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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

CENTRAL AFRICA

Central African Republic

**Official Website of the International Criminal Court
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World Leader React to Conflict Scarred Countries in Africa (Ventures Africa) By Herdrine Katche
February 15, 2019

The United Nations has asked authorities in the Central African Republic (CAR) to take action following alleged torture cases by Russian soldiers or mercenaries in the country. This comes after an investigation over allegations of torturing and abusing Mahamat Nour Mamadou for days.

According to a report that was seen by AFP, the victim, Mahamat Nour Mamadou, told UN investigators that he was held by a group of Russians in the central city of Bambari last month on suspicion of belonging to an armed militia. He said he was severely beaten and had a finger cut off.

Vannina Maestracci, a spokeswoman for UN said based on statements and physical evidence, the UN can confirm that the victim has been ill-treated and tortured.

She added that “this mission has informed officially the relevant Central African authorities and shared all supporting documents requesting follow-up action,” The UN does not have authority to arrest individuals in a country where it has peacekeepers and has turned to Bangui to ensure the perpetrators of the serious crime are held responsible. UN says Mamadou was released through the intervention of Internal Security Forces (FSI). Russia’s influence in CAR has been growing since the UN-backed government there called for help to fight militias rampaging through the country.

Moscow has already supplied weapons, military officers, at least 170 military “trainers” and a security adviser to work with president Faustin-Archange Touader. According to reports in Russian and Western media, the military trainers are mercenaries with close ties to Russian mining companies and the numbers deployed could be significantly higher than officially reported.

Last month, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian criticized the presence of Russian mercenaries in CAR from the private military company Wagner. Three Russian journalists who were investigating the Wagner group were ambushed and murdered in CAR last year.

A peace agreement between the government of CAR and 14 armed groups was agreed earlier this month in a bid to bring peace to the unstable country. As of now, it is not clear whether the Russians were part of the private military outfit Wagner, with the UN describing the suspected torturers as “non-UN uniformed individuals of Russian Nationality”

CAR is not the only country that has attracted international attention over government-sanctioned torture. Last week the US reacted to credible allegations that the Cameroon government carried out human rights violation in the country. US is Cameroon’s most allied security partner, with about 300 US troops stationed there to train and assist the Cameroonian military in its fight against extremism in its far northern region.

However, following reports on the ongoing crisis with the English-speaking separatists called Ambazonia, and the protesting opposition leader, Cameroon has been accused of using security and military equipment donated by the US to fight civilians. Following the allegations, the US announced that it would withdraw its military support to the country.

Besides the US, other countries that Cameroon counts on, including Israel, France, Germany, and China have also shown a strong reaction to the allegations in the country.

France also reacted to the allegations against the country, calling on the Cameroonian government to respect the rights of the people to freely express their opinions. As seen in a Q&A daily press briefing, the French Foreign Ministry said “We are concerned at this legal development and are continuing to follow the situation of Mr Kamto and that of approximately 200 of his supporters who are being held in detention. The Cameroonian opposition, of which Mr Kamto is a leading figure, must be able to freely express its opinions, in accordance with the law,” Kamto was on Wednesday charged with ‘rebellion’ by a military tribunal. Twenty-two members of his Cameroon Renaissance Movement (MRC) are also on trial for the same charges, lawyers said.

Government-sanctioned torture is common in countries with a record of violent opposition groups, activists, or rebellion from popular armed groups and terrorism. Cameroon, which has been criticised of having an authoritarian system, where Paul Biya, the president has been in power since 1982 is an example. CAR and Cameroon have recorded a high rate of violence in the past few years.

It usually takes an intervention from world powers and the UN, US and France to placate extreme approaches made by these governments to fight extremism; like some “fire for fire” approach. These accusations against Russia in the CAR renew concerns for its growing presence in Africa, especially because its presence in CAR was facilitated by the country’s government.

It remains to be seen if the CAR government would take action regarding the torture accusations, but one thing is certain: oppressive governments on the continent have no qualms about hurting their citizens, and usually stop when they are prevailed upon by western powers.

Unprotected: Report on Violence and Lack of Protection for Civilians in CAR (MSF) February 19, 2019

For six years the people of Central African Republic (CAR) have had little respite from conflict. The horrific consequences of the ongoing violence have been witnessed by teams from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). In recent months, armed groups have deliberately targeted civilians in towns such as Batangafo, Alindao and Ippy, where MSF has assisted the victims of the violence.

MSF has published the results of our investigation into the attacks against civilians that took place in November 2018 in the town of Batangafo, northern CAR, where we have run a hospital for the past 12 years. Fifteen people died and 29 were injured in the attack; houses were set on fire and destroyed. More than 20,000 people were displaced from camps for displaced people. Some of MSF’s hospital services were disrupted after more than 10,000 people sought refuge inside the hospital compound.

Our report, *Unprotected: Summary of internal review on the events of 31 October in Batangafo, Central African Republic*, describes the events of November 2018, the consequences of the events, and the lack of protection afforded to civilians. It highlights the violence perpetrated by armed groups targeting civilians and the ineffectiveness of the UN’s peacekeeping mission in CAR, known as MINUSCA. The UN peacekeepers deployed to Batangafo were unable to prevent the attacks, resulting in death and displacement. “MINUSCA was responsible for protecting civilians,” says MSF head of mission Omar Ahmed Abenza. “However, they were unable to do this.”

In the course of the violence, our hospital itself came under threat, preventing the sick and injured from accessing our services.

“The hospital was threatened and accused by the armed groups of sheltering ‘enemies’,” says Ahmed Abenza. “Armed men and roadblocks were placed all around the town, blocking access to the hospital for many in need. This shows an unacceptable lack of respect to the medical mission as stipulated in international humanitarian law.”

The series of recent attacks against civilians in Batangafo, Alindao and Ippy are indicative of the highly volatile nature of the conflict and the lack of protection afforded to civilians. MSF is extremely concerned about the consequences of the violence on people’s ability to access healthcare. Many people in need are unable to get treatment for common but preventable diseases such as malaria, to give birth safely in a hospital, or to access other basic health services. “Most of the victims of the violence are ordinary people,” says Ahmed Abenza. “Civilians in Batangafo have been left with no effective protection.

The Central African Republic’s New Peace Deal Is a Small Step in the Right Direction (World Politics Review) By Marcel Plichta
February 20, 2019

After seven years of war, the Central African Republic has taken a shaky step toward peace. The United Nations announced in early February that the Central African government and 14 armed groups had agreed to a draft peace accord after 10 days of negotiations in Khartoum. The deal is a promising first step, but the drivers of conflict in CAR need to be addressed for a lasting peace to take hold, as competition for natural resources, ongoing ethnic disputes and, to some extent, religious cleavages, have all complicated past peace efforts./p>

The agreement, provisionally signed on Feb. 6, calls for the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission within 90 days and “joint security patrols” between the Central African Armed Forces and rebel groups for 24 months to facilitate reintegration. There is also a provision in which rebel leaders will be able to form political parties after disbanding their armed groups.

There is much to celebrate about the accord. Unlike other failed efforts, this is the first deal to emerge from direct dialogue among all the warring parties. Getting so many armed groups to the table and reaching an agreement are significant milestones, and many of the stakeholders seem genuinely interested in implementing the framework. The fact that the accord includes significant concessions made on all sides is a sign of how comprehensive it is.

Yet while many elements of the accord are welcome efforts to provide peace, justice and stability to CAR, this isn’t the country’s first peace deal. After the 2013 coup that toppled then-President Francois Bozize and brought Seleka rebel leader Michel Djotodia briefly to power, there were seven subsequent peace efforts, including a Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process, known as DDR, and the recent formation of a Special Criminal Court. Since then, the court has languished without a single conviction, and most fighters have not gone through the DDR process. Meanwhile, most armed groups abandoned past agreements and newer armed groups, including “Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation” or 3R, were never made parties to them in the first place.

February’s breakthrough comes with the possibility that the U.N. Security Council may lift the country’s long-standing arms embargo. The arms restriction has not reduced violence in CAR, and it forced the Central African government to rely on France and Russia to secure weapons while armed groups continued to acquire theirs illegally. The issue has been contentious in CAR, with public demonstrations in the capital, Bangui, calling for the embargo to be lifted. The embargo was recently renewed, but the Security Council may reconsider if the new framework holds.

There are some causes for concern, though. The peace agreement’s enforceability is questionable without significant international support and absolute compliance from armed groups. Bringing rebels into joint security patrols could quickly integrate fighters into the armed forces, but it may also legitimize them if they continue to exploit populations and resources despite some degree of oversight from Bangui. Parts of the deal centering on “decentralizing” the government may also limit the government’s ability to oversee and clamp down on any potential violations of the accord.

Competition within and among armed groups is another threat. Militias in CAR often form alliances and coalitions, such as the Seleka that overran Bangui and ousted the government in 2013, but these alliances shift and fracture. Within the groups themselves, a deal with their own leadership does not guarantee that their forces will comply. Major aspects of the accord center on the immediate halt to resource exploitation and the intention to eventually begin redistributing wealth from the country’s resource-rich provinces—for minerals like gold, uranium and diamonds—to poorer areas. Should the interests of rebel leaders and their fighters diverge too much, the fighters may continue seeking wealth and power at the expense of the peace process. In the midst of the recent negotiations, fighters from one powerful former Seleka faction, the Union for Peace in the Central African Republic, or UPC, and other groups talking with the government attacked civilians and peacekeepers, killing at least 18 people. Expecting rebel fighters to cooperate with the Central African military and international peacekeeping missions may be overly optimistic for both sides given the years of conflict between them and the recent clashes.

Beyond the armed groups, the deal may also be unsavory for the general population. While amnesty is not explicitly mentioned, Central Africans may reject rebel leaders entering the government and political institutions without a democratic mandate. Suspicious of these terms, human rights organizations such as the Civil Society Working Group on the Central African Crisis called for mass protests against the accord in early February.

Even if the rebel leadership successfully transitions into the government, balancing rebel political participation with the mandates of the DDR process, the Special Criminal Court, the International Criminal Court in the Hague and the to-be-formed Truth and Reconciliation Commission will be a challenge, to say the least. A number of prominent rebel leaders, such as Nouredine Adam, are under international sanctions. While President Faustin-Archange Touadera, in power since 2016, has successfully resisted granting blanket amnesty to rebel groups, bringing the major players into the government and transitional institutions will still give them some degree of immunity from prosecution.

There is also the risk that foreign interests could act as spoilers to the peace process. France, Russia and China have all had

recent dealings with the Central African government to extract natural resources. While France and China have been much more focused on CAR's economic prospects, Russia may have an interest in keeping the government reliant on its military assistance. Moscow has reached out directly to rebel groups and struck deals with the government in Bangui to trade security cooperation for resource concessions. If Russia and other powers prize their economic and political influence over peace and justice, the beleaguered.

Central African government may be left without strong international partners as it struggles to fulfill its end of the agreement.

Then there's the issue of Sudan, which sponsored the peace talks, even though it has previously been an obstacle to peace in CAR. Sudanese armed groups that back President Omar al-Bashir have repeatedly crossed the border to engage in wildlife poaching, while Bashir's government shipped weapons to rebels in 2014. Khartoum's alignment with Russia has reportedly given Russian private military contractors and officials access to the northern parts of CAR through the Sudanese border. Further complicating matters, Sudan's own current unrest may make the government—and the many Sudanese paramilitary groups that it supports—unpredictable in the short term.

With stability in CAR so elusive, this new peace deal, while promising, must diverge from prior efforts by comprehensively addressing the local drivers of conflict in the country—and by keeping the agendas of external actors in check. Only then may an end to this seven-year conflict be in sight.

Situation in CAR remains serious, UN envoy warns (Xinhua) February 21, 2019

A senior envoy told the United Nations Security Council Thursday that the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) remains serious despite the recent signing of a peace deal.

"The signing of the Global Agreement for Peace and National Reconciliation on Feb. 6 is the culmination of a long process," said Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and head of the UN mission in the CAR.

The global peace agreement, signed by the CAR Government and 14 armed groups in Bangui on Feb. 6, was the major focus of the day's meeting.

In his final briefing to the Security Council, Onanga-Anyanga said that "Central Africans have come a long way, and despite numerous challenges...they deserve our admiration and encouragement."

Since conflict began in the CAR in 2012, due to fighting between the mostly Christian anti-Balaka militia and the mainly Muslim Seleka rebel coalition, thousands of civilians have been killed and two out of three people in the small Central African nation have become dependent on humanitarian aid.

"While we are right to welcome the fact that our multifaceted efforts have allowed this important political advance in the Central African Republic, we must remain vigilant because the situation remains serious," said the UN envoy, adding that "the unbearable fate of displaced people and refugees, as well as scenes of senseless violence and the many victims (are a nagging reminder) of this."

Onanga-Anyanga stressed that the signing of the peace deal was a "necessary and decisive step, certainly, but only one step. The hardest thing is indeed to come. The real test will be in the full and good faith implementation of the agreement," he said.

With that in mind, he called on all stakeholders to scrupulously honor the commitments they have made under the agreement and not to betray the confidence placed in them by the Central African people and all those who accompanied them in throughout the peace process.

"The country today has the opportunity to open a new page full of promise and that turns its back, definitely, to a painful story," said Onanga-Anyanga, and he urged the parties to always pursue dialogue to sustain the new political and social consensus put forward by the Feb. 6 agreement.

Onanga-Anyanga said that the support of the Security Council, the countries of the region and the wider international community remain essential for the successful implementation of the peace agreement.

Heading up the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) since August 2015, Onanga-Anyanga will be succeeded by Mankeur Ndiaye of Senegal.

Unidentified Armed Men Attacked UN Mission In Central African Republic On Tues - Spokesman (Urdu Point)

By Faizan Hashmi

February 22, 2019

Unidentified armed men opened fire against peacekeepers of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic(MINUSCA), earlier this week, the mission's spokesman, Vladimir Monteiro, told Sputnik on Friday, adding that the "blue helmets", the name given to these peacekeepers, had repelled the attack.

On February 19, armed individuals on motorcycles opened fire at the "blue helmets" of MINUSCA on the Bambari-Alindao motorway.

They [the peacekeepers] returned fire, which resulted in the attackers' death," Monteiro said.

MINUSCA was established by the UN Security Council on April 10, 2014, to address the existing security challenges in the African nation, which has been plagued by decades of instability and fighting.

The mission currently comprises 13,595 uniformed personnel, including 10,768 troops, 153 military observers, 292 staff officers and 2,050 police officers, according to its official website.

CAR Gov't, Armed Groups Commit To Ending Recruitment In Armed Formations Under Peace Deal (Urdu Point) By Sumaira FH

February 24, 2019

The government of the Central African Republic (CAR) and armed formations, which have recently signed a peace deal to end the armed conflict in the country, have pledged to refrain from recruiting people, in particular minors and foreigners, into armed formations, according to the text of the agreement seen by Sputnik on Sunday.

"The parties reaffirm their commitments to ...immediately put an end to all forms of recruitment, including that of children and foreigners, into armed groups," the text said.

The parties also agreed to give up illegal exploitation of natural resources and illicit traffic of arms and munitions, and committed to not hindering the free circulation of people and goods and the deliveries of humanitarian aid.

The long-sought peace accord was signed in the CAR capital of Bangui in early February.

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Sudan & South Sudan

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

South Sudan's war: a relentless litany of almost unimaginable horrors (The Guardian) By Peter

Beaumont

February 25, 2019

There are wars that seem to slip under the wire almost unnoticed – where human rights abuses are rife and you would expect them to command far greater global attention.

Last week's UN report into South Sudan is a case in point. An almost endless litany of human rights abuses, its 200-plus pages make for the most dismal reading, a portrait of the world's youngest state as one of the latest additions to the category of failed state.

Despite the most recent attempts at a ceasefire and political accommodation with the multiplying warring parties fighting for control of the new nation's resources – not least its oil reserves – the report, for the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, depicts routine and continuing abuses that may amount to serious war crimes.

The stark figures on conflict insecurity are bad enough: 60% of the population experience food insecurity, while a population of just over 12 million people includes 2.2 million refugees and 1.9 million internally displaced.

One of the world's worst humanitarian crises, South Sudan will need \$1.5bn (£1.1bn) in aid for citizens still inside the country and \$2.7bn for its refugees, says the UN. In some areas, 65% of women and 36% of men may have been sexually abused, according to the report.

