guidelines that forbid, among other things, the building of load-bearing walls. In practical terms, this means that, if a school was minimally damaged by an American air strike, the U.S. can finance basic refurbishments, such as replacing doorframes or applying new paint. But if the school was destroyed—as the vast majority of structures in Raqqa were—the U.S., as a matter of policy, cannot replace it. The Europeans and the Gulf states generally follow the same rule.

For even these limited interventions, only public structures are eligible. Since the Second World War, the U.S. has rarely paid directly for the reconstruction of private homes in any conflict; the crucial difference in Syria is the absence of other actors to provide such aid. In Iraq, the U.N. has rebuilt more than twenty-five thousand residences that were destroyed during the war against Isis, and the World Bank is funding major infrastructure projects. In Raqqa, deferring to the regime, neither institution has done anything.

Yassin told me that, among the buildings where he had placed renters, “we estimate that at least seventy per cent of them will have to be torn down—they’re not safe.” I asked what will happen to their occupants if that happens. “They’ll have to go somewhere else,” he said.

In Raqqa, you can’t walk down the street without encountering people whose lives have been shattered by American arms. An investigation by Amnesty International found that the U.S.-led coalition killed at least sixteen hundred civilians in the city; locals say that the actual toll is much higher. Although American officials like to claim that the U.S. “liberated” Raqqa, nobody I met there felt liberated.

One afternoon, in a neighborhood adjacent to Al Firdous, we passed a yellow taxi parked outside a building that looked as if it had been stepped on by a giant. A sheet hung over the doorway. When my translator asked if anyone was home, a middle-aged man with gray hair and a gray mustache emerged. His name was Mustafa al-Hamad. We followed him into a room with crumbling walls lined with blankets and pillows, where we were joined by his wife, Namat.

They were originally from Aleppo, where Hamad had managed a shoe store. In 2012, the revolution turned violent in their neighborhood, and they moved with their four children to Raqqa. The war had not yet reached Raqqa, and Namat’s family lived there. Hamad bought a taxi and began working as a driver. He and Namat had another daughter. After Isis captured Raqqa, in 2014, they considered fleeing—but nowhere they could go was significantly safer. Two years later, the S.D.F. began its advance on the city, and Isis, recognizing the need for human shields, prohibited civilians from leaving.

In 2017, as the S.D.F. approached Raqqa, the already ferocious deluge of munitions intensified. That July, a shell or an air strike killed Namat’s brother, Khalid. She and Hamad resolved to get out. The taxi could fit only them, their five children, and Khalid’s thirteen-year-old son, whom they had adopted. Hamad promised to return for Namat’s mother, sister, nieces, and nephews. They left at night, following a rutted dirt road through the wetlands on the edge of the Euphrates. Eventually, they arrived at a line of vehicles—other residents trying to escape the city—backed up from where the road disappeared into a marsh. Isis militants had blown up a levee, flooding the way.

About a dozen men were helping people move their cars, one after another, across several hundred feet of water. “If we hear a plane, we have to go,” they told Hamad. The Americans, fearing that Isis militants were sneaking out of Raqqa, had dropped leaflets threatening to bomb anyone attempting to ford the river.

When it was Hamad’s turn, he and his two teen-age sons got out and pushed. Namat and her daughters waded alongside them. The water rose to Namat’s chest; she held her infant above her head. They made it across, and the next day reached a town under the control of the S.D.F.

Hamad did not go back for Namat’s mother and sister—to do so would have been suicidal. Both women, along with four of Namat’s nieces and nephews, were later killed in an air strike. As soon as Raqqa was accessible, Hamad and Namat visited the site, hoping to recover their bodies. There was too much rubble.

The day after I met Hamad, he led me and my translator to the place where he had pushed his taxi across the marsh. The dirt road was still flooded, and looked exactly as he had described it. On the way back to the city, we stopped at a small scrap yard. In a wooden shack surrounded by rusty engine parts, shutters, gears, wheels, and other refuse, we found the young owner sitting on a crate, drinking tea with one of his suppliers. While I spoke to the owner about his business—there had been a brief boom, he said, but the city was soon picked over—the supplier regarded me suspiciously. He was missing several teeth, and

cotton spilled from holes all over his dirty coat. He grew agitated as I continued asking questions, and finally interrupted me. “During the battle, a mortar killed my wife and three of my daughters,” he said. “Another one of my daughters lost her leg.”

The man, named Hussein Ahmad, invited me to his house, where I met his ten-year-old daughter, Fatma, who is now in a wheelchair. Fatma recalled cooking dinner with her mother and sisters when a shell tore through their kitchen. Rima was fifteen, Amira fourteen, and Waffa twelve. Ahmad said he had asked several N.G.O.s about getting a prosthesis for Fatma. He’d taped his phone number to the wall, in case someone showed up while he was out collecting metal.

Most civilians who were injured by U.S. artillery and air strikes were treated at the Raqqa Public Hospital. A former doctor from the hospital told me that by the end of the fighting only ten of his colleagues remained, the others having fled or died. Amputation became the default treatment for wounded limbs, the doctor said. One physician had performed so many amputations that ISIS accused him of deliberately impairing people. Infection and sepsis were common. Fatma said that, when she woke up in one of the wards, “they were cleaning my leg but I couldn’t feel anything—then it started to smell and they cut it.”

Because the hospital also treated ISIS militants, it was a frequent target of U.S. air strikes. (Toward the end of the offensive, it also became an ISIS fighting position.) When the current director of the hospital, Kassar Ali, took me inside the original facility, we had to scuddle through downed pipes and caved-in ceilings, the walls and floors scorched black by fire. Scattered everywhere were the remnants of medical supplies: white piles of cast plaster, contorted gurneys, smashed exam tables. Air strikes had destroyed all of the X-ray machines, cat scanners, and MRI devices. Doctors Without Borders has financed the renovation of a new wing—which is currently the only public-health facility in Raqqa—but none of this essential equipment has been replaced. According to Ali, American commanders had visited the hospital on several occasions: “Each time, they took pictures, we had long meetings, and they promised support. But so far they’ve given us nothing.” Since October, even the visits have stopped. Reached by phone recently, Ali said that he is deeply worried about the possibility of a COVID-19 outbreak in Raqqa. “We can take care of one or two patients, at most,” he explained. The hospital has two ventilators—eight were lost to air strikes.

If people in Raqqa knew the U.S.’s rationale for refusing to engage in any substantive reconstruction of their city—because it might end up in the hands of the regime—they would no doubt feel even more betrayed than they do now. Raqqa is an Arab city, and most of its residents, unlike the Kurds, are unwilling to accept any deal with the regime. While interviewing people in Raqqa, I often heard the phrase “the devil before Assad.” When General Mazloum made his accommodation with the regime, protests broke out in the city. Some Arabs, fearing the regime’s return, have since fled. Hamad and Namat told me that if the regime comes back they, too, will leave. After they escaped Raqqa, in 2017, their daughter Noor married and moved to Hama Province, in western Syria; six months later, she was killed, along with her husband and her in-laws, in an air strike by the regime or the Russians. Hamad and Namat’s anger aside, staying would be foolhardy: as natives of Aleppo, they risk meeting the same fate as the tens of thousands of Syrians whom the regime has disappeared since 2011. When their eldest son turned eighteen, he would be conscripted.

The partially demolished apartment where they now live once belonged to Namat’s mother. When they returned to Raqqa, Hamad and Namat spent ten days clearing out rubble and shoring up the walls. Hamad wired in electricity, and Namat planted vegetables in an empty lot outside. They even had a kitchen with a sink and running water. If they left this place, I asked, where would they go? Hamad reflected, then said, “Wherever the regime isn’t.”

Dread of the regime is even more acute for those who have worked, even in limited capacities, with the U.S. At the offices of Citizenship House, a local N.G.O. based in the Al Firdous neighborhood, I met half a dozen women who ran democracy-education workshops funded by the State Department and by European governments. One of them, Yamam Abdulghani, told me, “To the regime, we’re terrorists. They accuse us of applying a Western agenda and Western ideologies.” When I asked what punishment such activities might elicit, Abdulghani said, “Look at Caesar’s pictures.” In 2013, a former military-police photographer using the pseudonym Caesar divulged thousands of images of Syrian prisoners who had been tortured and executed in regime detention centers.

The workshops at Citizenship House are quintessential “stabilization” programs. In contrast to humanitarian operations—which are supposed to address immediate needs—such programs are designed to forestall the emergence of ISIS and other extremist movements; for this reason, the U.S. and its allies will fund them. But, in Raqqa, the absence of any U.S. protection against the regime—and of any U.S. investment in rebuilding—has created exactly the kinds of conditions in which radical groups like ISIS flourish. According to Abdulghani, a bellwether for such instability in Raqqa is the current situation of its women.

Women’s rights are central to the political philosophy of Abdullah Ocalan, and the S.D.F. and the Autonomous Administration vigorously promote gender equality. A billboard outside the Raqqa Civil Council declares, “With women at the forefront of the twenty-first century, we will end all violence against humanity.” Moreover, before ISIS, few women in Raqqa wore niqabs and veils. Yet Abdulghani was one of only two uncovered women I met in the city. The other was the Kurdish co-chair of the Civil

Council. Abdulghani said that the prevalence of niqabs and veils could be attributed, in part, to the lingering influence of isis. But the U.S. withdrawal was a bigger factor. “Before October, some women had started to uncover,” she said. “Now it’s stopped. Women are afraid of what’s coming.”

Abdulghani, who, in 2016, smuggled herself out of Raqqa in a truckful of goats, said that people often harass her on the street, calling her a prostitute and warning that isis will soon be back. “Everyone is preparing to leave,” she said. “No one feels secure. No one can think about tomorrow.”

Two weeks after Trump ordered a full withdrawal of the thousand or so U.S. troops in Syria, he decided to send half of them back. They would not be defending their Kurdish allies against Turkey, or deterring the regime from encroaching on Raqqa. Instead, Trump said, “we are leaving soldiers to secure the oil.” Cryptically, he went on, “Maybe somebody else wants the oil, in which case they’ll have a hell of a fight.” The Pentagon has characterized the mission differently: the “somebody” it is concerned about is isis, and American troops are in Syria “for the oil” only insofar as safeguarding it deprives isis of a potential source of revenue.

Both of these explanations feel disingenuous. It’s true that isis persists around the S.D.F.-controlled oil fields of Deir Ezzour Province, where U.S. Special Forces continue to carry out counterterrorism raids. But Iran, which supports the Assad regime, is also active there. Nashat Khairi and his family, for instance, can’t return to their village in Deir Ezzour because it is occupied by an Iranian-backed militia. Until October, containing Iranian adventurism was a key U.S. priority in Syria, and Trump’s “maximum pressure” approach to Iran has been perhaps the most consistent feature of his foreign-policy agenda. Iranian operations in Syria are overseen by the Quds Force, which used to be commanded by Qassem Suleimani, the general who was assassinated in a drone strike in January. Trump later defended his decision to order the strike by saying that Suleimani had “viciously wounded and murdered thousands of U.S. troops.” A U.S. withdrawal from Deir Ezzour could entail surrendering U.S. bases to the Quds Force.

Another place in Syria where U.S. troops are currently stationed is also rich in oil—a Kurdish region called Jazira. But isis has no presence in Jazira, and there is little need to protect its oil. Most of the crude in both Jazira and Deir Ezzour is exported to the regime, which refines it and sells a portion back to the Kurds, as diesel and petroleum. Although the Kurds and the regime fundamentally oppose each other, they engage in this commerce because neither could subsist without it: international sanctions prevent the regime from buying sufficient oil on the global market, and the Kurds have no refineries of their own. Jazira is strategically valuable not because of its peculiar oil trade but because it is where the M4 crosses into northern Iraq—another Kurdish-governed territory. The border is a lifeline for Syrian Kurds, and also a bridge between two major spheres of U.S. influence. Russia is thus determined to control it. When I visited Jazira, this winter, U.S. and Russian patrols were confronting one another almost daily on the muddy roads that crisscross its barren hills.

Russia has long presented itself as a preferable alternative to U.S. hegemony in the Middle East, and Trump’s disengagement has galvanized Putin’s regional ambitions. The most arresting thing about the video showing the Russian takeover of the U.S. airbase near Ain Issa is not the Russian helicopter touching down on an American landing zone, or the Russian soldiers moving into American barracks; it is the Russian officer invoking timeworn American rhetoric. “We are here to deliver humanitarian and medical aid to civilians, and to provide them with peace and security,” he says.

The Kurds know that Russia, Iran, and the regime want the same thing Turkey wants: an end to their autonomy in Syria. This is why many Kurds, despite Trump’s oft-expressed indifference to their welfare, cling to the hope of a renewed alliance with the U.S. Nearly all the Kurdish officials I interviewed were so desperate to salvage what remained of the American commitment to Syria that they refused to speak on the record about the withdrawal. One S.D.F. commander told me that, even during the Turkish invasion, he and his peers refrained from criticizing the U.S. in the press. “We discussed it, and decided to say we felt ‘disappointed’ instead of ‘betrayed,’” he said. Trump’s opinion of the Kurds, however, seems to have only deteriorated since he abandoned them. In November, he hosted Erdoğan in the Oval Office, where the Turkish President reportedly produced an iPad and showed a video comparing General Mazloun to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder of isis. Afterward, Trump thanked Erdoğan and the Turkish military “for the job they’ve done” in Syria. He has also mused, “The Kurds, it’s very interesting—Turkey doesn’t like them, other people do.”