South Sudan has also become the most lethal place for humanitarian workers, with 14 killed in the country last year.

But it is in the granular detail that the horror of South Sudan, eight years after independence, emerges. Stories of the most gross violations of human rights appear on almost every page, associated with conflict in places like the Equatorias and Unity State, which have long been a focus of violence.

"There is a confirmed pattern of how combatants attack villages, plunder homes, take women as sexual slaves and then set homes alight – often with people in them," said commission chair Yasmin Sooka in a statement about the report's findings.

"Rapes, gang rapes, sexual mutilation, abductions and sexual slavery, as well as killings, have become commonplace in South Sudan."

Dark even as that summary sounds, it does not come close to depicting a reality where – as the report suggests – a quarter of victims of sexual violence, used by all sides to sow terror, are children as young as seven. Children are also increasingly being recruited by the warring parties as soldiers.

The report tells of people being held for years and tortured in secret, vermin-ridden detention centres; of people hacked to death, children run down by tanks, babies being drowned, starved or smashed against trees.

During a visit to South Sudan last year, I interviewed victims of human rights abuses, including those fleeing from recent fighting in Unity province who had taken shelter in the vast expanse of marshes around Nyal.

The tales those survivors told were horrific, but the details collected by the UN commission's members, and the sheer scale of the human rights violations listed, eclipse by far those stories.

"There is no doubt that these crimes are persistent because impunity is so entrenched in South Sudan that every kind of norm is broken, even raping and killing the young and the elderly," said commission member Andrew Clapham at a news conference in Geneva on Wednesday.

The commission added that the army, national security, military intelligence, rebel forces and affiliated armed groups had committed serious human rights breaches, and said it had drawn up a confidential list of suspects that included army and opposition commanders, two state governors and a county commissioner.

Although South Sudan's main warring parties signed a peace deal in September, widespread violence, especially rape, has continued.

Describing rapes committed during the fighting in Unity state last spring, the report said: "One witness recalled that: 'They even raped one woman who had just delivered a baby. I understand that her baby was one to two months old. They even raped girls aged between seven to 10 years old. The soldiers rammed a piece of wood into the vagina of one woman after they had raped her. They hung dead bodies from trees – both men and women.'

"Some women died as a result of being raped, while one witness recounted how a newly wed young woman was shot and killed because she refused to be gang-raped."

It is not only in the fighting in the countryside that appalling abuses have taken place. The commission described accounts of prisoners being killed by security forces in and around the capital Juba's notorious Blue House security headquarters.

One witness described killings at a site near Yei where detainees were being held in containers.

"When they want to kill you, they take you out of the container. There is one excavator who will dig a big hole. The militaries will take the first five in the line and instruct them to line in front of the hole.

"A group of militaries with guns will line in front of them and start shooting, some other militaries will use panga – it's a machete – and hit, cut people. So, they all fall into the hole. Some fell alive before being hit by panga. Then the militaries gave order to the excavator to close the hole. Some people were buried alive. I saw that several times."

If there is one faint glimmer of hope in all this, it is that the report represents the first step in a process that may culminate

with war crimes prosecutions. The commission announced it would continue to build on its findings.

“This evidence may be used beyond South Sudanese bodies – it may be available on request to regional and state parties for future prosecutions,” said Commissioner Barney Afako. “With sustained political will and effective leadership, the transitional justice framework and mechanisms can help to bring accountability, reconciliation and healing as South Sudanese deal with the past and secure their future stability and prosperity.”

South Sudan’s armed groups commit to end violations against children (Relief Web) By Beatrice

Mategwa

February 25, 2019

An unusual gathering in Juba, and an unusual dose of honesty.

“We cannot deny that we use children in our forces,” said Major General Charles Machieng Kuol from the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) at the gathering – of mainly officers from different military groups in South Sudan, and other stakeholders.

They had come together – at a three-day workshop – to discuss the final draft of what would become a Comprehensive Action Plan aimed at preventing violations against children in armed conflict.

“Now that the peace is here, we need to work together as peace partners and stop using children,” said Lam Puol Gabriel from SPLM-IO. “Today we are here to put a stop to that suffering,” he added.

“Not only have children’s rights been violated ... all rights are under threat,” said a representative of the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF). “The primary role of the army is to protect children in both times of peace and war time. It is a constitutional right for the army to perform these duties,” said the SSPDF representative.

South Sudan finds itself on the unenviable list of countries regarded as persistent perpetrators of grave violations against children, in the annexes of the report of the United Nations Secretary-General on children and armed conflict.

At the workshop, the military officers expressed a shared desire to help delist their country from this list.

“We are gathered here to open a new page where South Sudan will be respected,” said Bangasi Joseph Bakasoro of the opposition alliance (SSOA). “Let us move together with our brothers and sisters in different countries to make sure that we are respected as a family of the global world; respecting the rule of law, respecting human rights and respecting the rights of children to demobilize them in all our ranks,” urged Mr. Bakasoro, while acknowledging that “crimes and mistakes” had been committed against children and humanitarian agencies.

“The children of South Sudan need peace and they need freedom,” said Alfred Orono Orono, Chief of Child Protection at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), which helped organize the workshop.

“They need to be secure, like all the children in the whole world, doing things that children do,” added the senior child protection officer, passionately listing other things children should be doing.

“They need to go back to school, they need to be productive members of their community in the future, and that cannot be done within conflict; and that cannot be done if they are part of the armed forces,” he went on, “Or if their schools are attacked or destroyed – if they are denied the humanitarian access. All these things cannot happen – the future of the children in this country cannot happen with that background,” he said.

Mr. Orono Orono was essentially considering the six grave violations against children, which continue to be committed in South Sudan following years of conflict: recruitment and use of children; killing and maiming; rape and other forms of sexual violence; abduction and attacks on schools and hospitals; and denial of humanitarian access.

“The most important thing is that it meets the international standards,” he added, saying that this was “the first time anywhere in the world that an Action Plan that has all the six grave violations has been drafted and is going to be adapted.”

The government expressed its commitment to ensuring an end to these violations, with a robust plan to implement the Action Plan, including by integrating it in the military training curriculum.

“When the army is being trained at the training centres, they should be given this part of the act,” said Kuol Manyang Juuk, South Sudan’s defence minister to journalists.

“In the military colleges, also this should be one of the subjects to be taught so everybody becomes responsible in the protection of children. So, we will commit ourselves to doing it,” said the minister, who said this will be rolled out as soon as

the document is approved by the government, promising it “will be implemented in letter and spirit.”

An initial Action Plan was signed on in 2009 by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) now the SSPDF, revised in 2012 and recommitted to in 2014, but efforts to implement it were interrupted by the civil war that erupted in 2016.

“Unicef is very happy with the level of engagement and collaboration. We are now very hopeful that it will now be ratified by the and endorsed by the government and the parties. Ultimately, this is the Action Plan of the government of South Sudan and the parties,” said Andrea Suley from Unicef – the UN children’s fund.

“They have all committed to work together to make sure that we prevent children from being committed and being used in armed forces. Now this will require tremendous amount of commitment and work from all the players,” said Alain Noudehou, UNMISS Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator in South Sudan.

“The plan was not easy to come up. They have worked tirelessly and have come to a commitment and agreement – and the work moving forward, will be tough, but I recognize that because we have leadership of all these entities assembled in this room and committed to it, it will be very important that they stay the course so that the implementation of the Action Plan is actually fruitful,” said Noudehou

U.S. Congress members voice concern over Sudan’s state of emergency, call to maintain sanctions (The Sudan Tribune) February 26, 2019

Two influential Congress members expressed concern about the imposition of a year-long state of emergency in Sudan as the head of the House human right commission called to maintain its name on the terror list.

Congressman James P. McGovern Chairman of the House Rules Committee and Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and Congresswomen Karen Bass Chair of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa, condemned in two separate statements the declaration of the state of emergency in Sudan on 22 February.

"These emerging events are very concerning. Security forces will have greater powers and I am concerned that this could lead to an increasing crackdown on civilians including more arrests, holding protesters in detention for longer without access to lawyers, and even deaths," said Bass.

She stressed the U.S. support for "the Sudanese people’s desire for democratic, representative governance and the freedom to exercise their civil liberties". Further, she called on the Sudanese government to respect human rights, to end arbitrary detention and the excessive use of violence against protesters.

For his part, McGovern recalled that al-Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, supported extremist groups, repressed religious minorities and impoverished Sudanese for the benefit of " few wealthy and connected insiders".

He further mentioned his disappointment when President Donald Trump in October 2017 decided the lift of economic sanctions on Sudan pointing out to the poor humanitarian access to all regions of Sudan.

"Given the courageous protests now taking place inside in Sudan, it would be unconscionable for the Trump Administration to remove Sudan from the State Sponsor of Terrorism list or provide Khartoum with economic support or additional sanctions relief," said McGovern.

Last week, Special Assistant to the U.S. President and Senior Director for Africa at the National Security Council (NSC), Cyril Sartor, paid a 4-day visit to Khartoum for talks with the Sudanese officials on the second phase of the Sudanese-American process to normalize bilateral relations, including Sudan’s designation a state sponsor of terror.

Before to leave Sudan on 20 February, Sartor warned that the violent crackdown on protesters threatens Sudan’s removal from the list of countries sponsoring terrorism.

"We have been quite clear, quite explicit ... with all the government leaders that I have met with that the current conditions in Sudan and the overreaction of the security forces, in particular, put the talks (on the Sudan removal from the terror list) at risk," he told the AFP.

3 ways Trump administration could show US cares about South Sudan (The Hill) By Amir Idris February 26, 2019

In May 2018, the White House announced it would begin reviewing U.S. assistance to South Sudan to ensure that funds do not prolong the civil war, or enable

predatory or corrupt behavior. Then, in December, the national security adviser John Bolton announced the administration's new Africa policy. In his statement, Bolton labeled South Sudan's leaders as "morally bankrupt," noting they prolong "horrific violence and immense human suffering."

Yet the administration has neither released the outcome of its review, nor outlined a policy to address the ongoing man-made crisis in South Sudan. The delay or failure to make public this information begs the following questions: Does the United States still care about South Sudan? If so, where is the policy?

Nearly six months after South Sudan's main foes, President Salva Kiir and rebel chief Riek Machar, signed a "peace agreement," South Sudan continues to bleed from a civil war. The United Nations reported it has documented that at least 134 women and girls were raped, and 41 suffered other forms of sexual and physical violence, including victims as young as 8 years old. The UN report indicated these horrific atrocities were committed by armed forces.

In recent weeks, fierce fighting broke out in Yei in the Equatoria region between a combined force of the government and Machar, aided by Ugandan troops, and the National Salvation Front led by Thomas Cirillo Swaka, who is one of the non-signatories to the agreement. The UN Refugee Agency reports the fighting has displaced 8,000 civilians, forcing an estimated 5,000 to flee into the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Many of South Sudan's woes are not new. Since its independence in 2011, South Sudan has not been able to transition to a state and a nation. The peace deal was expected to end the war and engender reforms. Its avowed purpose, however, was to legitimize the government, secure Sudan's and Uganda's economic interests, and silence opposition voices — in particular, those who are raising concerns about the credibility of the agreement and the leaders' fitness to lead.

The United States and its allies — the United Kingdom and Norway — have expressed alarm at the escalating conflict but, for justifiable reasons, have refused to support a peace agreement that had no chance of succeeding. But naming the perpetrators of the conflict, labeling them as morally bankrupt, and withholding funding are not tantamount to an effective policy in the long term. In fact, the U.S. disengagement heightens suffering for the people of South Sudan.

The absence of a U.S. policy regarding South Sudan has created a vacuum that other regional or international actors cannot fill. The East African region is divided, consumed with economic and security crises. The permanent members of the UN Security Council — in particular, China and Russia — are complicit in perpetuating the conflict by aiding South Sudan's government. In addition, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan seems unable to fulfill its mandate to protect civilians.

Hence, the United States must take an active role in seeking a permanent solution to the crisis — beyond the strategy of "African solutions for African problems" adopted by the African Union and the United Nations approach of crisis management. Such failed policy positions embolden South Sudan's political and military elites to tighten their grip on power, while using the country's valuable national resources to protect themselves from domestic and international pressure to seek genuine political reform.

The Trump administration could take three steps immediately to prevent South Sudan from fragmenting into warring ethnic enclaves:

First, publicly release the outcome of the review of U.S. assistance to the country.

Second, outline a substantive policy position on South Sudan that takes into account the important issues of democracy, political and civil rights, and leadership transition.

Third, move quickly to appoint a special envoy with a clear mandate to engage the region, the international community, and South Sudanese actors in a political process that leads to a credible, inclusive peace agreement, an interim government with new leadership, and a plan for South Sudan to become a viable state and a nation.

Ultimately, such a process would safeguard U.S. strategic interests in the region.

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[Democratic Republic of the Congo](#)

DR Congo leader calls for 'better armed' UN peacekeepers (Yahoo News) February 15, 2019

DR Congo's new President Felix Tshisekedi called Friday for a "better armed" UN peacekeeping force in the troubled country, in his first formal meeting with foreign diplomats after taking power.

Tshisekedi also called for "healthy cooperation" with Europe, following tensions during the latter half of his predecessor Joseph Kabila's 18-year rule.

He said the Democratic Republic of Congo wanted to work jointly with the UN to draw up a withdrawal plan for the MONUSCO peacekeeping mission, one of the biggest in the world which has been present in DRC for 20 years.

In the meantime, its troops "should be reduced and better armed and prepared" to fight the numerous rebel and militia groups which hold sway over large areas of the country, he said.

On December 27, DR Congo expelled the European Union's head of mission, Bart Ouvry, a Belgian national, after the 28-nation bloc reimposed sanctions on 14 officials over a brutal crackdown on protests during Kabila's rule.

Tshisekedi said he wanted a mutual exchange of ambassadors "as soon as possible," but underscored Kinshasa would "protect its political independence... and sovereignty."

Congo Ebola center set on fire after armed attack (Reuters) February 27, 2019

Armed assailants attacked an Ebola treatment center in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on Wednesday, setting off a fire and becoming embroiled in an extended gunbattle with security forces, health officials said.

The identity and motive of the assailants were unclear. Aid workers have faced mistrust in some areas as they work to contain an Ebola outbreak.

Dozens of armed militia also regularly attack civilians and security forces in eastern Congo's borderlands with Uganda and Rwanda, which has significantly hampered the response to the disease.

The health ministry said in a statement that 38 suspected Ebola patients and 12 confirmed cases were in the center at the time of the attack. Four of the patients with confirmed cases fled and are being looked for, it said.

UN, ICRC Address Sexual, Gender-Based Violence in Conflict Situations (New Delhi Times) February 27, 2019

Heads of the United Nations and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement are pledging more action to prevent and end sexual and gender-based violence during conflicts. In Geneva, two humanitarian groups announced they have launched an effort to end the use of rape as a weapon of war./p>

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says he has met many victims of rape and brutal sexual violence in war zones from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the former Yugoslavia. Guterres says he has heard firsthand accounts from Rohingya refugees who were gang-raped while trying to escape violence in Myanmar.

He says the place and circumstance of the abuse may differ, but the pain and trauma remain the same.

"Let me be clear. Sexual and gender-based violence in conflict is not only a horrendous and life-changing crime, most often perpetrated against women and girls," Guterres said. "It is also used as a tactic of war, to terrorize families, dehumanize communities and destabilize societies, so that they struggle to recover for years or even decades after the guns fall silent."

Guterres says sexual and gender-based violence in conflict is now widely recognized as a war crime that is preventable and punishable.

Congolese human rights activist Julienne Lusenge is president of the group Sofepadi and the director of the Congolese Women's Fund. For her, the suffering endured by women and young girls who have been violated by men at war is an every day personal matter.

“During this month of February, our medical center Karibuni Wa Mama a Bunia received in one week 28 children who were victims of serious sexual offenses, including a baby of two years,” she said. “We continue to see women who have been captives held by various different armed groups in our regional offices.”

Not only are these women used as sex slaves, but she says they also are victims of forced marriages, forced labor, physical and psychological violence, and inhuman and degrading treatment.

Lusenge says her organization provides survivors of these atrocities medical, psychological and legal support. She says in the past 20 years her group has been organizing socio-economic rehabilitation for victims. She says the communities as a whole — traditional leaders, young people, and survivors themselves are involved in this struggle.