Were Trump to remove the remaining U.S. forces in Jazira and Deir Ezzour, the S.D.F. would have to make additional concessions to the regime in order to secure a bulwark against Turkey. This could include handing over Raqqa. But, even if the U.S. stays in Syria, and Turkey does not renew its offensive, the status quo appears unsustainable. Once Russia, Iran, and the regime have defeated the final pockets of the Arab opposition, they will almost certainly turn their attention to the Kurds. Arthur Quesnay, a political scientist at the Sorbonne, who recently co-authored a report on northern Syria, told me, “It may take a couple of years, but the regime will gradually return and recapture territory.” Quesnay believes that the fall of Raqqa and Deir Ezzour will be only the beginning. If the regime managed to take control of a few strategic sites, such as the border crossing in Jazira, it could starve the S.D.F. of resources, precipitating its collapse. In that case, Mazloun’s army would revert to what it was before his fateful introduction to the U.S., in 2014: a small Kurdish militia, surrounded by enemies.

All over northern Syria, the Kurds are preparing for this scenario by building an extensive network of tunnels. According to Mazloum, Trump promised him that he would never allow Erdoğan to attack Kobani. But Mazloum seems to have little confidence in the reassurance: I saw more tunnels in his home town than anywhere else. Twenty-five miles of paved road connects the former U.S. airbase near Ain Issa to Kobani, which abuts the Turkish border. The entire length of this route is lined with small blue tents, spaced around seventy feet apart, each standing beside a large mound of soil. When my translator and I pulled over and entered one of them, we found two teen-agers, covered in dirt, peering into a narrow shaft. A winch was suspended above the mouth of the shaft, and when the boys retracted its cable a man in a harness surfaced from the subterranean dark. They had been digging for three weeks straight. The tunnel, which parallels the road, was thirty feet underground.

While the Kurds are adjusting to the fact that the sky is no longer on their side, so are the area's civilians. West of Ain Issa on the M4, where the front line with the Turks cuts across sweeping plains, a small Christian village called Tell Tawil sits on a low rise, conspicuous from a distance because of its abundant trees. In 2015, as ISIS neared Tell Tawil, the entire population fled. A year later, after the S.D.F. expelled ISIS, some people returned. When the Turks invaded, there was another exodus. One afternoon, as I accompanied an S.D.F. fighter through Tell Tawil's deserted streets, he explained that Turkish-backed militias across the fields frequently shelled the village, despite the ceasefire, and Turkish drones sometimes targeted it with missiles. All the houses were empty, and the church was boarded up.

I was therefore surprised when we came upon two old men, sitting shoulder to shoulder, on a stoop in the sun. Their names were David Abraham and Khoshaba Samuel. Abraham, who is eighty-seven years old, wore a pin-striped blazer over a V-neck sweater and a collared shirt. He said that he had lived in Tell Tawil since 1935. His wife had died six years ago, four of his five sons had settled in Sweden, and his daughter lived in the U.S. Samuel, who is eighty, had known Abraham since he was a child and still appeared to respect his seniority. "I love this land," Abraham said. "I'll never leave it." Samuel nodded in agreement.

After saying goodbye to Abraham and Samuel, I asked the S.D.F. fighter to show me his unit's forwardmost position. We were heading down a hill to the northern edge of the village when I heard footsteps approaching from behind and turned to see Abraham briskly following us. At the end of the road, the S.D.F. fighter pointed to several sandbagged foxholes outside a gated property. He gestured toward the open expanse, strewn with old tractor parts, that stretched from where we stood: this was the no man's land.

When Abraham caught up to us, he insisted that we come to his house for a cup of coffee. I asked where he lived.

"Here," he said, opening the gate behind the foxholes.

Three huge dogs barked and jumped on Abraham as he led us into the yard. Pushing them away, Abraham complained to the S.D.F. fighter that someone had recently shot one of the dogs in the paw. We sat at a picnic table, on a deck looking out toward the Turkish front line. Abraham said that mortars sometimes whistled over his roof. He went inside and returned with whiskey tumblers containing espresso. Roosters crowed. After a while, Samuel appeared and, without a word, took a seat across from Abraham. Like almost everyone else from Tell Tawil, they were cotton farmers. Abraham owned a six-acre parcel across the road, but, even if peace came to Syria before he died, he knew that he'd never work it again. ISIS, the Turks, and the S.D.F. had all littered it with mines.

As we stood to leave, I asked Abraham what Tell Tawil had been like during the Second World War, when Britain and Vichy France fought for control of Syria. He said that his memories were vague. One, however, did stand out. He remembered lying flat in the fields, with other children, each time planes passed overhead.

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South America

Chilean Court Upholds Conviction of Former Pinochet Aide Labbe (New York Times) By Aislinn Laing
April 14, 2020

A Chilean court on Tuesday ratified a three-year prison sentence handed to Cristian Labbe, a former aide to dictator Augusto Pinochet, for torturing a detainee in 1973.

Labbe, 71, a far-right politician who served as mayor of a Santiago suburb until 2012, was convicted in September of torturing 26-year-old student Harry Cohen in a town in southern Chile in the early days of military rule.

The Temuco Court of Appeals in the south of the country rejected an appeal by Labbe against his conviction, and ordered the state to pay compensation of about \$35,000 to the victim.

Labbe was among a number of former members of Pinochet's notorious DINA secret police who were prosecuted under a drive during the presidency of Michelle Bachelet to bring more of those accused of human rights abuses during the dictatorship to trial.

During Pinochet's 1973-1990 rule, some 3,000 people died or were disappeared, while 28,000 were victims of torture, including Bachelet.

Torture 'for your amusement': How Thatcher's government misled MPs and public about its dealings with the Pinochet regime (Declassified UK) By Grace Livingstone

April 21, 2020

The British government under Margaret Thatcher misled the public and MPs about its dealings with the Pinochet regime in Chile while it tortured and killed thousands of people, declassified British documents show.

When the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998, Margaret Thatcher became his most high-profile defender. But when she was prime minister, her government was reluctant to reveal the true extent of its links with a regime responsible for the "disappearance" of thousands of people.

Thatcher's government, which lasted from 1979 to 1990, not only lifted a British embargo on the sale of weapons to Chile imposed by the previous Labour government, it also sold arms that could be used for internal repression while training hundreds of Chilean soldiers.

Thatcher also ended the regime's diplomatic isolation by restoring a British ambassador to Santiago and authorising the first visits by British ministers to Chile since Pinochet's coup in 1973.

UK diplomats worked behind the scenes at the United Nations to water down international condemnation of Pinochet. When faced with an outcry in the UK about the torture and disappearance of a British-Chilean citizen, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) knowingly withheld information from parliamentarians who enquired about his fate.

Restoring relations

General Pinochet overthrew Salvador Allende — the socialist president who was democratically elected in 1970 — on 11 September 1973, to widespread international condemnation. His regime became one of Latin America's most repressive and bloody in modern history.

Thousands of citizens were herded into Chile's national football stadium or secret detention centres. After the fall of the dictatorship, a truth commission confirmed that more than 40,000 people were tortured, 3,200 were killed or "disappeared" and over 200,000 fled into exile.

The Labour governments (1974-79) that preceded Margaret Thatcher had cut off economic aid, withdrawn Britain's ambassador from Santiago and welcomed thousands of Chilean refugees to Britain, in addition to denying arms exports.

On coming to office in 1979, however, Conservative ministers immediately restored export credits for Chile and ended Labour's Latin American refugee programme. Thatcher's Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington, met the Chilean foreign minister, Hernán Cubillos, in London in September 1979, the first ministerial meeting with a member of Pinochet's government.

Two months later Industry Secretary Keith Joseph, Trade Minister Cecil Parkinson and FCO Minister Nicolas Ridley all welcomed Pinochet's finance minister, Sergio de Castro, to London.

Reinstating a British ambassador to Chile was controversial. He had been withdrawn in 1975 in protest at the torture of British doctor Sheila Cassidy, who had been tied to a metal bed frame and given electric shocks.

In January 1980, the Thatcher government agreed to return an ambassador to Santiago even though the Chilean government refused to accept that Cassidy had been tortured. The government accepted a statement from the regime apologising for any treatment she "may have" received, but this form of words meant no investigation or prosecution would take place.

An FCO cable in December 1979 makes clear that the Chilean statement was purely for presentational purposes. It read: "Whereas the Chileans seem to think an agreement to the exchange of ambassadors is contingent on their giving us public satisfaction on these... cases... our real concern is to be able to use these apologies in our presentation ex post facto of an announcement that we have agreed to the exchange of ambassadors."

Torture and disappearance

The fate of another British passport-holder also caused public concern in Britain. William Beausire, a 26-year-old born in Chile to a British father and Chilean mother, was not involved in politics, but his sister was married to a leading opposition activist. After leaving Chile to seek work in Europe on a flight via Argentina in November 1974, a tannoy announcement in Buenos Aires airport called him to the information desk. He never arrived in Europe.

Over the next seven months, several witnesses saw Beausire in Chilean prisons, but the authorities refused to admit he was even in the country. Piecing together the story from witnesses, his family discovered that armed men in Buenos Aires airport had put him on a plane back to Chile, where he was held in several secret interrogation centres.

During his detention, Beausire had electric shocks applied to his body, sticks thrust up his rectum and was left hanging from the ceiling for long periods of time. After July 1975, he was never seen again.

In 1981, the BBC broadcast a documentary about Beausire, containing graphic reconstructed torture scenes and interviews with the missing man's family. Letters of protest poured into the Foreign Office.

Forwarding one of these to the British embassy in Santiago, an FCO official wrote: "We have just received the first letter on the TV programme. Copy enclosed for your amusement."

The FCO knew that the Chileans had shelved the Beausire investigation but omitted to tell this fact to the 128 MPs and 185 members of the public who had written to them. Only David Owen, as a former foreign secretary in the previous Labour government, was told that the case was closed.

Assistant Under-Secretary of State John Ure queried why facts were being withheld from Conservative MP Timothy Renton. He was satisfied with the response from the FCO's South America Department, concluding: "Mr Renton... is writing on behalf of a constituent and our reply... will inevitably be passed back to the Chile [solidarity] lobby. It seems unnecessary to give them further fuel for agitation at this juncture."

William Beausire's body was never found and no one was ever prosecuted.

Arming Pinochet

The Thatcher government lifted the full arms embargo on Chile in July 1980 and a year later loosened its own restrictions on arms exports, assessing applications on the "likelihood" rather than the "capability" of equipment being used for internal repression.

Thatcher was fully behind the drive to sell weapons, telling Cabinet colleagues in July 1981:

"The present regime in Chile had been a particular target for left-wing propaganda in this country and it was unfortunate that the hollowness of much of the left-wing case had not been exposed, as Chile represented a good potential market for British military and civil goods."

Her government went on to approve licences for a range of military equipment including 10 Hawker Hunter fighter planes, Canberra bomber aircraft, three warships, eight Blowpipe missile launchers with 60 missiles, a Sea Slug surface-to-air missile system, armoured Land Rovers, machinery to manufacture small arms and ammunition, and cluster bombs.

Less than a month after the arms embargo had been lifted, Cecil Parkinson visited Pinochet in Chile and extolled the economic success of the regime. The British ambassador, John Heath, reported that "Mr Parkinson said that he had also been impressed by the skill and intelligence of the economic team which was directing the Chilean economy and by the high growth rate".

The ambassador added that Parkinson "commented that some of the businessmen in his party had begun to have feelings that they would like to operate within the Chilean system of free enterprise, despite what Mrs Thatcher was doing in Britain."

Secret visits to London

Several other British ministers went on to visit Pinochet's Chile including FCO Minister Cranley Onslow (1983), Trade Minister Alan Clark (1987) and Agriculture Minister John Gummer (1988). Foreign Secretary Geoffrey Howe met Pinochet's

foreign minister in London in 1987.

But it was the military links between Britain and the Pinochet regime that were closest. Air force commander General Fernando Matthei, army commander Cesar Benavides and navy chief Jose Toribio Merino all made secret, “private” visits to Britain in 1983 where they met “senior MOD [Ministry of Defence] staff”, according to declassified documents.

Junta member General Matthei returned to Britain several times during the Thatcher years. In May 1986, he met the FCO minister of state, Baroness Young, and dined at the home of Britain’s Chief of the Air Staff, Sir David Craig.

Junta president Admiral Merino visited Britain again in July 1987 where he met the head of Britain’s armed forces, Sir John Fieldhouse and the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir William Staveley, as well as defence procurement minister Lord Trefgarne.

Numerous high-ranking British officers went to Chile, including two visits by Britain’s Assistant Chief of the Air Staff in 1984 and 1986. The British government spent more than £1.1-million on training 255 members of the Chilean armed forces in the UK between 1981 and 1984.

Support at the United Nations

As Pinochet’s military regime became increasingly isolated, Thatcher’s government helped to neuter international criticism of it. General Pinochet met Trade Minister Peter Rees in September 1982 and made a “specific request” that Britain “modify” its position on human rights at the UN.