“Women come to us as victims, but they go home as agents of change,” Lusenge said. “Once they have been instructed on their rights and on the laws, which punish sexual violence, they join the fight at our side.”

The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, says sexual violence too often is accepted as an inevitable by-product of war. He says this must end. He says the law is clear that rape and other forms of sexual violence are a violation and those guilty of these crimes must be held accountable and punished.

Maurer says the ICRC will do more on behalf of victims.

“Today, the International Committee of the Red Cross is launching an appeal of \$27 million to help us better respond to sexual violence in 14 key countries, including expanded services in Colombia, improved responses in Syria and new services in Central African Republic,” he said. “For the first time, we will place dedicated specialists in six countries this year to increase the field coordination and response of the ICRC.”

Among its many recommendations, the U.N. and ICRC are urging governments to ensure survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict receive adequate protection. They are calling for measures to protect detainees from sexual abuse. They also say governments must provide training for police and armed forces to prevent these atrocities from occurring.

They agree with Julienne Lusenge, who says it is time to stop using women’s bodies as battlefields.

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

Airstrikes and "stability": What's the French army doing in Chad? (African Arguments) By Marielle Debos
February 14, 2019

Between 3 and 6 February, the French army launched airstrikes against a rebel convoy in Chad. The intervention came at the request of Chadian authorities, who welcomed France’s cooperation and the “neutralisation” of the fighters.

Considering the long history of French involvement in its former African colonies, there is nothing exceptional about these strikes. In fact, Chad has experienced more French military interventions since independence than any other African country.

But the justifications for France's presence and the military techniques have changed recently in important ways.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the former colonial power waged a counter-insurgency war against the Chad National Liberation Front (Frolinat). In 1986, France then established Operation Epervier (Sparrow hawk) to contain Libyan expansionism. Chadian dictator Hissène Habré – who was sentenced in 2017 for war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture – was a key ally of France and the US against Gaddafi.

Then as now, France supported the existing regime in the name of “stability”, and over the decades, France's military presence has allowed it to prop up subsequent regimes in Chad. They first supported Habré before switching allegiance to Idriss Déby who has been president since seizing power with French support in 1990.

Since then, Déby has faced several serious rebellions. In both April 2006 and February 2008, rebels even managed to reach the capital N'Djamena. France's support at these times was more discreet than today. It involved sharing intelligence with the Chadian army, “shows of force” (low-level flight over the rebel column) and warning shots. In 2008, it also included facilitating the supply of ammunition from Libya and protecting the capital's airport.

In 2019, however, the French approach has changed significantly. They are no longer content to create conditions favourable to a victory for the Chadian army: they launch airstrikes against rebels themselves.

Fighting terrorists or political rebels?

France's Operation Epervier remained active despite the resolution of the Chad-Libya conflict and the end of the Cold War until it was replaced in August 2014 by Operation Barkhane. This new French initiative absorbed Epervier in Chad and Operation Serval in Mali. With approximately 4,500 soldiers deployed in five Sahelian countries, Barkhane is currently the largest French deployment abroad.

Barkhane's objective is to support the “war on terror” in the Sahel and Sahara. However, its most recent targets have been rebels attempting to seize power in N'Djamena. These Chadian fighters are far from nice democrats. They use the rhetoric of democracy and change, but many were close to Déby before their defection. Timan Erdimi, leader of the Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), who happens to be the president's cousin, was a pillar of the regime until he joined the rebellion in 2004.

Whatever we think of their past and current politics, however, the UFR has little to do with the jihadist armed groups in the Sahel and Lake Chad basin that France is purportedly in the region to combat. Chadian rebels, who found refuge in Libya and made alliances with other armed groups there and in Sudan, are driven by politics not ideology.

From a legal point of view, France's February intervention falls within the framework of a military cooperation agreement dating back to 1976 since when it has been interpreted excessively broadly. But unless we believe that anything that helps Déby is part of the fight against terrorism, there is little connection between France's February airstrikes and Barkhane's *raison d'être*.

Supporting Déby at all costs

Chadian authorities have strategically instrumentalised the “war on terror” by rebranding rebels as “mercenaries and terrorists“. Since its army's intervention alongside the French in Mali in 2013, Déby has also played up the military diplomacy card and made himself indispensable to Western allies. As a result, the conflict-ridden country has acquired the status of regional power in just a few years.

Chad's army is currently engaged in the war against jihadist armed groups in the Sahel and Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin. It is now badly overstretched, however, and is facing difficulties in trying to cope with a rebellion on its own territory. This is especially the case as many soldiers and rebels have been recruited among the same ethnic groups and share strong social ties.

This is why France's airstrikes are particularly important. They are part of an escalation and are a sign that France is now supporting Déby at all costs while ignoring the regime's authoritarian practices and human rights violations.

In France, this means very little. Debates on foreign policy and its consequences in the Sahel are staggeringly poor. Few French MPs have voiced concern over the strikes. But in Chad, the role of the former colonial power does not go unnoticed and continues to fuel a strong anti-French sentiment.

Rebel Incursion Exposes Chad's Weaknesses (International Crisis Group) By Richard Moncrieff and

An early February incursion by the Union of Resistance Forces (UFR) into Chad from Libya was halted by French air strikes, conducted in coordination with the Chadian army. This most severe security threat for several years highlights the weakness of the country and President Idriss Déby's rule.

What happened?

On 3-6 February 2019, at the request of N'Djamena, planes from the French Operation Barkhane proceeded with a series of strikes against a group of Chadian rebels in the north east of the country. According to rebels' spokesperson Youssouf Hamid Ishagh, the Union of Resistance Forces (Union des forces de la résistance – UFR), a coalition based in Libya, intended to reach the capital N'Djamena in order to overthrow President Idriss Déby and “set up a transitional government uniting all of the country's forces”. The plan was aborted following the French intervention. Composed mainly of Zaghawa fighters from Déby's own ethnic community, this rebel movement is directed by Timan Erdimi, the president's nephew, who lives in Qatar. He first tried to overthrow his uncle in 2008, and again in 2009 after forming the UFR.

According to a statement released by the Chadian army on 9 February 2019, “more than 250 terrorists, including four leaders” were captured, and over forty of their vehicles destroyed. These figures were refuted by Ishagh, who described them as fanciful.

The Chadian political opposition has criticised the French military intervention, the first in Chad since 2008, which it views as new proof of France's unconditional support for Idriss Déby, while expressing its opposition to any takeover of power by force. These incursions took place as other Chadian armed groups are increasingly active at the country's borders, and as the president is under pressure from an economic crisis and several years of social unrest.

Paris defended its intervention, conducted “in response to a request from Chadian authorities”, and justified it by the need to preserve stability in both Chad and the sub-region. The French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves le Drian declared in front of parliament on 12 February that “France intervened militarily to prevent a coup d'Etat”. French authorities added that Chad is a strategic ally whose army is deployed in operations against terrorism in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin.

What is the link with Chad's domestic context?

By asking France's military forces to intervene on his territory for the first time since 2008, President Déby showed that he took the risk very seriously. This is due to a domestic situation marked by growing social upheaval, but also to burgeoning dissent within his own ethnic community, which the rebels hope to exploit.

The capture of state resources has long generated tension among the Zaghawa and even within the presidential family. When Déby came to power in 1990, Zaghawa military and political leaders, including the president's nephews, Timan Erdimi and his brother Tom Erdimi, helped organise a strong autocratic system around a new political party, the Patriotic Salvation Movement (Mouvement patriotique du Salut – MPS). Timan and Tom both served as chief of staff to the president before taking up strategic positions – respectively director of Chad's cotton parastatal company, at that time a public entity, and head of national oil projects. But in the early 2000s, Déby's plan to revise the constitution in order to stand for re-election in 2006 led to a break with the Erdimi brothers, who saw themselves as his “natural” successors. This resulted in large-scale defections of Presidential Guard officers and senior administration officials, and the creation of rebel groups in Sudan. Later, the presidential family made unsuccessful attempts to reconcile Idriss Déby and Timan Erdimi.

Other events provoked clashes among the Zaghawa. In 2009, his rapprochement with Sudan caused tension between the president and some of his clan who supported the rebellion in Darfur. Finally, in recent years, the growing influence of Déby's wife, Hinda, an ethnic Arab from the Ouaddaï region in the east of the country, and the appointment of her relatives to positions of responsibility, has generated new disputes among Idriss Déby's family members.

The UFR's recent incursion sought to take advantage of these tensions in order to encourage defections within the army, promote an internal uprising and provoke a reversal of alliances among the president's entourage.

On 6 February 2019, Timan's brother Tom Erdimi, living in exile in the U.S., addressed an audio message in Arabic to the Chadian military, calling them to join the UFR and overthrow Déby. “We call on you to join us. We are not far... We do not want to kill you; we do not wish to die either. The blood of Chadians has flowed too much already”, he said. A few days later, he echoed a complaint from soldiers' families when he added in a further audio message: “[the government] sends Chadian soldiers to die abroad without honour and without money for their families”.

Aside from strong support from part of the Zaghawa, at one time the Erdimi brothers also had good relations with politicians

and intellectuals from the rest of the country, including the south. Many Zaghawa fear that their influence and interests will be threatened and that they could be the target of violence once President Déby is replaced or dies. The Erdimi brothers promise, should they come to power, to safeguard their interests while also undertaking to open a transitional period involving non-Zaghawa. But most Chadians are opposed to yet another violent coup d'Etat, and the UFR's attempts to attract a broader consortium of discontented citizens to their movement did not prove successful.

The incursion started out in Libya, and the UFR has support in the Darfur region of Sudan. How is the situation in these two countries related to recent events in Chad?

This crisis has come about in a particular geopolitical context. In Libya, Marshal Khalifa Haftar is trying to change the strategic picture by leading a major offensive on southern cities, putting pressure on Chadian rebel groups in the area. In Sudan, President Omar al-Bashir, who forged an alliance with Déby in 2009, appears weakened by months of popular uprisings.

Like other Chadian rebel groups, including the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad – FACT), the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la République – CCMSR) and the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (Union des forces pour la démocratie et le développement – UFDD), the UFR shifted to southern Libya following its expulsion from Darfur in western Sudan by Khartoum in 2010. These groups do not agree on what strategies to adopt, they are divided along ethnic lines and by personal ambitions, and have even competed against each other. Their fighters engage in various forms of trafficking and sometimes work as mercenaries for Libyan militias.

The UFR's incursion into Chad was likely precipitated by the offensive launched in mid-January by the Libyan National Army (LNA) of Khalifa Haftar, seeking to extend his hold over southern Libya. While the UFR spokesperson insists that the incursion of fighters into northern Chad was planned for a long time and has no connection with the LNA's operation, other members of the group recognise that the pressure exerted by Haftar's forces pushed them to promptly cross the border.

The LNA's operation is officially aimed at combating terrorists, criminal gangs and foreign armed groups operating in the region. Although alliances in the Libyan civil war fluctuate constantly, the UFR was at one time close to the Misrata militia and the Benghazi defence brigades, Haftar's rivals. Close to Paris, and an ally of N'Djamena in the region, Haftar often targeted the positions of Chadian rebels in southern Libya. It is possible that among other objectives, his advance aims to weaken them further.

In the 2000s, armed insurrections against Déby from Darfur, then in the grip of a civil war, twice reached N'Djamena and came close to overthrowing him. Since the signing of a peace agreement between N'Djamena and Khartoum at the end of 2009, al-Bashir ended his support to Chadian rebel groups, including Timan Erdimi's UFR. Nevertheless, the UFR maintains close ties with Darfuri groups, including the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), and some of its fighters continue to move back and forth between Libya and Sudan. If al-Bashir's power was to be threatened, so would be the agreement between the two countries, which ultimately relies on the good will of the two presidents. That said, although the situation remains unstable following months of demonstrations, al-Bashir still appears to have the support of his security forces.

What are the prospects and what risks can be identified?

As in 2008, France's military intervention came in support of the Chadian authorities and President Déby. While most Chadians reject any attempt to grab power by force and condemn the incursions of rebel groups into their territory, many also criticise the support given by France and the international community in general to the country's current leadership. It is true that international actors have thus far failed to exert enough pressure on Chadian authorities to push them to engage in a truly inclusive political dialogue.

Although Chad's security situation seems to have stabilised, Déby's call for help from France shows that the Chadian army, often portrayed as strong, also has its weaknesses. According to several officers interviewed by Crisis Group, the army, present in several theatres of operation (in Mali, in the countries of the Lake Chad region and on several home fronts including Tibesti, at the border with Libya), is overworked and some soldiers are demoralised. The situation is made worse by cuts in soldiers' allowances implemented in recent years (up to December 2018) to cope with the financial crisis following a fall in oil prices. In this context, groups like the UFR will undoubtedly continue to encourage desertions. More generally, recent events call into question the strength of Déby's rule, which largely relies on the army, and underline the fragility of a country led by the region's "strongman".

500 Chad troops enter Nigeria to help tackle Boko Haram: Army (Business Standard)

February 23, 2019

A contingent of more than 500 Chadian troops entered Nigeria on Friday to "lend a

hand" to the Nigerian army in its efforts to tackle the Boko Haram jihadist goup, a Chad army spokesman told AFP.

The soldiers, part of a regional force comprised of troops from Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger, will be deployed on Saturday, the day Nigerians will vote in presidential and parliamentary elections.

Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari, seeking re-election, vowed Friday that voters will be able to vote in security, despite a week-long postponement and renewed violence.

The election campaign has coincided with fresh violence in the north, blamed on both criminal gangs and Boko Haram jihadists.

More than 200 people have died since the start of this month alone.

In 2015 Buhari was elected on a promise to put an end to the Boko Haram threat. The conflict between Boko Haram and the Nigerian army has claimed more than 27,000 lives since 2009 and more than 1.7 million people are still unable to return to their homes.

And the problem has spread across to the other countries in the Lake Chad region. On Friday four people were killed and seven more reported missing in an attack attributed to Boko Haram jihadists on a small settlement in southeast Niger, a local official there said.

Five more killings attributed to Boko Haram were reported in Chad the previous day. Nigeria is the most populous African nation, with 190 million residents, and the continent's biggest exporter of oil.

Saturday's elections are seen as of great importance to the stability of the region.

The Shadow Rebellion in Chad (The New Yorker) By Ben Taub
February 21, 2019

In the summer of 2017, a Chadian spy called me from a military base in the capital, N'Djamena, to inform me of a rebellion brewing to the north. The rebellion itself was hardly news—there have been scores of failed coups in Chad since it gained independence from France, in 1960—but the spy surmised that this revolt might come to pose a real threat to the regime. It was led by Timane Erdimi, a disenchanted nephew of the President, Idriss Déby, who had seized power in 1990 in the same fashion as each of his predecessors: by capturing the Presidential palace in a rebellion of his own. For weeks, Erdimi's rebels had been amassing weapons and personnel in the lawless desert of southern Libya. "Some soldiers are loyal to the President, some soldiers are not—no one knows how this will develop," the spy told me. "They're far from N'Djamena, but who knows how long that will remain true." Now, on a hot summer night, he continued, Déby was deploying military and intelligence officers on an aerial surveillance mission. Their task was to photograph the rebels' positions, and to assess their numbers and capacity. The sound of revving airplanes drowned out the end of the call.

In the following weeks, there were several indications that things were getting worse, although there was no conclusive reporting on the rebellion itself. In late August, Déby severed relations with Qatar and expelled its diplomats, and reporters speculated that this act was in political solidarity with various Arab nations that, months earlier, had accused Qatar of supporting terrorism; in fact, the spy said, it was because Chadian forces had found evidence that Qatar, where Erdimi lives in exile (and from where he has remotely directed the rebellion), was providing cash and equipment to the rebels—an explanation that I was unable to verify, but that better fit a terse public statement, issued by Chad's foreign ministry, calling on Qatar to "stop all activities aimed at destabilizing Chad." In September, the spy reported that some Chadian élites had quietly left the country, out of fear that they would be detained for their past ties to Erdimi. Then, in October, Déby withdrew hundreds of Chadian soldiers from Niger, where they were fighting Boko Haram as part of a multinational African counterterrorism task force, which is backed by Western countries, including the United States. Chadian officials refused to offer an explanation, and reporters implied that Déby was reacting to his country's inclusion in President Trump's travel ban. Not so, said the spy; Déby needed the troops at home to defend his northern border. The spy noted how hastily—in the absence of official information, and in a country without a free press—Western outlets had filled in gaps with lazy geopolitical narratives, without pursuing explanations that would involve an African government having domestic motivations of its own.