The UK government then withdrew its support from a December 1982 UN General Assembly resolution condemning Pinochet’s human rights abuses. It also worked behind the scenes to persuade other countries to water down the criticisms in the resolution.

British ambassador John Hickman noted that Chile’s air force commander had expressed his gratitude to the British delegation: “Matthei went out of his way to say that he and other members of the junta were very grateful to us,” he wrote.

Every year throughout the 1980s, Britain continued to lobby other countries at the UN to tone down an annual resolution condemning Pinochet’s military regime.

Colombia grants amnesty to former IRA members as part of peace process (Colombia Reports) By Adriaan Alsema
April 22, 2020

Colombia’s war crimes tribunal on Tuesday granted amnesty to three former IRA members who had been sentenced to prison for assisting the now-defunct FARC rebel group in bomb-making.

Irishmen Martin John McCauley, Niall Terrence Connolly and Seamus O’Muineachain received amnesty after the court ruled that – even though they weren’t members of the FARC – their crimes were directly related to the armed conflict.

The former IRA members were arrested in 2001 and sentenced to 17 years in prison in 2004 on fraud charges. By then, they had already fled to Ireland, the Prosecutor General’s Office announced.

“The Colombia Three” were granted parole on the condition they would carry out no activity in opposition of the state and would be made available to foreign authorities if requested.

McCauley, Connolly and O’Muineachain were arrested in 2001 after spending time with the FARC to teach the Colombian guerrillas bomb-making techniques they had learned during “The Troubles” in northern Ireland.

According to Colombian authorities, the three had been seen in a demilitarized zone in southern Colombia where the FARC and the government of former President Andres Pastrana were holding peace talks at the time.

The former IRA members were the last remaining foreigners with pending prison sentences for crimes related to Colombia’s armed conflict after a 2016 peace deal between the FARC and former President Juan Manuel Santos allowed the release of dozens of foreign members of the former guerrilla group.

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Venezuela

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TOPICS

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

New head of army denied amnesty by TRC - Foundation for Equality Before Law (Politics Web) By JP Botha
April 14, 2020

As a result a charge of murder and attempted murder still pending against Lt. Gen. Mbatha

Press release by the Foundation for Equality Before Law: Appointment of Lieutenant General Lawrence Khulekani Mbatha as Head of the Army

Injustice and the disregard of the provisions of our Constitution have become such a common phenomenon in South Africa that it is taken for granted in most circles. The appointment of Lt. Gen. Mbatha as chief of the South African Army is without doubt a result of a rotten legal system where the right is unilaterally and unlawfully applied by the National Prosecuting Authority. Lt. Genl. Mbatha instructed Walter Smiles on May 25, 1993, to throw a hand grenade in the Trust Bank Building in Kimberley. He transported Smiles to the scene and was present when the hand grenade was thrown. 1 Person died and 40 were injured, including defenceless women and children.

Lt. Genl. Mbatha applied for amnesty, but the amnesty committee found that the incident was not committed in the conflict of the past and associated with a political objective.

Amnesty was therefore denied.

There is therefore a charge of murder and attempted murder against Lt. Gen. Mbatha pending and his appointment as head of the South African Army shocking.

The crude way in which the National Prosecuting Authority disregards the provisions of Article 9 of the Constitution and law and justice in general, is further emphasized when it is taken into account that the acts for which former members of the security branch are currently being prosecuted, are without exception associated with a political objective and committed in the conflict of the past and therefore fall within the ambit of the concluding paragraph of the Interim Constitution. By contrast, the murder and attempted murder committed by Lt. Gen. Mbatha, according to the emphatic finding of the amnesty committee, was not committed with a political objective in the conflict of the past. It therefore does not fall within the provisions of the concluding paragraph of the Interim Constitution and is, for all legal purposes, ordinary murder and attempted murder.

The decision of the amnesty committee and final report of the TRC relating to this incident is attached.

Yours faithfully

JP Botha, Chairperson, Foundation for Equality Before Law, 13 April 2020

Text of decision:

AC/2000/053

TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

AMNESTY COMMITTEE

APPLICATION IN TERMS OF SECTION 18 OF THE PROMOTION OF NATIONAL UNITY AND RECONCILIATION ACT,
NO. 34 OF 1995.

KHULULEKANI LAWRENCE MBATHA 1ST APPLICANT (AM 3363/96)

WALTER SMILES 2ND APPLICANT

(AM 3364/96)

DECISION

The first applicant is seeking amnesty for:

"Instructions to throw hand grenade on the 24th May 1993" at Kimberley and the victims Ezekiel Lebogang Mokone (killed) and Jeane Nel (injured).

The second applicant states:

"On the 24th May 1993 I threw a hand grenade into a crowd at the Trust Bank Centre, Kimberley". He continues to state that one person was killed and others were severely or slightly injured. He also states: "Hand grenade was directed at the Bophuthatswana Representative and at the Station Commander of South African Police". As can be seen from the aforementioned the applicants do not clearly state the acts, omissions or offences in respect of which amnesty is sought. It may be in the interest of clarity to state that the following facts were common cause at the hearing:

- (a) That a hand grenade was thrown at the Trust Bank Building in Kimberley.
- (b) That the date of the occurrence was the 25th May 1993 and not the 24th May 1993.
- (c) That as a result of the explosion of the grenade Mr Ezekiel Mokone was killed and Mr Jeanne severely injured.
- (d) That 40 other people sustained injuries.

It is also clear from the evidence that the perpetrators didn't intend to kill or injure the specific victims. The hand grenade was intended to explode in the foyer of the Trust Bank Building where other people (if present) might have been injured. The grenade was, however, deflected and exploded outside the building, killing and injuring the people referred to.

After the incident two persons, Mr Siphos Moses Mbaqa and Mr Darlington Nkosinathi Nkohla, were charged and found guilty of culpable homicide in respect of the killing Mr Mokone, attempted murder of Major Uys, the station commander of the South African Police and the illegal possession of the hand grenade.

The committee will now deal with the application of the first applicant. For purposes of our decision we will accept that Mr Mbatha intended to ask for amnesty for all offences flowing from his involvement with the throwing of the hand grenade on the 25th May 1993.

The offences occurred under the following circumstances:

The ANC Youth League and Cosas organised a march from Galeshewe, Kimberley to the Trust Bank Building in the centre of Kimberley city on the 25th May 1993. The purpose of the march to hand over memoranda of protest to the Bophuthatswana consulate who had their offices in the building and to the S.A. Police. This march took place after the Peace Accord had been signed by the ANC and the then government and after the negotiations which resulted in the constitution had resumed. Permission was requested to hold the march but the Police at Kimberley were not prepared to grant the request and the representative of the United Nations, Mr Adriana Cassandra, and the chairperson of the Northern Cape Peace Committee, Adv. Jeanne Nel was called upon to mediate. The Police informed Mr Cassandra and M E Nel that the march will not be allowed unless the leadership of the Youth League and Cosas ensured that the march would be peaceful. Cassandra and Nel thereupon met Mr Steenkamp, the leader of the ANC in the Northern Cape and Mr John Block, the chairperson of the ANC Youth League who gave the required insurance that the march will be peaceful and properly marshalled. Permission for the march was thereupon obtained on condition that it will throughout be under the observation of the U.N. and the Peace Committee.

Mr Lawrence Mbatha, the first applicant in the present application, was at that stage the regional Commander of M.K. in the Northern Cape.

As commander he had discretionary powers to act in circumstances where no direct instructions from his seniors could be obtained. In evidence he conceded that Mr Steenkamp and Mr Block, who were members of the ANC civilian leadership, were regarded as his seniors and that he took instructions from them.

According to Mr Mbatha he picked Mr Smiles up at a place commonly known as Tickey Stop in Kimberley and he, Smiles and the driver of the car in which they were travelling drove towards the place known as Small O.K. where he and Smiles got out of the car, and joined the marches. Mbatha testified that at that time he instructed Smiles that after the last memorandum has been submitted and the marchers were moving away, he should throw a hand grenade through the sliding door.

The memorandum were handed over and the marchers were preparing to move away. At that time according to Mbatha Smiles threw the hand grenade. It struck a security guard in the face rolled back exploded and killed Mr Ezekiel Mokone, a co-member of the ANC and wounded several other people.

The above is a short summary of Mr Mbatha's version of the events on the 25th May 1993 up to the explosion.

After the explosion several members of the ANC were detained. In the end Mr Darlington Nkosinathi Nkohla and Mr Moses Siphon Mbaqa were charged and convicted of the very same offences for which the present applicants now apply for amnesty.

Their convictions were largely based on the evidence of a witness, Mr Thembinkosi Steven Ngoele and a alleged confession of the second mentioned accused Mr Nkohla.

While the above trial was in progress the two applicants in the present amnesty applications approached the legal representatives of the two accused referred to above. Mr Smiles informed them that he was the guilty party and an affidavit was drawn up containing the confession. There was an attempt to hand the affidavit to the police but they declined to accept it and proceeded with the trial. Neither Lawrence Mbatha nor Smiles gave evidence at the trial to contradict the evidence presented by the State. The latter evidence was accepted and the accused Mbaqa and Nkohla were convicted.

The first applicant acted as a member of a known political organisation. According to him he acted as regional commander of M.K. and within the scope of his express or implied authority and that the act was directed against the Bophuthatswana government and the S.A. Police.

It may also be argued that he believed on reasonable grounds that he was acting in the course and scope of his duties and within the scope of his express or implied authority.

It is however clear that the act was not committed in the execution of an order on behalf of or with the approval of his organisation. On the contrary the local leaders of the ANC who he considered to be his seniors gave the assurance to the Peace Committee that the march will be a peaceful event. Furthermore the throwing of the grenade took place while the local chairperson of the ANC Youth League who the applicants regarded as their senior, was asking the marchers to disperse peacefully.

Under the circumstances the first applicant could never have been under the impression that he was acting within the scope of his authority. He was in fact acting contrary to the express undertakings given by his organisation. Any bona fide belief that he was acting within the scope of his authority is further contradicted by his behaviour after the event. He did not report to his seniors about the event, which, if it was carried out within the policy of the organisation, would surely have been approved by them.

In view of the foregoing amnesty is REFUSED to the first applicant. The committee does not find it necessary to deal in detail with the evidence of the first applicant except to put on record that his evidence was not satisfactory on all aspects.

The application of the second applicant remains to be dealt with. This applicant made various statements which was placed before the committee. Viz.:

- (a) His application for amnesty
- (b) An affidavit by him dated the 27th September 1993
- (c) A statement made on the 8th June 1996 to Representatives of The Truth Commission
- (d) A transcription of the evidence given by him before the Human Rights Violation Committee at Kimberley on 12th June 1996.

(e) A further statement by him to representatives of the TRC dated 14 August 1996.

Apart from the foregoing the second applicant's oral evidence before this committee was transcribed and appears on pages 265 - 406 of the record of the amnesty hearing.

This applicant contradicted himself more than he corroborate himself. He was in deed an unreliable witness but at the end of the day the committee still had to answer the question: why would a person admit to an offence that he didn't commit? One could speculate on many possible answers. The committee, however, could not ignore a probable answer which the applicant himself supplied in his statement dated the 8th June 1996 to representatives of the TRC, who we don't believe influenced him in any way.

He started off by saying that he did not attend the meeting at all and only heard on the radio about the hand grenade explosion. He then continues:

"I did not pay attention to the incident at all until I long after was contacted by major Lawrence who asked me to volunteer as the person who threw the hand grenade at the venue.

We were both members of the ANC and I knew him before hand. I joined the ANC Marshall structure in 1990.

Lawrence said it was necessary to have perpetrator or volunteer to this incident, but he never told me specifically why.

He spoke of money and as I had a hard time I agreed. Sometime after I was taken to a lawyer, Rodney Isaacs who had prepared an affidavit where I confessed to be the person who threw the grenade at the venue.

I don't remember what was written in the affidavit and I was just asked to sign it. Afterwards Rodney Isaacs, the lawyer, took me to the police station, but I was kicked out without any interrogation.

The police has never since confronted me with the case.

I have a witness who can testify that I was not on the venue that day, his name is Boy Oliphant. I don't know his address but I can find his house. I never took any further notice of the matter and Major Lawrence never paid me anything".

Smiles tried to explain why he made this statement. He said that he didn't trust the people of the TRC who visited him and requested a statement from him. During his evidence he often explained that he didn't reveal the full truth in his statement of the 27th September 1993 because he didn't want to implicate his leader, Major Lawrence Mbatsha. We find it strange that if he in fact did not trust the representatives of the TRC that he would voluntarily and out of his own accord tender information that would implicate his leader if that information had not element of truth.

On the evidence presented the committee is not satisfied that a full disclosure had been made and which one of Mr Smiles's versions if any reflects the truth.

Amnesty is therefore REFUSED.

We recommend that Mr. Mokone's relatives who fall within the category of victims as defined in the act and Mr Jeanne Nel and Mr. Cassandra be declared victims for the purposes of Act 23 of 1995.

SIGNED AT CAPE TOWN ON THIS THE DAY OF

NGOEPE J

DE JAGER S.C.