That fall, I set about trying to verify the existence of the rebellion. There were a few ambiguous reports of skirmishes near the Libyan border, but they usually sourced back to social media. Meanwhile, the spy kept sending grim updates. In November, he

told me that there were dozens of wounded and dead soldiers in the military hospitals and the morgue. “The rebels are advancing,” he said. But, when I called an American official who was based in Chad, he wasn’t sure what to make of the spy’s uncorroborated reports; it was possible that there was a rebellion, he said, but something of this scale had never come up in his meetings with Chadian military brass. His uncertainty raised uncomfortable questions: If the state of the rebellion was as the Chadian spy had described, how could the United States not know? And, if military clashes had taken place, was the Chadian army using training and equipment that it had solicited from Western militaries, under the guise of counterterrorism, to quash Déby’s political opponents?

The rebellion carried on mostly in the shadows. Last August—roughly a year after the spy’s phone call from the military base—Reuters reported that a “fledgling rebel movement” of forty-five hundred fighters had attacked government forces near the Libyan border. (The Chadian government denied that any fighting had taken place.) Meanwhile, the rebels took hostages, posted photos of themselves carrying surface-to-air missiles, and threatened to topple “Idriss Déby and his international backers.”

Then, earlier this month, after the rebels breached the Chadian border, France’s Air Force spent four days bombing rebel convoys. For years, the French military has used its base in N’Djamena as a staging ground for air strikes against jihadis in Mali, as part of Operation Barkhane, its campaign against terrorism in the Sahel. But this was different: an intervention on behalf of an aging autocrat, carried out “to prevent a coup d’etat,” as the French foreign minister put it. More significant, it was a tacit admission of how little progress has been made—that, after decades of supporting Sahelian strongmen, and turning a blind eye to their abuses, Western countries have been unable to devise any regional strategy except one that conflates the strength of a regime with the stability of a country, and which brings about neither stability nor strength.

No Chadian President has survived on his own. Since Chad gained independence, the French have traditionally supported whoever is in power until the moment that rebels overrun the capital and the President flees or is killed. There has never been a change to the Presidency by free or fair election, only succession by capture the flag; N’Djamena falls and the victor holds the Presidency for as long as he can. (Last year, as Déby approached the end of what had been his final constitutionally permissible term, Chad’s parliament revised the constitution to allow him to retain the office until 2033.) During the Cold War, the C.I.A. went tit for tat with Libya’s strongman, Muammar Qaddafi, in sponsoring whichever Chadian warlord most vehemently strove to oust the one backed by the other, human rights and the rule of law be damned. In 1987, President Ronald Reagan welcomed Hissène Habré, then the Chadian President—who had held French tourists hostage, murdered thousands of dissidents, and tortured detainees by forcing them to suck on the exhaust pipe of a running car—to the White House, and called it “an honor and a great pleasure to have had him here.” Military support that ought to have been ruthlessly conditional instead allowed men like Habré to be conditionally ruthless. The result was that Chad and its neighbors never developed functional institutions, and most Sahelians derived no benefit from the existence of the state. In 1990, fifteen per cent of Chadian babies died before their first birthday, and the average citizen lived to age thirty-nine.

France and the United States have typically prioritized short-term, tactical advantages in their approach to fragile African states—the limiting of Soviet influence, for example, or the maintenance of access to profitable mines. But these are meaningless objectives in the face of impending catastrophe. The Sahel is being ravaged by climate change, leading to drought, starvation, and mass migration. At the same time, the region is experiencing a demographic explosion; countries that have more than doubled in population in the past few decades are expected to double again in the next twenty years. Add these factors to the status quo of the least educated and least developed region of earth: nonsensical borders, terrible colonial history, corrupt governance, joblessness, hopelessness, and a population bereft of food and rights and dignity. Six decades of the West gently prodding authoritarians toward democratic reforms has done little to achieve them. Presidential elections serve more to obscure the lack of progress than they do to elect a leader, and a lack of free expression has allowed for the region to exist in a kind of information vacuum, limiting both local development and the capacity of Western governments to devise a coherent approach—or, apparently, to stay abreast of Chadian troop movements. As I wrote in this magazine, in 2017, the West’s strategic approach to countries like Chad, to the extent that it ever had one, has been paradoxical: in pursuing stability, it strengthened the autocrat, but in strengthening the autocrat it enabled him to further abuse his position, exacerbating the conditions that lead people to take up arms.

Jihadi groups thrive in the margins of broken states, and, where there are no terrorists, Déby has seen it as politically advantageous to fabricate them. In the aftermath of the French air strikes, his forces arrested some two hundred and fifty rebels and announced that they would be tried as “terrorists,” without the veneer of judicial protections typically afforded to criminals, traitors, or whatever category would normally apply to political opponents and army defectors who have attempted a coup. The designation is convenient for France, too; the legal mandate for Operation Barkhane is counterterrorism, not killing men who have had enough of Déby’s rule. But the facts are being obscured amid staged cries of victory. (Last week, Chad’s education ministry ordered every high-school and college student in one of N’Djamena’s districts to attend a pro-Déby, pro-France rally.) French and American audiences may not notice or remember the silence of their own governments in response to injustices in Chad, but Chadian citizens will.

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Mali

Mali: UN mourns three Guinean peacekeepers killed, condemns attack 'in strongest terms' (UN News) Februaury 23, 2019

The peacekeepers were killed in the area of Siby, near the capital, Bamako.

Mr. Guterres and the members of the Security Council extended their condolences to the families of the fallen, wished the injured a speedy and full recovery, and expressed their solidarity with the people of Guinea and with those who risk their lives serving in the mission.

Guinea is the eighth largest contributor of troops to MINUSMA, with 869 women and men serving in it.

The UN chief cautioned that any attack against UN peacekeepers may constitute a war crime and called on the Malian authorities to "spare no effort in identifying and swiftly bringing to justice the perpetrators of this attack".

The UN Security Council added that "involvement in planning, directing, sponsoring or conducting attacks against MINUSMA peacekeepers constitutes a basis for sanctions designations pursuant to United Nations Security Council resolutions".

After a failed coup six years ago, a proliferation of armed groups fighting government forces and their allies in the centre and northern areas of the country has plunged the country into conflict.

Today, MINUSMA is the deadliest mission to serve in as a UN 'blue helmet' with more than 180 paying the ultimate sacrifice, since it was established in 2013. In 2019 alone, the number of fatalities stands at 15.

The UN chief reaffirmed nonetheless in his statement on Saturday the determination of MINUSMA, which currently has 16,227 deployed personnel, to "continue implementing its mandate in support of the people and Government of Mali in their quest for peace".

This was echoed that by the UN Security Council members who stressed that "these heinous acts will not undermine their determination to continue to support the peace and reconciliation process in Mali".

In 2015, a UN-backed peace agreement was signed by armed groups — the Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad and the Plateforme coalition of armed groups — and the Government of Mali. However, continued violence has rendered its implementation very challenging.

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Liberia

"You have to face justice so I can get peace": Calls for war court in Liberia (African Arguments) By
Lucina Rouse
February 14, 2019

15 years after the brutal war ended, no one has been prosecuted in Liberia and many victims feel they've been forgotten.

In July 1990, Victoria Duo sheltered along with two thousand others, her toddler strapped to her back, in St Peter's Lutheran Church in Monrovia.

"In the night, we started hearing gun sounds," she recalls. "There was nowhere for us to go. The soldiers started collecting

money then fired on us.”

She only narrowly survived what is now renowned for being the worst single atrocity in Liberia’s consecutive civil wars. Troops loyal to then president Samuel Doe killed around six hundred people that day. Duo was shot in the arm and neck, causing her to fall, before the soldiers switched their aim to bodies on the ground. Her young child sustained wounds that led to the amputation of his left leg, but he survived. Her husband was not so lucky.

Liberia’s 14-year period of civil war began in December 1989 when rebel commander Charles Taylor led fighters over the border from Côte d’Ivoire. His aim was to take power, but it was a harder task than anticipated. The ensuing protracted conflict led to around 250,000 deaths and involved multiple atrocities including widespread sexual violence and the conscription of children as soldiers.

A series of ceasefire attempts eventually led to elections in 1997 in which Taylor was elected president. The peace did not last long, however, with violence flaring up again in 1999. This war culminated in a fierce battle around Monrovia in 2003 which led Taylor to resign and leave the country.

Following more elections, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the country’s new president in November 2005. One of her government’s first actions was to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It published a report which called for prosecutions and reparations.

Yet nearly 15 years later, not one person has been held accountable on Liberian soil for committing crimes during all those years of deadly violence.

Government reluctance

When George Weah became president in January 2018, many hoped the TRC’s recommendations might finally be enacted. Unlike his predecessor Sirleaf, against whom the TRC report had recommended sanctions due to her support of rebel factions during the war, Weah had no personal involvement in the fighting; his career as an international football star spanned the whole period. Moreover, as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador in 2004, he had insisted that justice must be brought on those who armed children.

Since he came to office, however, those hopes have been fading. The government has made it clear that its priority is infrastructure development and Weah’s stance on a war crimes court has become increasingly ambiguous. In November 2018, shortly after thousands took to the streets in Monrovia to call for a court, for example, Weah made a statement implying that Liberia might have to choose between justice and peace.

This perspective has some support in Liberia. Some people question whether security forces would be capable of quelling any unrest caused by the re-opening of old wounds. Others, such as 28-year-old Monrovia resident Philip Boe, even go as far as to suggest that those calling for a court are deliberately trying to destabilise Weah’s leadership. “All they want to do is see the country crumble,” he says.

These concerns aside, however, there may also be political reasons for the president’s reticence. In the second round of the presidential elections, for instance, Weah received the important backing of Prince Johnson, a wartime rebel commander whom the TRC accused of committing “the highest number of violations ever recorded for individual perpetrators”. Now a senator, he has threatened to mobilise his sizeable support base in Nimba County if prosecuted. Furthermore, Weah’s vice president, Jewel Howard-Taylor is the ex-wife of Charles Taylor, although she was cleared by the TRC.

Edward Mulbah, Executive Director of the Liberia Peacebuilding Office, suggests: “Those who enjoy state power are not keen about evaluating their role in the war”.

“My life can’t be where it’s supposed to be”

While there may be legitimate concerns that prosecutions could unsettle what Weah recently described as a “fragile peace”, campaigners argue that a court is essential to address the root causes of the conflict in order to establish long-term stability. The TRC identified these causes to include: “poverty, greed, corruption, limited access to education, economic, social, civil and political inequalities; identity conflict, land tenure and distribution”. There is a widespread feeling that these problems have yet to be addressed.

Advocates of justice also argue that accountability is necessary where there are victims. They point out that many who suffered from Liberia’s civil war are living in poverty today and have received neither symbolic nor material reparations.

Victoria Duo, for example, ekes out a living selling plantain at Monrovia’s Gorbachop market. Her son Richard, now 31, is disabled and unemployed.

Richard knows some people who committed atrocities in the war. He has represented Liberia playing amputee football and played alongside ex-combatant teammates who admitted their crimes. "It was difficult for me to accept, but as time went by I had to let go of certain things," he says. "Working together with those guys on the football field was incredible. We promoted peace through our soccer."

Yet in spite of this experience, Richard insists on the need for a war crimes court. "Today my life can't be where it's supposed to be," he says. "I'm not properly educated and I can't play amputee football all my life. I don't care whether you are my teammate or whatever; if you have to face justice so I can get peace and benefits that would be good."

"Since that thing happened in 1990, we never received even five dollars' benefit," agrees Duo. "All I want is to go to hospital to free the pain in my body."

What next?

Since Weah took office, calls have grown for a court to be established. Civil society groups have led calls domestically, while the UN Human Rights Committee in July 2018 expressed concern over continuing impunity in Liberia and called for the justice and reparations in keeping with the TRC's recommendations.

Broader public opinion in Liberia appears mixed. In a recent national survey, a third of respondents were in favour of retributive justice, though Mulbah from the Peacebuilding Office believes further analysis is necessary to fully understand public feeling about a court.

Jefferson Koijee, the head of the ruling party's youth league and now Monrovia's city mayor, has called for a referendum to gauge wider opinion. But some such as activist Adama Dempster disagree with this approach. "There's no referendum for criminal accountability," he says. "When the warlords and rebels killed people, did they go for referendum?"

"All we need is the political will of the government," echoes Elise Keppler, Associate Director at Human Rights Watch.

This does not appear to be forthcoming. And while international partners may be willing to urge the government, they are unlikely to be prepared to bankroll what would be a costly judicial process.

For the moment, that means that despite the hope when Weah became president those guilty of committing war crimes in Liberia remain unprosecuted, while their victims like Richard Duo continue to await justice or reparations.

"People who committed atrocities are enjoying the good life," he says. "It's not fair."

What is Next for Nimba in the Justice Debate?(Liberian Daily Observer) By Robin Dopoe
February 15, 2019

Nimba County was the "launch pad" by Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) – marching across the border from Côte d'Ivoire to Butuo on December 24th, 1989 and initiating the rebellion insurgency that started the First Liberian Civil War.

For a long time, the general perception has been that the majority of the people of Nimba resist the prospect of a war crimes court in Liberia.

It has been rumored that discussions around justice and accountability have been discouraged in Nimba. Most recently, Flomo Theater tried to perform their theater show in Ganta and were met with so much resistance that there could be no performance.

"When we arrived in Ganta City, we received a different message than other towns" said Alex Swaray, executive director of Flomo Theater.

In Nimba, many people still fear the worst, "the war crimes court will start conflict between the communities," said the Mayor of Ganta.

For many years, debates on criminal accountability in Nimba has been polarized, and most Liberians believe it is the result of unwavering support for Nimba County's Senator, Prince Yormie Johnson.

"The war started here because we were mistreated by Doe, and someone came to our rescue. If there is a war crimes court... everybody will be carried away" said an officer at the Mayor's office.

It is widely known that Prince Yormie Johnson was the leader of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL)

after splitting from Taylor's NPFL in early stages of the war. Today, Prince Johnson is currently the Senior Senator for Nimba County.

Prince Johnson has repeatedly stated that there is no need for a war crimes court in the past.

But defying this perceived norm, there has been a general movement in Nimba where people are speaking out in favor of justice. In January 2019, FrontPageAfrica published an article outlining the supporters of a war crimes court and found that Prince Johnson's comments might be at odds with the opinions of Nimbaians on the ground.

Only a few days after Flomo was turned away from their performance in Ganta, Prince Johnson has now changed his mind. Prince Johnson is now "not afraid" of a war crimes court in Liberia while speaking on Prime FM 105.5 in Monrovia last Wednesday.

What will this mean for the people of Nimba? Will justice and accountability be openly discussed in the streets in Ganta?

Liberia: Agnes Taylor's Trial Postponed, Woewiyu Sentencing Further Delayed (Front Page Africa) By James Harding Giahvue

February 21, 2019

The war crimes trial of Agnes Reeves Taylor, former wife of ex-President Charles Taylor, and the sentencing of Thomas Woewiyu, former spokesman of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), have both been postponed to later dates.

Taylor's trial was due to begin in London starting next Monday, February 25, 2019 but was delayed just 10 days before the start date. No word was given on the reason for the delay. A further hearing is scheduled for June.

The trial of Reeves Taylor, who has been detained since her arrest in 2018, is expected to take 16 weeks and will be a large and costly undertaking for UK prosecutors. Reeves Taylor is being defended by top UK barrister Courtney Griffiths who defended her husband Charles Taylor during his trial by the Special Tribunal for Sierra Leone held in The Hague. Taylor is serving a 50-year sentence in a UK prison. Griffiths' fees are being paid by the UK government. This was the second time Reeves Taylor's trial has been pushed back after it was rescheduled from January 14, 2019. Experts are predicting that the case may not start until September.

Woewiyu's sentencing has been rescheduled for April 30, 2019 after it was moved from October 15, 2018 to November 26, 2018 and then moved again to February 20, 2019. Woewiyu, 73, faces 75 years imprisonment in the United States after a Philadelphia jury convicted him of 11 counts of criminal fraud and perjury for lying to US immigration authorities about his role in the Liberian civil war. There has been no explanation for the repeated delays. Woewiyu is under house arrest and wears an ankle bracelet.