KHAMPEPE Ms

New Dilemmas for Sri Lanka: Federalism and Post-war Reconciliation (Institute of South Asian Studies) By
Roshni Kapur and Amit Ranjan
April 16, 2020

Summary

Following his election as president of Sri Lanka in 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa has taken a strong stand against federalism and devolution of powers to protect the unitary structure of the state. In February 2020, the Gotabaya-led government also withdrew from the United Nations (UN) resolution number 30/1 on accountability and reconciliation. This paper examines the reasons for maintaining the unitary state structure and withdrawing from the UN-led resolution. It argues that as the long

time demands of Sri Lankan Tamils for federalism and reconciliation are relegated to the background, their political and social position is unlikely to change.

Introduction

After Gotabaya Rajapaksa from the Sri Lanka Podujana Party (SLPP) was sworn in as the president of Sri Lanka in November 2019, he took a strong position against federalism and devolution of powers to protect the unitary structure of the state, much to the dismay of the Tamil leaders. In fact, his victory at the presidential election last year made a large number of Sri Lankan Tamils and human rights advocates around the world worry about the position of minorities in the country. Gotabaya's role as defence secretary during the last Eelam war (2006-2009) between the Sri Lankan state and the militant group, Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam (LTTE) made him a favourite among the Sinhalese-Buddhist community while giving reasons to many Tamils to worry about their vested interests. The elections and the poll results demonstrated a polarisation along ethno-linguistic and communal lines. While a majority of voters in Sinhala-dominated areas casted their votes in favour of Gotabaya, the minority areas in the North and East overwhelmingly voted for Sajith Premadasa who contested from the United National Party (UNP).

One of the main political groups, the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), a coalition of four Tamil parties in Sri Lanka, has overtly expressed its disappointment with the SLPP's policies. In late 2019, the TNA held meetings with the SLPP and UNP respectively before extending its support to the latter party. While Premadasa did not take a firm stand on the devolution of powers issue, Gotabaya outrightly rejected these demands except for the 13th amendment. The TNA felt that aligning with the UNP would be a more practical choice despite not being fully assured that it would enforce the 13-point plan laid out by the TNA. Gotabaya has argued that the country's unitary status needs to be kept intact because a majority of the population did not support a power-sharing arrangement. He contended that the demands made by the minorities would be met through development and economic equality, a continuation of the development-oriented policies of his brother and former president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa. However, the TNA wanted the Tamil community to have the authority in running its own affairs, including control over the local police and lands. The TNA has demanded a political solution based on a power-sharing arrangement for decades and contended that the Tamil ethnic problem can only be resolved through devolution of powers to the provinces. It has equated democracy with federalism and devolution of powers and maintains that the lack of a political solution to their demands could lead to implications for the country including minorities feeling subordinate citizens.

The first section of this paper explores the United Nations (UN) Human Rights Commission's (UNHRC) co-sponsored 30/1 resolution adopted by the Yahapalana (good governance) government under the leadership of former president Maithripala Sirisena. The second section examines the new administration's reasons for maintaining the unitary state structure and withdrawing from the UN-led resolution.

The UNHRC Resolution on Sri Lanka

In 2015, the unity government (2015-2020) under Sirisena that was elected on its promises of reconciliation, transitional justice, peace, democracy, good governance and anti-corruption adopted the UNHRC's co-sponsored 30/1 resolution. The main sponsors of the resolution were Macedonia, the United Kingdom, Montenegro, Northern Ireland and the United States (US). Although transitional justice has been placed on the state agenda by previous governments, this was the first time the government accepted that human rights violations were committed by the security forces during the civil war. The state agreed to set up a new transitional justice model comprising four pillars, including a truth and reconciliation commission, office of missing persons, reparations office and a special court to prosecute the alleged perpetrators within an 18-month deadline. However, the process of gazetting the laws, operationalising the offices, releasing the reports and implementing the recommendations was delayed. The coalition government also retracted some of its promises, including establishing a hybrid court with the involvement of foreign judges. The high level of enthusiasm and eagerness displayed in the early days of the government's tenure slowly waned away.

The new government under Gotabaya has taken a different stance on reconciliation and accountability by withdrawing from co-sponsoring UNHRC resolution 30/1 in February 2020. The decision was met with a mixed response. While certain sections of the Sinhala-Buddhist constituency welcomed the move, the international community, Tamil diaspora and civil society expressed their disappointment. The TNA has been in favour of implementing the UNHRC resolution, given that it is related to the national question of a power sharing arrangement. While the TNA realised that a full implementation of the UNHRC resolution would not have been probable under the UNP's leadership, there was some hope that Premadasa, unlike Gotabaya, would work with the UN on reconciliation.

The government's decision was taken shortly after the US imposed a travel ban on Sri Lankan army commander Shavendra Silva and his family. The US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, said that its action was in response to credible evidence of Silva's involvement in mass human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings during the final stages of the civil war. Silva was in charge of the 58th Division which was alleged for carrying out human rights violations. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, said that Silva's appointment as the new army chief in August 2019

undermines the country's efforts towards reconciliation, transitional justice and security sector reforms.

Reasons for Withdrawal

There are a number of reasons for the Sri Lankan government's withdrawal from the UNHRC resolution. The government may not want to antagonise its relations with the conservative Sinhala-Buddhist constituency that it has relied on for political vote. This group has resisted the formation of any international accountability mechanism of war crimes for a variety of reasons. First, it felt that this would be tantamount to an attack on the country's 'war heroes'. Hence, the Gotabaya government may want to protect the military from any investigations of alleged war crimes. Second, many alleged perpetrators were holding positions of power and any inquiry against them would jeopardise their careers. Third, international commissions of inquiries tend to be viewed as intrusive in nature that undermine state sovereignty and territorial integrity. As a result, some hardline Sinhala-Buddhist groups have tried to de-legitimise the efforts of these commissions of inquiries. There were occasions when they disrupted workshops that sought to implement the findings of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC).

Second, the Sri Lankan state had reconceptualised the language of reconciliation for its own political mileage. During his tenure as president, Mahinda offered his version of reconciliation through development and reconstruction projects in the North-East. Academic Jonathan Goodhand has termed this the 'victor's peace' that manifested through selective development projects, normalisation of militarisation in the North-East and continuation of the Sinhala-Buddhist spatial-territorial project in the North-East. The government had portrayed connectivity projects, including the rebuilding of roads and bridges, as the most significant aspects of post-war reconstruction and development. This bodes well with the liberal Western aid narrative of opening access to markets that were previously closed off.

Third, the government may not want to be seen as pandering to Tamil nationalists by fully committing to transitional justice and reconciliation processes. Although Tamil nationalists lost their long-standing connection with a consolidated and dominant group when the war came to an end, their ideology has continued to survive through a network of organisations rather than a centralised decision-making body. The Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has emerged as a strong contender in international politics whose demands are compatible with globalised justice efforts. This type of Tamil nationalism has become engrained in the forms of liberal peace engagement in Sri Lanka. The Tamil community has resorted to non-institutional platforms to preserve its identity, notions of nationhood and narratives of persecution and struggle. The Tamil's claim on the Northeast province is based on the notion that they are the traditional landowners of those places when Tamil kingdoms existed in the pre-colonial era. On the other hand, the Sinhalese trace their righteous ownership to the ancient chronicles Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa, resulting in two diametrically opposed historical accounts purported by the Sinhalese and Tamils. While the Sinhalese nationalists' position is based on the dominant colonial discourse of the unitary state structure, Tamil nationalists have rejected the naturalisation of this political system arguing that their right to a separate nation is premised on the idea of a pre-colonial autonomy and ethnic nationhood that they once enjoyed.

The Tamil nationalist identity has manifested through commemorations, social media and even through acts of violence. The annual Maaveerar Naal (Great Heroes Day) that pays homage to those who died during the war glorifies the LTTE by hoisting its flag and displaying pictures of its former leaders. Since 19 May 2009, the last day of the civil war has also been designated by Sri Lankan Tamils as a day to remember those who died in the final phases of the conflict. Although the Sri Lankan government in the post-conflict period has outlawed some elements of these events, the local Tamil community and diaspora has demanded the right to express their sentiments within these memory spaces.

The new government has claimed that it would address accountability and reconciliation issues by establishing a new domestic commission of inquiry. Homegrown mechanisms have been previously set up to investigate disappearances and human rights abuses both during and after the civil war. They were tasked with probing cases that had not been examined by the police or prosecuted by the Attorney General's Department. For instance, the LLRC report published in November 2011 made some recommendations on issues of displaced persons, agricultural issues, resettlement and return of land. Any new domestic mechanism would need to address the issue of disappearances, truth telling, reparations, closure and healing, security sector reform and conflict transformation.

Conclusion

The government's withdrawal from the co-sponsored UN resolution could mount further pressure from the Tamil leaders, Tamil diaspora, civil society and international community to build a political consensus pertaining to the post-war reconciliation and devolution of powers issues. Interestingly, Gotabaya's presidential style is starkly different from that of Mahinda, despite appointing him as the prime minister. Following the first street protest by university students after Gotabaya assumed presidency, he invited the protesters to his office to discuss their issues in a constructive manner. He also accepted a persisting demand by tea plantation workers for a minimum daily salary of 1,000 Sri Lankan rupees (S\$7.60). He has plans to recruit around 3,000 individuals from the Northern areas into the country's police force at the constable and sub-inspector levels. Some have argued that Gotabaya's critics are gradually approving of his policies that stride on meritocracy

rather than sectarianism. It will be intriguing to observe how Gotabaya engages the TNA in the long-term and work closely with them to voluntarily repatriate around 3,000 Sri Lankan refugees staying in India. Despite the more inclusive and democratic approach to his governance, Gotabaya is likely to maintain the country's unitary state structure and oppose any demands to federalism and devolution of powers. The SLPP is hoping to secure a majority at the General Elections that were scheduled for April 2020 has been postponed for the time being. Gotabaya has also ruled out decreasing the president's powers. However, he faces another challenge of maintaining relations with Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalists who want preferential treatment for their community.

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Terrorism

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Piracy

Pirates ignore quarantine, attack four ships in one week (Mexico News Daily)

April 16, 2020

Pirates are not respecting the coronavirus quarantine guidelines and continue to attack ships off the coast of the Mexican state of Tabasco, just as they have done for centuries.

Last week alone, armed pirates assaulted four ships off the coast of Puerto Dos Bocas.

On April 9 at around 10:30 p.m., the offshore supply vessel Remas, located 70 nautical miles offshore and owned by the Italian company Micoperi, was boarded by at least three gun-toting pirates who ordered the crew to stop the ship and scoured the vessel for valuables, injuring two crew members. The incident was recorded by the ship's security cameras.

The 75-meter-long vessel was also attacked in November 2019 by seven armed pirates who attacked in fast boats. One crew member was shot in that incident.

Other vessels under siege by pirates last week in the Gulf of Mexico include the Panamanian pipeline-laying ship Sapura 3500, the Mexican supply ship Remington, and the Vanuatu-flagged Achiever.

The pirate attacks were reported to Mexican port authorities.

The pirates' bounty included crew members' belongings and sophisticated communication and navigation equipment, which is typically sold on the black market.

Pirate crews have also attacked Gulf of Mexico oil platforms to loot equipment.

After a fourfold increase in acts of piracy in the Gulf last year, the Mexican navy established four monitoring zones which will be patrolled through 2024.

The Mexican oil company Pemex operates more than 100 oil platforms in the gulf off the coasts of Campeche and Tabasco where pirate attacks have increased dramatically.

Last year, Mike Vigil, former chief of international operations for the United States Drug Enforcement Administration, called Gulf of Mexico piracy "the wave of the future."

Pirates board containership off Benin, crew held (Seatrade Maritime News) By Marcus Hand

April 20, 2020

Pirates are reported to have attacked the containership Tommi Ritscher off Cotonou, Benin holding eight of the crew hostage.

The Portuguese-flagged boxship was boarded by an unknown number of people from a speedboat at Zone 3 anchorage, Cotonou, according to Dryad Global.

A naval patrol vessel is understood to have approached the Tommi Ritscher after it was boarded and the speedboat fled leaving the pirates onboard. Eight crew are believed to be being held on the vessel while 11 more have sought safety in the citadel, Dryad said.

Crew members are understood to be Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Filipino, and two naval vessels are currently at the scene.

The 2014-built containership is managed Transeste Schiffahrt in Germany, and owned Woollerton Shipping, according to the Equasis database.

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Gender-Based Violence

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Commentary and Perspectives

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WORTH READING

Agency of International Adjudicatory Bodies

Mikkel Jarle Christensen and Mikael Madsen

April 22, 2020

This article contributes a new vocabulary for studying the agency of international adjudicatory bodies, that is, their capacity to take action and make choices. Zooming in from the wider space of international adjudicative bodies, the article takes international courts as its object of inquiry due to the rapid proliferation of such institutions since the 1990s and the powerful position they have in the global governance. To investigate the complex role of agency in and around such international adjudicatory bodies, the article relies primarily on examples from the fields of human rights and international criminal law. Being able to conceptualize agency exercised by international courts in these fields is particularly important: Human rights and international criminal courts have emerged as challengers of state power and interests. Using these courts as examples, but underlining also broader dynamics of power relevant in other fields, the article highlights how the social and political context in which international adjudicatory bodies are situated helps structure their agency and ability to affect change.

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