Reeves Taylor was arrested in London in July 2018 on eight counts of torture offenses, which were allegedly committed between 1989 and 1991. She denies all allegations against her.

Reeves Taylor was the third Liberian to face prosecution for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Europe for a role in the Liberian civil war after Alieu Kosiah in Switzerland and Martina Johnson in Belgium.

Woewiyu, a former Minister for Defense under the Taylor government, became the first highest-ranking official to be convicted in America. His conviction follows the sentencing to 30 years of Mohammed Jabbateh, alias Jungle Jabbah, for similar offenses in April 2018. Jabbateh became the first Liberian jailed in America for a role in the Liberian civil war. Charles Taylor's son Chuckie was convicted as an American for committing torture in Liberia's civil war and is serving a 97-year sentence in Florida.

Liberia: War Survivors Angry Boley Not Jailed in America (Front Page Africa)] February 22, 2019

Vincent Toe, 41, was only a lad when he witnessed rebels with the Liberia Peace Council (LPC) kill his aunty and eight other people in a town called Behtu. The rebels accused them of practicing witchcraft. "They cut off her head in front of me," Toe says of his aunt Jlegbe Nimely, who was 44 at the time. "They beat me and left me, because—I think—I was small."

Toe says he also witnessed LPC rebels kill Wiah Bloteh, a fisherman seeking refuge in another town called Sleyon under the same accusation. "They cut off his private part. I could not stand it, so I ran away."

The LPC killed 25 people in the Sasstown area for being alleged witches and wizards in November 1994, according to the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report. Toe says he witnessed a lot of the LPC rebels' witch-hunt here.

The TRC blamed Jerry Gban, a former major in the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL), who was a general in the LPC, for the Sasstown Massacre. Toe remembers Gban and one "General Las Order". Gban, on the list of the TRC's "most notorious perpetrators", is recommended to face a war crimes court. The Report also recommends Dr. George Boley, who led the LPC, face the court.

Boley won a seat for Grand Gedeh County District #2 at the National Legislature, clinching 18.3 percent of the votes in a 13-man race in the 2017 elections. That was five years after he was deported to Liberia from the U.S. after he became the first person in the country to be charged under a then-new U.S. law that criminalized the recruitment of child soldiers. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) referenced the TRC report finding that Boley's men carried out "extrajudicial killings", including the Sasstown Massacre.

Toe says he was angry when he heard that Boley was elected a representative for Grand Gedeh County.

"They (Americans) supposed to put him in jail, because he killed a lot of people and made properties to go away from us," Toe says.

Boley formed the LPC in 1993. Made up predominantly of Krahn, it collaborated with the AFL and ULIMO. The group ravaged towns and villages from southeastern to the west-central Liberia, vying for rubber and timber.

The TRC found that the LPC committed the third most atrocities in the Liberian Civil War (1989-2003) with 16,708 or 10 percent of the total 163,615 crimes it recorded. Only the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and Liberia United for Reconciliation and the Democracy (LURD) committed more with 63,843 crimes 39 percent and 18,797 crimes or 12 percent, respectively.

Many of his victims expected Boley to face the same fate as Mohammed Jabbateh and Tom Woewiyu who were convicted in a Philadelphia court of lying to U.S. immigration authorities about their war record. Jabbateh has been jailed for 30 years. Woewiyu faces 75 years when he is sentenced in April. But prosecutors in Boley's case chose to deport him even though they knew he was unlikely to face any prosecution under the government of then-President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf who had shelved most of the TRC recommendations.

Boley's deportation angered many international human rights advocates, particularly when he threatened some of those who had testified against him. His election to the legislature was an embarrassment to US law enforcement.

For victims Boley's election has meant they have to see him in a seat of power something they find hard to forgive.

"So long that they found it out in America that he was one of the rebel leader [of LPC], they supposed to hold him there," says Augustine Alison a survivor living in Greenville, Sinoe County. "They never supposed to deport him. They are the cause [for him to be a lawmaker in Liberia]."

Alison, 55, says he and his family fled Greenville to the Ivory Coast via Maryland, crossing the Cavalla River when LPC captured the southeast in 1993. They survived the Kablakar Massacre, recorded by the TRC, he says. While in exile, he heard news of the killing of his uncle Gray D. Alison, a former minister of defense, who had been jailed by the Samuel K. Doe government. The TRC found Alison was killed by the NPFL. The Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL) killed Watta Alison, his uncle's wife, according to the TRC. A video available online shows Johnson, then leader of the INPFL, interrogate Mrs. Allison over Johnson's allegation against her husband. At one point he reaches to slap her.

Alison did not return to Liberia until 2007 via a United Nations repatriation program. He and his wife had six children in the Ivory Coast. The TRC recorded that forced displacement such as Alison and his family faced was the most common crime committed during the war.

"I feel bad about it, because we who should be getting the money we cannot get it," says Alison, who is taken ill with hypertension. The same people who killed our people [are] eating it."

One difference between Boley's case and Jabbateh's is that by 2010 the Monrovia-based Global Justice and Research Project was not established. GJRP was only established in 2012, the same year Boley was deported. Since then, the group has been working with the Switzerland-based Civitas Maxima in prosecuting alleged Liberian war criminals in Europe and America, including Jabbateh and Thomas Woewiyu, the former NPFL spokesman who is awaiting sentencing in America.

Boley makes it two the number of former leaders of warring factions in the National Legislature. Prince Johnson, the former INPFL leader, has been a senator for Nimba County for three consecutive terms since 2005. Both men are part of large number of current and former government officials the TRC recommends to face the court, including Senator Sando Johnson

of Bomi County, Kai Farley, Superintendent of Grand Gedeh County and Adolphus Dolo, former Senator of Nimba County.

Adama Dempster of Human Rights Advocacy Platform of Liberia says setting up the court requires the support of these same government officials, he says makes it a difficult situation.

“The thing is there is no political will,” Dempster says. “It is difficult to get political will to prosecute past crimes because the people who should be listed in the TRC report,” he says. “No one would love to shoot themselves in the legs”.

Survivors are firm, however, and relish an opportunity to testify against Boley and others.

“So after giving the people such treatment, today you are in power enjoying the amenity of the people,” says Alex Summerville, 46, a survivor in the Pleebo Sodoken District of Maryland. He lost six relatives in Grand Kru when the LPC attacked the county in 1993. “I feel that is unfair. George Boley...needs to be tried,” Summerville says.

“If they call me I will go,” says Rev. Nelson Fukah, 70, a survivor in Greenville. Fukah says his 76-year-old father and 73-year-old mother died after being beaten by LPC rebels in 1994 in Chichon Town in the Kpanyan District. He says the rebels killed 18 people, excluding his aging parents and burned down the town. They were accused of being NPFL supporters.

“I am able to go to court and testify what his forces did to the citizens [of Grand Kru],” says Toe, the Sasstown Massacre survivor.

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EAST AFRICA

Uganda

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

Ongwen was no brutal rebel, says Kony's escort (New Vision)

By David Lumu
February 28, 2019

The escort of the Lord's Resistance Army rebel leader, Joseph Kony, has told the International Criminal Court (ICC) that contrary to the alleged cruel side, the ex-LRA combatant, Dominic Ongwen, was not a brutal person during his almost three decades in the jungles.

“The way Dominic related with people, well, I would say he is somebody who likes people. He was non-discriminatory. He was playful. I don't think his life changed later because he loves people. Even later when he was already grown, and he was already higher in rank than myself, we were still living together just like before,” witness D-27, who was identified as Kony's escort, told court this week on Monday.

Ongwen, who is charged for his alleged role as a former LRA commander for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in northern Uganda between July 2002 and December 2005, faces a total of 70 counts at the ICC.

The LRA commander, who has pleaded not guilty to all the charges, was handed over to the ICC in December 2015 for trial on war crimes and crimes against humanity.

In 2003, Uganda petitioned the ICC to indict LRA leader, Joseph Kony, Ongwen and three other senior LRA rebels, Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odhiambo and Vincent Otti.

The prosecution has already presented 69 witnesses to pin Ongwen, and this month, the defence team started to present witnesses too.

When Ongwen's lawyer, Krispus Ayena Odongo, asked Kony's escort to describe Ongwen's life in the bush during the LRA

rebellion, he Ongwen, who also started as Kony's escort, was a law abiding person.

"It was often said there were commanders in the LRA who were very brutal. Was he [Ongwen] a brutal man to his soldiers, and also to the civilian population, for instance?" Odongo asked.

"No, Dominic was not a brutal person. I know that Dominic would obey the rules to the dot," said the witness.

Ongwen was born in 1975 in Kilak County, Amuru district. He was abducted the LRA on his way to school, Koro Abili Primary School, in 1988. He was 14 years.

During his bush days, the witness said Ongwen was part of the insider ring, dubbed 'control altar' that used to direct military strategies of the rebel group.

The witness, who was himself abducted in 1990, told the court that although commanders within the LRA rank and file did not associate with those under their command, "Dominic would associate with them" freely and always showed his playful side to those under his command.

When the trial lawyer Hai Do Duc cross-examined the witness on why Ongwen and himself didn't quit LRA activities given the gravity of crimes that the rebels were committing, the witness said, they feared retribution from Kony, who said: 'If you escape they could punish your family.'

"For that reason, very many people could not think of escaping," he said.

Odongo wants the international court to dismiss 41, almost half of the over 70 charges against Ongwen, saying that they are defective.

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Kenya

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

Kenya Police Found Liable in Death of Baby During Post-Election Violence (Voice of America)

By Rael Ombuor

February 14, 2019

A judge in Kenya has found five top police commanders "culpable" for the death of a six-month-old in 2017. The little girl died as police tried to control election-related protests in Western Kenya. The country's director of public prosecutions may now file charges against the commanders.

Magistrate Beryl Omollo ruled that the five commanders are "culpable" for the death of Samantha Pendo.

Pendo was a six-month-old girl killed in August 2017 as police tried to quell protests in Western Kenya, after President Uhuru Kenyatta was named the winner of the country's presidential election.

Witnesses said anti-riot police stormed into the home of Joseph Abanja and Lencer Achiengs in the town of Nyalenda and clobbered baby Samantha on the head. She died while undergoing medical treatment.

The public prosecutor's office ordered an inquiry after investigations by Kenya's Independent Policing Oversight Authority failed to determine who killed the little girl.

Omollo read out her decision in court Thursday.

"I have evaluated the entire evidence as presented before me, and I am satisfied that the deceased baby Samantha Pendo did not die as a result of natural consequences, but due to severe head injury caused by blunt force trauma inflicted on her by members of the National Police service," Omollo said.

The magistrate also ordered the director of the public prosecutions office to investigate 31 more officers who might be linked to Pendo's death.

Pendo's mother, Lencer Achiengs, told to VOA after the decision that it provides some relief.

"Today I am happy at least some people have been held responsible. Even if they did not find the culprit, at least some of the officers have been held responsible for what happened to my daughter. It should be a lesson, even if elections are being held, let nobody shed blood because of elections. Elections come and go," Achiengs said.

According to a 2017 report by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, at least 33 people were killed by police as they protested the outcome of Kenya's general elections.

Demas Kiprono, Amnesty International's campaign manager for safety and dignity, said today's ruling supports the group's previous findings.

"This means that atrocities happened during our last election and we need to come up with elaborate steps to ensure police accountability so that whenever they are interacting with members of the public in any situation, they are guided by their standing orders and international human rights law regarding the use of force and policing assemblies," Kiprono said.

The courts have forwarded Pendo's case to the public prosecutor's office for a decision on what charges the police commanders might face. The timing and seriousness of the charges are still to be determined.

Kenya recalls its ambassador to Somalia as territorial row escalates (Reuters)

By Duncan Miriri and Angus MacSwan

February 17, 2019

Kenya has recalled its ambassador to Somalia after the Mogadishu government's decision to auction oil and gas exploration blocks at the centre of a maritime territorial dispute in the Indian Ocean, the foreign ministry said.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague is considering a claim on their maritime boundaries brought by Somalia in 2014 after negotiations over the 100,000 sq. km stretch of sea floor broke down.

Kenya said on Saturday it had summoned its ambassador, Lucas Tumbo, and asked his Somalia counterpart Mohammed Muhamud Nur to return to Mogadishu for consultation with his government.

"The summons is a consequence of a most regretful and egregious decision by the government of Somalia to auction off oil and gas blocks in Kenya's maritime territorial area," the foreign ministry said.

Somalia, which held the auction in London on Feb. 7, did not respond immediately to the new developments.

Kenya said it had raised concerns with the Somali government a day before the auction after it noticed blocks in what it considers to be its maritime territory were included in the auction.

"This unparalleled affront and illegal grab at the resources of Kenya will not go unanswered and is tantamount to an act of aggression against the people of Kenya and their resources," it said in a statement, adding it was ready to defend its territorial integrity "at any cost".

The two states have been co-operating in the long fight against the al Qaeda-linked, al Shabaab militants in Somalia. Kenya said the row over maritime territory could jeopardise that.

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Somalia

Burundi in threat to quit Somalia mission (The East African)

By Fred Olouch

February 25, 2019

The African Union is on the spot over a request by Burundi and Somalia to convene an urgent summit of troop contributing countries to discuss withdrawal of the African Union Mission in Somalia.

The continental body has not responded, amid a threat by an angry Bujumbura to withdraw all its 5,432 troops from the Amisom.

Burundi's threat was sparked by an announcement that Burundi will have shed 1,000 troops by February 28. On February 19, President Pierre Nkurunziza and his Somali counterpart Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo held a meeting in Bujumbura and called for an urgent summit of the five troop contributing countries to review the decision by the AU Peace Support Operations Division, which Bujumbura rejects as discriminatory.

President Nkurunziza had invited the Somali leader for consultations in which they called for urgent talks at the heads of state level about what they see as a decision targeting Burundi, and further agreed to carry out operations against Al Shabaab as soon as possible.

"There is a decision that was taken by the Peace and Security Council of AU that we Burundians didn't welcome and we know Somalia wasn't pleased with it. That's why we have called for an urgent summit so the decision can be reconsidered," said President Nkurunziza at a press briefing.

Later on Thursday, the Burundi parliament debated the matter and called on the AU chairperson and Egyptian leader Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, to convene a summit of the TCCs to address the "injustice" against their country. The MPs made the call on the day 200 soldiers left Somalia for Bujumbura as part of the withdrawal.

Defence Minister Emmanuel Ntahomvukiye said that his country will withdraw all its soldiers from Amisom if the AU does not reconsider the order to withdraw 1,000 troops from Burundi.

"Instead of planning to pull out 1,000 troops from Amisom, the African Union should prepare for the withdrawal of all Burundian troops," said Mr Ntahomvukiye.

He said that the order to withdraw only Burundian troops from Somalia in a short time could leave the troops more vulnerable.

The decision to withdraw 1,000 soldiers from the Burundi National Defence Forces in Sector 5 in Hirshabelle came from the AU Peace Support Operations Division, in line with the new Amisom operations blueprint known as the Concept of Operations (CONOPS).

Under CONOPS, several Forward Operating Bases will be reconfigured and others wound up as troop numbers fall. This started in Sector 5, where Burundi troops are based.

CONOPS is part of the implementation of the Somalia Transition Plan, which involves reconfiguration of the forces into new sectors in preparation for final handover of security responsibility to Somalia's security forces by 2021, when Amisom finally withdraws.

Early this week, Amisom commanders agreed on key operations and activities to be executed under CONOPS, which include targeted operations to flush Al Shabaab out of their hideouts.

Simon Mulongo, the Deputy Special Representative of the Chairperson of the AU Commission, said the Somalia Transition Plan will be implemented in three phases.

They include; phased and conditions-based troops' withdrawal and handing over of priority locations in Mogadishu to the Somali Security Forces; degrading Al-Shabaab and securing main supply routes; and supporting the Somali National Army as it takes full charge of the country's national security responsibilities.

The last time the heads of state from the troop contributing countries met was in March 2018 in Kampala, where they called on the United Nations to reconsider the phased withdrawal programme because it was not realistic and would lead to a reversal of the gains made by Amisom.

AU Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat was at the meeting. Due to reduced and irregular funding, the UN Security Council Resolution 2372 issued in 2017 had instructed Amisom to reduce its uniformed personnel to a maximum 21,626 in readiness for a full pull-out in 2020.

The first batch of 1,040 troops left in December 2017 on a pro rata basis, with Uganda withdrawing the highest number, 250 out of its 6,223 troops, followed by Burundi (217 out of 5,432), then Ethiopia (176 out of 4,395), Kenya (146 out of 3,664) and Djibouti (40 out of 1,000).

U.S. Africa Policy Cannot Afford to Ignore Somaliland (The National Interest)

By Michael Rubin
February 26, 2019

“Great nations do not fight endless wars,” President Donald Trump declared in his State of the Union address, even as he redoubled his commitment to “focus on counterterrorism.” While many commentators describe Afghanistan—the war against which Trump railed—as America’s longest war, the battle against terrorists and warlords in Somalia has now run even longer .

Alas, even as Trump talks about scaling back the U.S. military footprint abroad, his willingness to follow the State Department’s lead in Somalia threatens to embolden radicalism and revive piracy in the Horn of Africa. At issue is Somalia, where the State Department’s embrace of false unities and antipathy toward change has led it to double down on its support for Somalia’s symbolic government in Mogadishu.

At first glance, Trump’s cynicism looks warranted. After years of civil war, Somalia has a provisional constitution and a government. Elders have appointed a parliament, which in turn has elected a president. But the federal government’s control is largely illusionary. Most diplomats and non-governmental organizations are sequestered inside the international airport, which makes Baghdad’s old Green Zone look permissive. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), encompassing troops from five African countries and police from an additional three, provides basic security. The president holds little sway outside his palace and a few square blocks around his palace, while Al-Shabaab, a terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda, continues to strike in the city and across the country.

Fictions are expensive. The United Nations and aid organizations are seeking upwards of \$1 billion in aid this year just to provide immediate relief, and that figure is even greater when the price tag for AMISOM is factored in. Much of the aid, however, never reaches Somalis; Transparency International now ranks Somalia as the world’s most corrupt country. Rather than help Somalis, donations to Mogadishu often fuel factional fighting and drive Somalis into the arms of radicals and yet, despite his promise to turn Washington’s old ways on their head, the Trump administration policy in effect remains to throw good money after bad. In effect, Somalia has joined Pakistan and Egypt in an extortion racket whereby it demands endless aid to fight radicalism, but never defeats it for fear of losing an annual windfall which elites siphon for personal interests.

Not all of Somalia, however, embraces this cycle. As Somalia descended into civil war in 1991, Somaliland, ground zero for Somali dictator Siad Barre’s reign of terror, declared itself independent. Its claim was solid: during the colonial era, it was a British protectorate, distinct from the rest of Somalia, with internationally-recognized borders. All five UN Security Council members recognized its 1960 independence. To Somalilanders, its subsequent union with Somalia was voluntary, as was its exit against the backdrop of Somalia’s descent into chaos. Residents of the region also point out that the State Department’s traditional antipathy toward border changes rings hollow given Washington’s, the African Union’s and the broader international community’s recognition of South Sudan and Eritrea. True, neither of these countries is a success, but Somaliland already promises to be. Today, Somaliland includes twenty-eight percent of Somalia’s area and one-third of its population. Unlike Somalia proper, Somaliland has denied Al-Shabaab access to its territory. Hargeisa, its capital, is among the safest cities in Africa. Somaliland has contested elections, secured via biometric iris scans, and has had five peaceful transfers of power amongst rival parties. While Somaliland has its own currency, its economy is increasingly cashless: organic innovation and permeation of cell phones has allowed even its rural citizens simply to trade digital money by cell phone. Americans might still think “Black Hawk Down” when they think of Somalia, but Somaliland has become more like Sweden and Estonia in its e-practices.

In effect, Somaliland does everything right. So why does the United States ignore it? In the era of budget cutbacks, the State Department refuses to even put an office in Hargeisa akin to what it has in Iraqi Kurdistan or Taiwan. The Pentagon, for its part, has no regular liaison with their Somalilander counterparts, even though both counterterrorism missions and the war in Yemen enhance Somaliland’s strategic importance.

Here's the problem: Somaliland's ability to stand up to radicals and Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorists may not be endless. Somaliland spends one-third its budget on security, but Somalia refuses to provide it with any international funds channeled through Mogadishu. The situation is now so dire that Somaliland's army and coast guard recruits must purchase their own guns in order to conduct the patrols which stabilize its 460-mile coastline, prevent weapons smuggling from Yemen, and deny Al-Shabaab access to its vast rural areas. While the UN has eased its arms embargo on Somalia in order to allow AMISOM to operate and to supply Somali government forces (who more often than not sell their weapons to the radicals for some quick cash), it continues to enforce an arms embargo on Somaliland that is an artifact of the situation in Somalia three decades ago.

Trump and National Security Advisor John Bolton are right to question foreign aid. Sponsoring parades in Bulgaria or art workshops in Central America have limited utility. But, every million dollars invested in Somaliland's security could offset defense needs with a price tag several orders of magnitude higher. Somaliland seeks not tanks and modern fighter jets, but simply small arms and more patrol boats. The region's willingness to invest more than fifteen-times proportionately what America's NATO allies do in defense shows it is serious and not simply seeking subsidy for what it could otherwise achieve on its own. Somalia's government might complain, but Washington need not kneel to Mogadishu. If Trump truly wants to end endless wars and American engagements abroad, perhaps it is time to embrace rather than ignore allies, bolster democracies and recognize that even at the height of its greatness, America has never truly gone it alone.

US says airstrike killed 35 Al Shabaab fighters in Somalia (CNN)

By Michael Callahan
February 26, 2019

The US military announced Monday that an airstrike in Somalia killed 35 Al Shabaab fighters on Sunday.

That means at least 180 fighters from the al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group have been killed in 22 airstrikes so far in 2019, according to figures released by US Africa Command, which oversees US military operations on the continent.

The latest strike took place about 23 miles east of Beledweyne, Hiran Region. US Africa Command said the airstrike targeted the fighters as they "were transitioning between locations in a rural area."

"We continue to support our Somali partners, especially when their operations provide us opportunities to take the fight to Al Shabaab as an element of our partnered strategy," said Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Gregg Olson, US Africa Command director of operations, in a statement.

"In the case of this strike, we interrupted an Al Shabaab attempt to mass their forces. Precision strikes eliminated a potential threat to our partners and to the people of Somalia well before the terrorists ever got themselves organized," he added.

The US military currently assesses that no civilians were killed in the strike.

The Department of Defense estimates there were 3,000 to 7,000 Al Shabaab fighters and 70 to 250 ISIS fighters in Somalia as of August 2018.

Sunday's airstrike follows four other strikes conducted over the weekend that killed two additional fighters.

There has been a significant increase in airstrikes in Somalia by the US since President Donald Trump authorized the US military to carry out precision strikes targeting Al Shabaab in March 2017 in an effort to bolster the Somali government. Prior to that the US military was authorized to carry out airstrikes only in self-defense of advisers on the ground.

In 2018, the US conducted 47 precision airstrikes against Al Shabaab militants. In 2017, the US conducted 35 airstrikes, and in 2016 it conducted 15.

The US has approximately 500 troops in Somalia, primarily in an advisory role.

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EUROPE

The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, War Crimes Chamber

Official Court Website [English translation]

Bosnian Serb Policeman Cleared of Persecution in Srebrenica (Balkan Insight) By Haris Rovcanin
February 27, 2019

The Bosnian state court on Wednesday acquitted Slavko Milovanovic, a former member of the reserve police forces at the Public Security Station in the village of Skelani in the Srebrenica municipality, of crimes against humanity.

Milovanovic was found not guilty of going to the village of Resagici on May 8, 1992, accompanied by a group of members of military, paramilitary and police formations, participating in an attack and giving an order to burn houses which women and children were forced to leave.

The judge said the prosecution had not been able to prove the allegations against Milovanovic.

“The only thing the state prosecution has proved is the fact that Milovanovic was a reserve policeman, but it has not managed to prove that he was a superior officer in his unit or to whom he could issue orders.

The witnesses said that a reserve policeman could not act as a superior officer,” said presiding judge Darko Samardzic said.

The court found that it was undisputed that the attack on Resagici happened on May 8, 1992, but the prosecution could not prove that the defendant was there.

The verdict can be appealed.

Zagreb Frees Bosnian Croat after Controversial Sentence Cut (Balkan Insight) By Anja Vladislavljevic
February 26, 2019

Marko Radic, a former Bosnian Croat battalion commander who was convicted of committing crimes against humanity against Bosniaks in the Mostar area of Bosnia and Herzegovina during wartime, was released from prison in Zagreb on December 2, Zagreb County Court told BIRN.

Radic was due to remain in prison until 2027, but was released because of the time he has already served.

“According to the data obtained from the prison in Zagreb, Marko Radic (son of Franjo, born on August 13, 1959) was discharged after serving a sentence of imprisonment of 12 years and six months. The time spent in investigative custody from June 2, 2006 was included in the penalty,” court spokesperson Kresimir Devcic said.

Radic was convicted in March 2011 by the Bosnian state court in Sarajevo and sentenced to 21 years in jail.

His request to serve his sentence in Croatia instead of Bosnia and Herzegovina was then granted.

The Zagreb court agreed to take over the execution of the Bosnian court’s judgment, but its own verdict, delivered last October, cut Radic’s sentence from 21 years to 12-and-a-half because the Croatian legal system does not recognise the concept of a ‘joint criminal enterprise’, which was part of the Bosnian verdict.

The Bosnian state court’s verdict found that Radic, as commander of the First Bijelo Polje Battalion of the Croatian Defence Council’s Second Brigade, participated in setting up prisons and ordering the arrest and unlawful detention of several dozen Bosniak civilians, including women, children and elderly people.

The verdict also said that he participated in the unlawful detention of Bosniak men at the Heliodrom prison camp.

The men were taken to the village of Vojno to do forced labour and kept in brutal, humiliating and inhumane conditions in a garage and the basement of a house in the village.

October’s decision by Zagreb County Court to cut Radic’s sentence caused a political storm in Sarajevo.

A public feud erupted between a Bosnian Croat minister and his Bosniak deputy, while a war victims’ association filed a

criminal complaint against the minister, Josip Grubesa.

Croatian jurist and ex-President Ivo Josipovic told BIRN in November 2018 that the Zagreb court's decision to reduce Radic's prison did not reflect the gravity of his crime.

"I personally consider that the crimes which the Zagreb County Court accepted as grounds for continuing the execution of the sentence in Croatia are so grave that the newly determined sentence is insufficient and disproportionate to the gravity of the crime," Josipovic said.

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International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

Official Website of the ICTY

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Domestic Prosecutions In The Former Yugoslavia

Croatia Jails Veteran Who Called Tudjman 'War Criminal' (Balkan Insight) By Filip Rudic
February 13, 2019

A misdemeanours court in Zagreb on Wednesday sentenced Erceg to 15 days in prison and gave him a one-year ban from approaching the monument to Croatia's first President Franjo Tudjman over the incident at its unveiling.

"The judge gave me a longer sentence than the police had asked for; they called for 10 days [in prison], I got 15," Erceg told the regional TV station N1.

He said that the judge refused to read out an explanation of the verdict, saying it would be sent by mail.

Croatian state officials attended the unveiling of the monument to Tudjman in December 2018, praising his contribution to the country's independence, but some opposition and rights groups protested, denouncing his record.

Erceg attended the unveiling, and while Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic was passing by, he shouted: "How are you not ashamed to erect a monument to this criminal?"

Right after his sentencing, Erceg went to the Tudjman monument, followed by journalists, where he repeated his claim that Tudjman was a war criminal.

"I am not ashamed of my opinions," Erceg said, according to the Croatian newspaper Jutarnji list.

In another incident in January 2019, a man was detained by police for daubing hammer-and-sickle graffiti on the base of the monument.

Croatian leftist parties and NGOs staged a rally in protest against the arrest, calling it political repression.

Some critics have accused Tudjman of presiding over serious violations of human rights and corrupt privatisations while in office in the 1990s, as well as accusing him of being part of a joint criminal enterprise along with Bosnian Croat officials during the war in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Six wartime officials of the unrecognised Croat-led statelet of Herzeg-Bosnia in wartime Bosnia and Herzegovina were convicted by the Hague Tribunal in 2017 of participating in a joint criminal enterprise with Tudjman and other senior Croatian officials with the aim of persecuting Bosniaks.

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Turkey

UN report suggests Turkish-backed groups commit war crimes in Afrin (Kurdistan 24) By Wladimir van Wilgenburg
February 28, 2019

A new report the United Nations 'Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria released on Thursday suggests armed groups in Afrin are guilty of war crimes.

“The Commission finds there are reasonable grounds to believe that armed group members in Afrin committed the war crimes of hostage-taking, cruel treatment, torture, and pillage,” the UN report stated.

“Due to the glaring absence of the rule of law, it similarly remains unclear whether Turkish forces were capable of exercising overall control over any armed groups present in the district,” it added.

The report contradicts the claim Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin made in January that Turkey is committed to the safety of life and property of Syrians, including the Kurds.

“The lack of effective complaint mechanisms and a centralized judiciary, coupled with the presence of dozens of armed actors’ power-sharing on the sub-district level, created confusion among civilians about which institution was responsible for addressing specific grievances, including in cases of detention and property appropriation,” the report explained.

It also mentioned that infighting among armed groups and a series of car bombs had exacerbated an already unstable security situation.

According to the UN report, over 50 armed groups operate in Afrin, including Ahrar al-Sham, Amshad brigade, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Nukhba, Jaish al Sharqiya, Jabhat al-Shamiya, Nur al-Din al-Zanki, and Sumina Shah brigade, among others.

The residents in Afrin describe “general absence of the rule of law, with parties in control either unwilling or unable to provide effective redress or, in some cases, extorting bribes from victims in order to do so.” These developments come despite changes in administrative, judicial, and executive structures in the region.

Some residents pointed to the lack of discipline armed groups demonstrated, especially with their involvement in “pillaging, arbitrary detention, and abduction.”

The UN report said Afrin lacks “an effective security apparatus and attendant absence of the rule of law,” adding that “the most common violations perpetrated in Afrin involved frequent abductions by armed groups and criminal gangs.”

Just as in Idlib, “numerous physicians, pharmacists, and other civilians perceived as affluent or their children were abducted for ransom. In some instances, individuals were re-abducted after having been released.”

The report noted that victims were often unable to identify their abductors, referring instead generally to armed groups, Free Syrian Army (FSA) affiliates, or criminal gangs.

Despite victims and their families in Afrin reporting such cases to military police, civilian police, and Turkish authorities, there was little effect, the UN report found.

“Numerous cases involving arbitrary arrests and detentions by armed group members also included credible allegations of torture and ill-treatment, often targeting individuals of Kurdish origin, including activists openly critical of armed groups and those perceived to be so,” it continued.

Arrests were occasionally followed by the confiscation of the victim’s property, including vehicles and livestock or the pillaging of their land, especially the cultivation of olive trees, which remains a significant source of income for thousands of farmers in the area, the UN report stated.

Some analysts described the allegations as “very serious,” and suggested they could be used as “evidence of war crimes.”

Nicholas A. Heras, a Middle East security analyst at the Washington-based Center for a New American Security, said the behavior of Turkish-backed, Syrian rebels in Afrin “has been deplorable.”

“The US should also think twice about any force that Turkey would offer it for counter-[Islamic State] operations in northeastern Syria,” Heras told Kurdistan 24.

Syrian Kurdish leader: border force needed to protect us from Turkey (Guardian) By Patrick Wintour
February 19, 2019

The leader of the Syrian Kurds has called for a small international observer force to be stationed on the Turkey-Syria border to protect Kurds from what she says is the threat of crimes against humanity committed by Turkish forces.

Ilham Ahmed is co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council – the political arm of the US-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have been responsible for liberating much of north-eastern Syria from Islamic State.

Described as one of the most powerful women in Syria, Ahmed is leading a Kurdish delegation touring Washington, Paris and London to persuade western countries not to betray the Kurds by leaving them exposed to the threat of a Turkish attack.

Ahmed said a final SDF assault on the last Isis redoubt would finish within days. Plans requiring “time and patience” were being drawn up to eradicate sleeper cells, she said.

She was speaking in the wake of the shock announcement by Donald Trump that 2,000 US troops will leave north-west Syria on the basis that Isis had been defeated.

Ankara views the Kurdish forces in Syria as a terrorist threat and an extension of the Kurdish separatist movement within Turkey’s own borders.

The Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has repeatedly warned America that a Turkish military operation against the US-backed Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Manbij is near. “Our patience is not limitless, he said over the weekend. “If the terrorists are not removed from Manbij within a few weeks, our waiting period will end.”

Ahmed said: “After all that has happened, if there is an attack, we will regard those that remain silent in the face of those threats as guilty of crimes against humanity.

“It is not just there will no longer be any trust in the coalition forces who we have fought alongside, and that their credibility will have been lost forever. It will mean the emergence of very big wars in this area.

“Any attempt by the Turkish state to establish a safe zone in the north of Syria will be an occupation, and no matter that the Turkish state wants to convince others that it will be a force for calm in the region, this is not what will happen.

“We saw this in Afrin last year as they tried to erase our culture and remove people from their homes. Huge massacres have been committed by the Turks. A further attack will only bring more war, displacement, occupation and an attempt to destroy our culture.”

An international protection force would provide aerial defence, she said, but “we would like to see an international power on the border as observers to ensure that Turkey does not attack”.

The force would be composed of “states that have actively participated in the war against IS, and the UN should also play a role”, she said. She added discussions were continuing now on the size and composition of the force, but it could be a symbolic number.

She also said Kurds were willing to put foreign fighters on trial in Kurdish Syria if they were given major international support on the legal procedures. “It would be better if they were tried in their own countries,” she added.

She said 800 to 900 Isis foreign fighters were currently held in prison by the Kurds and about 4,000 wives and children in refugee camps. She said: “We have not said we will let the fighters go, but if the Turks attack then it is true we will be fighting for our own existence and it is possible we may not be able to keep them under control and they may return to Europe. That is also at stake when we talk about an attack by the Turkish state.”

Ahmed denied the Kurds were actively discussing forming a security alliance of convenience with the Syrian president, Bashar

al-Assad, if the West decided it could not protect the Kurds from a Turkish assault.

“The regime has shown no signs of interest in a meaningful dialogue with us about Syria’s future,” she said.

Any such dialogue would require a change by the regime, including agreement to a political solution about the future of a federated and unified Syria.

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MIDDLE EAST AND NORTHERN AFRICA

Iraq

Grotian Moment: The International War Crimes Trial Blog

Iraq’s brutal crackdown on suspected Islamic State supporters could trigger civil war (The Conversation) By Eric Keels and Angela D. Nichols

February 20, 2019

Large portions of the Islamic State in Iraq have been either killed, captured or forced underground over the past three years.

Eleven years after the U.S. invasion toppled dictator Saddam Hussein, triggering a war between Islamic State militants and the U.S.-backed Iraqi government, Iraq has finally achieved some measure of stability.

But the Iraqi government isn’t taking any chances that this terrorist organization, commonly known as “IS,” could regroup.

Over 19,000 Iraqis suspected of collaborating with IS have been detained in Iraq since the beginning of 2013, according to Human Rights Watch. Most of them are Sunni Muslims, according to reporting by Ben Taub of the New Yorker. Sunnis are members of the sect of Islam from which IS predominantly recruits.

Suspected terrorists are often tortured into offering confessions that justify death sentences at trial. According to Amnesty International, common forms of torture include “beatings on the head and body with metal rods and cables, suspension in stress positions by the arms or legs, electric shocks, and threats of rape of female relatives.”

The government’s crackdown on Sunnis – even those with no evidence of ties with Islamic militants – sends a troubling signal about Iraq’s prospects for peace.

Our research into conflict zones shows that when post-war governments use violence against citizens, it greatly increases the risk of renewed civil war.

Repression following civil wars

The period after an armed conflict is fragile.

Citizens traumatized by violence wish fervently for peace. Defeated armed factions may have their sights set on revenge.

The post-war government’s priority, meanwhile, is to consolidate its control over the country. Sometimes, leaders use violent repression to ensure their grip on power.

It is a risky strategy.

We studied 63 countries where civil war occurred between 1976 and 2005, including El Salvador, Sierra Leone and Sudan. The results, which were published in the academic journal Conflict, Security and Development in January, show a 95 percent increase of another civil war in places where governments engaged in the kind of torture, political imprisonment, killings and

disappearances that Iraq's government is now undertaking.

Civil war is most likely to break out in former conflict zones if civilians believe they will be targeted by the state regardless of whether or not they actually support an insurgency.

Often, our results show, people respond to indiscriminate clampdowns by arming themselves. That is easy to do in conflict zones, which are home to many former rebels with extensive battlefield training and access to weapons, including both active militant groups and the remnants of vanquished insurgencies.

Assessing the risk of renewed war in Iraq

Sadly, Iraq has been down this road before.

In 2007, the U.S. military surge sent more than 20,000 additional American troops into combat in Iraq to help the government of Nuri al-Maliki – which came to power after Hussein's demise – fight Al-Qaida and other Islamic militants.

The U.S. enlisted Sunni insurgents to help them find, capture or kill Al-Qaida operatives during this period of the Iraq war, which is often called “the surge.”

That decision inflamed the centuries-old sectarian divide between Iraq's two dominant religious groups, Sunni and Shia Muslims.

During former Iraqi President Hussein's rule, Sunni Muslims controlled the country, and his government actively repressed Shia citizens. Since Hussein's ouster, however, Iraq's government has been run by Shia Muslims.

After the U.S. withdrew its troops in 2011, the U.S.-backed al-Maliki government began a brutal campaign to consolidate its authority. From 2012 to 2013, he expelled all Sunni officials from Iraq's government and silenced opponents using torture, political imprisonment, killings and disappearances.

At the time, our study of renewed fighting in conflict zones had just begun. The preliminary findings made us concerned that al-Maliki's use of violence to assert control over Iraq could restart the civil war by pushing angry Sunnis into the arms of militant groups.

Unfortunately, we were right.

Starting in 2014, the Islamic State began moving swiftly from Syria – where it was based – to conquer major cities across neighboring western Iraq.

Iraqi Sunnis, who were excluded from politics after Hussein's overthrow and fearful of government repression, did little to stop the incursion. Islamic militants increased their recruitment among Iraqi Sunnis by promising a return to Sunni dominance in Iraq.

Many Sunnis took up arms against their own government not because they supported IS's goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate across the Middle East but because they hated al-Maliki's administration.

By June 2014, the Islamic State had captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, just 250 miles north of Baghdad. It took three years of fighting and the combined force of Iraqi, U.S. and Kurdish troops, as well as Iranian-backed militias, to rid the country of this terrorist organization.

In September 2017, Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Abadi claimed victory over IS in Iraq. The international community turned its focus toward Syria, where Islamic militants were continuing their war on citizens and the government.

What's next for Iraq

Still, the Islamic State remains a persistent and legitimate threat to both Syria and Iraq, with some 30,000 active fighters in the region. Its commanders have reportedly buried large stockpiles of munitions in Iraq in preparation for renewed war.

American intelligence officials have warned against President Donald Trump's plan to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, saying it will give IS more freedom to regroup there and in Iraq.

The Iraqi government's crackdown on Sunnis is, in part, an effort to eliminate this threat, since IS could draw renewed support from disaffected Sunni Iraqis across the border.

But many observers think Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi is also exacting revenge on Sunnis for previously joining IS in armed

warfare against Iraq's government.

Rather than prevent more fighting, our research suggests, Iraq's clampdown on Sunnis may spark another civil war.

From Syria, IS slips into Iraq to fight another day (The Times of Israel) By Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Philip Issa
February 22, 2019

Islamic State fighters facing defeat in Syria are slipping across the border into Iraq, where they are destabilizing the country's fragile security, US and Iraqi officials say.

Hundreds — likely more than 1,000 — IS fighters have crossed the open, desert border in the past six months, defying a massive operation by US, Kurdish and allied forces to stamp out the remnants of the jihadi group in eastern Syria, according to three Iraqi intelligence officials and a US military official.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly on intelligence matters. But indications of the extremist group's widening reach in Iraq are clear.

Cells operating in four northern provinces are carrying out kidnappings, assassinations, and roadside ambushes aimed at intimidating locals and restoring the extortion rackets that financed the group's rise to power six years ago.

Cells operating in four northern provinces are carrying out kidnappings, assassinations, and roadside ambushes aimed at intimidating locals and restoring the extortion rackets that financed the group's rise to power six years ago.

The Iraqi army has deployed more than 20,000 troops to guard the frontier, but militants are slipping across, mostly to the north of the conflict zone, in tunnels or under the cover of night. Others are entering Iraq disguised as cattle herders.

They are bringing with them currency and light weapons, according to intelligence reports, and digging up money and arms from caches they stashed away when they controlled a vast swath of northern Iraq.

"If we deployed the greatest militaries in the world, they would not be able to control this territory," Rasoul said. "Our operations require intelligence gathering and airstrikes."

At its height in 2014 and 2015, the Islamic State group ruled over a self-proclaimed "caliphate" that spanned one-third of Iraqi and Syrian territory. The extremist offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq threatened to exterminate religious minorities.

Iraqi forces, with US, Iranian, and other international help, were able to turn the war around and Baghdad declared victory over the group in December 2017, after the last urban battle had been won.

But precursors to IS have recovered from major setbacks in the past, and many fear the militants could stage a comeback. The group is already waging a low-level insurgency in rural areas.

The Associated Press verified nine IS attacks in Iraq in January alone, based on information gathered from intelligence officials, provincial leaders, and social media. IS often boasts of its activities through group messaging apps such as Telegram.

In one instance, a band of militants broke into the home of a man they accused of being an informant for the army, in the village of Tal al-Asfour in the northern Badush region. They shot him and his two brothers against the wall, and posted photos of the killing on social media.

Sheikh Mohamed Nouri, a local tribal leader, said it was meant to intimidate locals in order to keep them from sharing intelligence with security officials.

"I have members of our tribal militia receiving threatening messages warning them to abandon their work," said Nouri.

In other instances, IS cells have killed mukhtars — village leaders and municipal officials. They have attacked rural checkpoints with car bombs and mortar fire, and burned down militia members' homes. In the town of Shirqat in central Iraq, militants stopped a police vehicle last month and killed all four officers inside.

Other activities have aimed at restoring the group's financial footing.

On Sunday, militants kidnapped a group of 12 truffle hunters in the western Anbar province, marking a return to a strategy of intimidating and extorting farmers and traders for financial gain.

Naim Kaoud, the head of provincial security, urged locals to suspend truffle gathering, which has just one season a year and is

an important source of income for rural families.

Other truffle hunters have disappeared in the countryside, according to former lawmaker and Anbar tribal figure Jaber al-Jaberi. He said the militants are taking cuts from truffle hunters in exchange for access to the land, and kidnapping or killing those who refuse to cooperate.

"This is one of the sources of their funding," said al-Jaberi.

Al-Jaberi cautioned against exaggerating the IS threat, saying the militants have been less successful at infiltrating communities than they were earlier this decade.

"These are different times," he said.

Others are not so sure. Hans-Jakob Schindler, a former adviser to the U.N. Security Council on IS and other extremist groups, said the same grievances that gave rise to IS in 2013 remain today, including a large Sunni minority that feels politically and economically marginalized by the Shiite-led central government.

"I'm very worried that we are just repeating history," said Schindler, who is now at the Counter Extremism Project.

He said he has seen IS "revert to the old type" of "classical terror attacks" and kidnapping for ransom, tactics that were once widely employed by al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The militants staged a dramatic resurgence after 2011, when US forces withdrew from Iraq and civil war broke out in neighboring Syria. Today some 5,200 American forces are based in Iraq, after they were invited back to help stem the IS rampage in 2014.

After President Donald Trump promised in December to pull American forces out of Syria, Iraqi lawmakers began clamoring for the US to leave, arguing that the mission against IS was approaching its end.

But with no letdown to IS militancy, those calls have petered out.

Iraq: 5 fishermen killed in suspected IS attack (Star Tribune) By Qassim Abdul-Zahra
February 23, 2019

An Iraqi security official says five fishermen have been killed in an attack by Islamic State group militants on a camp site near the Therthar lake, 100 kilometers (60 miles) northwest of Baghdad.

Naim Kaoud, head of the Anbar province security council, says the militants attacked the fishermen's site in the early hours of Saturday. Kaoud says three of the militiamen were wounded in a subsequent firefight.

A federal Iraqi security official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of media regulations, confirmed the casualties.

Hundreds of IS fighters have slipped into Iraq from Syria, The Associated Press reported Friday, to link up with 5,000 to 7,000 militants already in the country. The militants are believed to be behind a string of ambushes, kidnappings and killings in the countryside.

Iraq fears ISIS resurgence after killing of fishermen (The National) By Mina Aldroubi
February 24, 2019

Five fishermen have been killed in a suspected ISIS attack in Najaf province, raising fears that the extremist group is stepping up activity in Iraq as its fighters cling to their last patch of territory across the border in Syria.

The fishermen's bodies were found near Therthar lake in Najaf's Abbasid district on Saturday, according to the Iraq High Commission for Human Rights (IHCHR).

"Armed militants attacked the fishermen on Saturday morning," Ali Al Bayati, a board member, told The National.

Although no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, it fits in with a campaign of kidnappings and random killings by ISIS sleeper cells to undermine the Baghdad government.

Cells operating in four northern provinces have carried out abductions, assassinations, and roadside ambushes aimed at

intimidating locals and resuming the extortion rackets that financed ISIS's rise to power six years ago.

"It reflects the weakness of Iraq's intelligence system, which should have prevented these crimes," Mr Al Bayati said.

This is the group's new strategy, he said, with attacks increasing as ISIS lost ground in Iraq and Syria.

The killing of the fisherman came just a week after 19 people were abducted while truffle-hunting in the Al Nukhayb desert between the provinces of Najaf and Anbar. Seven were killed, nine have been released and three are still missing.

The victims' funerals were held on Wednesday in the holy city of Najaf, with their coffins covered in the national flag.

At its height in 2014 and 2015, ISIS ruled over a self-proclaimed "caliphate" that spanned one third of Iraqi and Syrian territory and attracted followers from all over the world.

Iraqi forces supported by a US-led international coalition slowly regained control of all the militant-held areas and the government declared victory over ISIS in December 2017.

ISIS emerged as an even more extremist offshoot of Al Qaeda in areas of Iraq where unemployment, lack of public services and anger at the government created conditions for locals to be radicalised. Thousands of its fighters and civilian followers have been killed and thousands more captured. An unknown number remain at large in both Syria and Iraq.

Iraqi security forces say US-backed Syrian forces have handed over about 300 captured Iraqi ISIS fighters in the past week. The Syrian Democratic Forces have besieged a small patch of land near the village of Baghouz, where hundreds of militants are fighting to retain the last sliver of the ISIS "caliphate".

The SDF offensive has been delayed by the need to evacuate thousands of civilians living alongside the militants.

US-Backed Syrian Forces Hand Over 280 Iraqi, Foreign Detainees to Iraq (Newsmax) February 24, 2019

U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have handed to Iraq 280 Iraqi and foreign detainees in recent days, Iraq's military said in a statement on Sunday.

An Iraqi military colonel confirmed to Reuters that 130 people were transferred on Sunday, adding to the 150 transferred on Thursday. They included the first known transfers of non-Iraqi detainees to Iraq, but it was unclear if they will remain in Iraqi custody.

There are meant to be more such handovers under an agreement to transfer a group of some 500 detainees held by the SDF in Syria, Iraqi military sources said.

Among the 280 were as many as 14 French citizens and six Arabs of unspecified nationality, according to one military source close to the handover process who commands troops near the Syrian border.

The Iraqi military has said only Iraqi nationals were handed over by the SDF.

Spokesmen for the SDF and U.S.-backed coalition could not immediately be reached for comment.

The mayor of the Iraqi border town of Al-Qaim, Ahmed al-Mahallawi, said on Thursday that some fighters' families had also been transferred.

"Early this morning, 10 trucks loaded with Daesh fighters and their families were handed over by SDF forces to the Iraqi army," he said, using the Arabic acronym for Islamic State.

Around 800 foreign jihadist fighters who joined Islamic State, including many Iraqis, are being held in Syria by the SDF, the group has said. More than 2,000 family members are also in camps, with dozens more arriving each day.

The fate of the detainees has become more pressing in recent days as U.S.-backed fighters plan their assault to capture the last remnants of the group's self-styled caliphate.

The militant group still poses a threat in Iraq and some western officials believe that Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, may still be hiding in the area.

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Syria

Syrian military linked to more than 300 chemical attacks, report says (The Washington Post) By

Louisa Loveluck

February 17, 2019

The Syrian government and affiliated forces have launched more than 300 attacks using chemical weapons during the country's nearly eight-year conflict, a report said Sunday.

The findings by the Berlin-based Global Public Policy Institute offer the most comprehensive record to date of presumed chemical weapons use in Syria, where the long war appears to be winding down.

The tally by the policy group also could be cited as part of any possible international war crimes cases against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI) said it had "credibly substantiated" 336 uses of chemical weapons, ranging from nerve agents to crude but dangerous chlorine bombs,

Almost all the attacks - 98 percent - were attributed to Assad's military or allied forces, including loyalist militias known as the Tiger Forces that also have the backing of Russia. The rest of the attacks were attributed to the Islamic State, which once held major parts of Syria.

The GPPI analysis begins Dec. 23, 2012. But the vast majority of the attacks it cites took place after then-President Barack Obama's 2013 declaration that use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians would be his administration's red line.

The researchers said they based their findings on witness statements and post-attack analysis, including reports of the effects from the apparent chemical agents and how the weapons were delivered on the attack sites.

"The Assad regime did not merely 'get away' with its use of these banned weapons," said the report. "It succeeded in using them for strategic ends."

With Syria's rebels on the verge of defeat and their former Gulf Arab backers reopening embassies in Damascus, Assad appears to be moving out of diplomatic isolation.

The United States remains a staunch opponent of Assad, although Washington holds little leverage over Syria. President Donald Trump announced last month plans to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria. Trump's claims that the Islamic State has been defeated, however, have brought sharp criticism from even political allies.

In the aftermath of a 2013 nerve agent attack on a Damascus suburb, Obama pulled U.S. warplanes back from the brink after a last-minute deal that was meant to see Assad relinquish his chemical stockpiles.

More than 72 tons were destroyed, but the attacks did not stop. The GPPI report said many of the subsequent attacks used chlorine, which turns into hydrochloric acid when inhaled. Exposure can damage the victim's respiratory system, and can lead to death in some cases.

Trump has twice ordered military action against Syrian government targets in the wake of high-profile chemical attacks, one on the northern town of Khan Sheikhoun and the other in the Damascus suburb of Douma.

There has been no recorded use of chlorine weapons in Syria since the last U.S. missile strike on April 14, 2018.

"The more we looked at the patterns associated with their use, the more we came to understand chemical weapons not as some special, separate evil, but as a key capability of the Syrian military as part of its broader campaign of indiscriminate violence," said Tobias Schneider, who led GPPI research team.

Medical workers and first responders in opposition-held areas say they have treated more than 5,000 people for suspected chemical exposure since 2012, adding strain to an already buckling health system. At least 188 people have died after chlorine attacks, according to estimates by medical workers and first responders.

In interviews with The Washington Post, doctors described the chaos they sparked.

"It felt like psychological torture, we just couldn't keep up," said one who had worked in the opposition-held town of Jobar, before it was recaptured by the Syrian government in March of last year.

"The bombs were bad enough, but when those other attacks started, we didn't know what to do."

Chemicals, he said, brought a different type of fear.

Reports that another town had been hit would glue colleagues to their phones, with WhatsApp messages rolling in and describing symptoms the doctor already knew well.

"We learned what chemicals do to a body, and why we should fear them. They made people crazy, they made people terrified. You know, it broke the spirit," the doctor said.

According to the data, Syria's army has consistently prioritized striking population centers over front lines, even in the face of defeat on the ground.

"The strategy worked," said Schneider. "It's hard to imagine other regimes facing similar challenges, looking at places like Sudan, are not studying the Syrian example closely."

The FBI Is Dismantling Its War Crimes Unit (Foreign Policy) By Aaron Glantz

February 18, 2019

The FBI is dismantling a special unit that investigates international war crimes and hunts down war criminals—including suspected torturers and perpetrators of genocide, *Reveal* from the Center for Investigative Reporting has learned.

The unit, which was created a decade ago and has its roots in federal efforts to hunt down Nazis living in the United States after World War II, has had a hand in many high-profile prosecutions.

Most recently, its investigators helped take down the Liberian warlord Thomas Woewiyu, whom agents found living a quiet life in Philadelphia. At trial, witnesses said Woewiyu's men herded civilians through checkpoints decorated with severed heads and strings of human intestines. He was convicted of perjury last July.

Now, human rights advocates worry that criminals like Woewiyu could evade justice.

"These are difficult cases to prove because they need rock-solid investigations," said Beth Van Schaack, a law professor at Stanford University who was deputy ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues in the Obama administration. Scrapping the FBI unit "is inevitably going to jeopardize prosecutions," she said.

In a statement, the FBI confirmed the shuttering of the war crimes unit but argued its dissolution "in no way reflects a reduced commitment by the FBI" to enforce human rights law. The agents previously dedicated to human rights work will continue that work as members of the FBI's civil rights program, the agency said.

But the move could run afoul of Congress, which mandated the unit's establishment and funds its work every year as part of the FBI's budget. Sources tell *Reveal* that most of the agents previously dedicated to human rights likely will now be assigned to other jobs and worry that perpetrators of torture and genocide will be free to act with impunity.

In addition to finding international war criminals living in the United States, the FBI's human rights unit also has investigated and apprehended perpetrators of war crimes against Americans abroad, along with Americans who commit war crimes themselves—such as military contractors accused of killing civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan or U.S. citizens who fight alongside the Islamic State. All those efforts now could fall through the cracks.

Human rights advocates, who have become increasingly concerned with President Donald Trump's embrace of ruthless autocrats such as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, worry that the move could be political.

"We worry when we see something go from a tweet that is very hostile to a policy that is very hostile," said Dixon Osburn, the executive director of the Center for Justice and Accountability, a legal nonprofit that brings human rights cases in civil court.

UN concerned over 200 families 'trapped' in last ISIL enclave (AlJazeera) February 19, 2019

About 200 families are trapped in a shrinking area of Syria controlled by ISIL with its

fighters preventing many from fleeing, the UN human rights chief said on Tuesday, accusing the armed group of possible war crimes.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, known as ISIS) is on the brink of defeat in its last pocket in eastern Syria, the village of Baghouz, where about 300 fighters and 2,000 civilians are under siege by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Many of the families continue to face intensified air and ground attacks by US-led coalition forces, the UN's Michelle Bachelet said in a statement.

"We understand that ISIL appears to be preventing some of them, if not all of them, from leaving. So, that's potentially a war crime on the part of ISIL," her spokesman Rupert Colville told a news briefing.

US-backed forces said they were trying to evacuate civilians from ISIL's last sliver of territory and warned fighters to surrender or face death.

"We are working on secluding and evacuating civilians and then, we will attack. This could happen soon," SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali said.

The front line in Baghouz was largely quiet on Tuesday. Devastated buildings and the twisted skeletons of cars dotted the side of the road.

Baghouz is the main front in the nearly eight-year war that has killed hundreds of thousands of people and sent millions fleeing Syria.

What next as battle against ISIL nears an end?

Colville said SDF troops attacking ISIL have an obligation under international law to take all precautions to protect civilians mixed in with the fighters.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said some 50 trucks entered the ISIL-held area on Tuesday, apparently to bring out some of the people trapped inside.

Idlib offensive

In Syria's northwest, meanwhile, Syrian government forces and their allies have intensified a bombing campaign in Idlib and surrounding areas in recent weeks, coupled with attacks by armed groups that have killed civilians, Bachelet said.

Twin explosions in the bustling centre of rebel-held Idlib city on Monday killed at least 16 people and wounded 70, she noted.

"Large numbers of civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in Idlib and northern Aleppo, are living an intolerable existence," said Bachelet.

She also voiced concern for about 20,000 people who fled ISIL-controlled areas in eastern Deir Az Zor governorate in recent weeks.

They are being held in makeshift camps run by Kurdish armed groups, including SDF, which are reportedly preventing IDPs from leaving, she said.

"Particular care needs to be taken with the civilians and if possible they should be treated humanely, and allowed to leave the camps. They shouldn't be held in detention unless they are suspected of committing a particular crime," Colville said.

Humanitarian corridors

Near the border with Jordan, in the country's south, the Syrian government on Tuesday opened two humanitarian passages with the assistance of Russian troops for people in a tent settlement who want to move to other parts of the country, the Russian defence ministry said.

The Rukban camp is home to some 40,000 displaced people, mostly women and children, who suffer from lack of food and medical supplies.

Al Jazeera's Imran Khan, reporting from Gaziantep on the Turkey-Syria border, said it remained unclear if there was any communication between the rebel group, Free Syrian Army that controls the camp, and Russian and Syrian government forces to allow civilians to join the humanitarian corridors.

"The clock is ticking," Khan said. "These humanitarian corridors are only open for 24 hours."

Last week, the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered badly needed humanitarian assistance to Rukban as Russia offered to help relocate those willing to move to government-held areas in Syria.

Jordan closed the border over security concerns and the Syrian government and its ally, Russia, have blamed US troops stationed nearby for failing to provide security for aid shipments - allegations denied by the Americans.

UN rights chief 'alarmed' by upsurge in attacks against civilians in Syria's Idlib (United Nations)

February 19, 2019

Since December, the intensified ground-based bombardment of the city, located in the north-west of the country, coupled with a series of attacks by non-State actors, has led to numerous civilian casualties and left close to a million people, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in an extremely vulnerable situation, her statement explained.

"Large numbers of civilians, including hundreds of thousands of displaced people, in Idlib and northern Aleppo are living an intolerable existence," said Ms. Bachelet.

"They are trapped between the escalation of hostilities and bombardment on the one hand, and, on the other, are forced to live under the extremist rule of Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham and other extremist fighters who regularly carry out targeted killings, abductions and arbitrary detention."

The High Commissioner called on "all parties involved, as well as external governments with influence, to ensure that the protection of civilians is held paramount in the planning and execution of all military operations in accordance with international law".

Idlib and areas of northern Hama and western Aleppo governorates, are part of a "demilitarized buffer zone" but, for over two months, violence has escalated again, including an increase of infighting amongst non-State actors and in the use of improvised explosive devices in areas they control, including by the extremist group, Hay'at Tahrir Al-Sham.

While the UN human rights office (OHCHR) notes that a comprehensive count of civilian casualties has not been possible, some of the most recent incidents include: 11 civilians killed and nine injured on 29 January following a ground-based bombardment in a residential and market area; 11 civilians killed by shelling in different areas on 12 February; at least nine killed and nine injured on 15 and 16 February in Khan Shaykun in southern Idlib; 16 civilians killed and more than 70 injured on Monday by two explosive devices in the Qusour neighbourhood of Idlib.

The list of fatalities includes a high number of women and children.

"I urge all the parties involved to, first and foremost, ensure that civilians themselves, and civilian infrastructure, are protected as required by international humanitarian and international human rights law," the High Commissioner said.

"The principles of distinction, proportionality and precaution must be fully respected, and military objects must not be placed in the vicinity of civilians," she added.

Ms. Bachelet also expressed concern about the well-being of some 20,000 people who fled ISIL-controlled areas in eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate in recent weeks and are now being held in makeshift camps for displaced persons run by Kurdish armed groups.

According to OHCHR, these include the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who are reported to be preventing IDPs from leaving the camps in what appears to amount to deprivation of liberty.

She added she remains "particularly concerned" about the situation of some 200 families, including many women and children, who are reportedly trapped in the tiny area still under the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and are apparently being actively prevented from leaving by ISIL.

The UN rights chief said they "continue to be subjected to intensified air and ground-based strikes by the US-led coalition forces and their SDF allies on the ground".

"Civilians continue to be used as pawns by the various parties," Ms. Bachelet lamented, calling on responsible parties "to provide safe passage to those who wish to flee, while those wish to remain must also be protected as much as possible".

"They should not be sacrificed to ideology on the one hand, or military expediency on the other. If protecting civilian lives

means taking a few more days to capture the last fraction of land controlled by ISIL, then so be it," she stated.

The Latest: Case filed in Sweden against Syrian officials (San Francisco Gate) February 20, 2019

1:45 p.m. A European human rights group says nine Syrians have filed a criminal complaint in Sweden against senior officials in Syrian President Bashar Assad's government.

The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, which works to assist survivors of torture in Syria, says the aim was to have Sweden investigate 25 named intelligence officials "as well as those not yet known by name" and issue international arrest warrants.

The Berlin-based non-governmental organization said Wednesday the complaint in Sweden follows similar moves already taken in several European countries.

The arrests earlier this month of three suspects in Germany and France marked a breakthrough for international investigators hoping to hold individuals accountable for atrocities committed on behalf of the Syrian government during the country's eight-year civil war.

12:50 p.m.

A convoy of trucks carrying civilians has left the last enclave held by Islamic State militants in eastern Syria.

An Associated Press team says at least eight trucks emerged Wednesday from the tip of a humanitarian corridor used in past weeks to evacuate people from the militants' last patch of territory along the Euphrates River.

Women, children and men could be seen aboard the trucks.

Mustafa Bali, a spokesman for the Syrian Democratic Forces, the U.S.-backed militia spearheading the fight against IS in Syria, confirmed the trucks were carrying civilians from the enclave.

It was not immediately clear if militants were also on board the trucks. Around 300 militants are believed to be holed up in the enclave, along with several hundred civilians.

International Conscience Movement calls for release of Syrian women and children (EU Reporter)

By Colin Stevens

February 20, 2019

A major conference has been held in Istanbul, Turkey by the International Conscience Movement, an NGO who's aim is to attention to the suffering of women who are being tortured, raped, executed, imprisoned and made refugees since the beginning of the war in Syria.

Their aim is to make advocacy and initiate diplomatic attempts to release all female prisoners unlawfully held in Syria, and to invite all humanity to take effective measures to protect women and girls in conflict and war.

Over 90 delegates from 45 countries were present to listen to strong testimony from Syrian women who have had first hand experience of torture and imprisonment at the hands of the Syrian regime.

Messages of support were received from politicians, human rights organisations, NGOs and individuals from over 110 countries.

The International Conscience Movement launched a message to the world, which says:

"We, as the human family, are repeatedly warned in all religious and moral texts in order not to fight, or in the case of war put on notice to respect human, moral and legal rules. However, at the present time, even if almost all of the states are a party to international conventions, crimes against humanity continue to be committed in the war geographies, which are becoming more and more violent and pushing the limits of reason. And we can neither punish those who commit these crimes, nor can we stop these cruel practices. We all know that history of humanity is full of bloody battles.

When we look at every hundred years of the last 7000 years of world history, only 13 years have lived in peace. We failed to prevent wars, but unfortunately we always managed to die and kill the masses! We know that people around the world have suffered a lot, and continue to do so. The two world wars of the last century are the wars that are mentioned today with great sadness and held up as an example. In these battles, millions of people died in every colour from all over the world. However,

each of the taken lives was just as precious as our very own lives, and each one's dreams were as colourful and rich as our dreams.

Their loved ones were dear as much as our beloved ones. Numerous war crimes have been committed in these wars. Almost every house, every street, every mosque, every church, every synagogue prayed to never ever suffer again; but neither the battles are over nor the suffering... Another brutal war that the world has seen began in March 2011 in SYRIA. During the Syrian war, we witnessed many war crimes and crimes against humanity accompanied by live broadcasts and we continue to be: We watched the children who have been killed by prohibited chemical and biological weapons, barrel bombs and who died in agony.

Torture, rape, executions, mass killings, mass graves, deportation of millions of people and many persecutions... According to official records, more than 450,000 people died during the war in Syria. The number of unrecorded deaths and losses is unknown. Up until today, over 13,500 women have been sentenced and over 7,000 women are still tortured, raped every day in these prisons and exposed to inhumane oppression. The Syrian regime has used rape as a weapon and continues to use it. The number of people held in buildings empty factory, hangar etc. used as prisons is unknown. Some women were taken while pregnant and gave birth in places where they were held; some women were imprisoned with their children...

Some women have been raped repeatedly where they have been held and forced to give birth to children who were the result of rape. The UN Independent International Syrian Research Commission noted that fewer cases of sexual violence were reported for reasons such as stigmatization and trauma. The relevant international conventions, in particular the Geneva Conventions, have introduced regulations for the non-destruction of the civilian population and the prevention of human rights violations in the conditions of war. The 4th of the Geneva Conventions are organized specifically for the rights of the civilian population. Basically, in this context, "Everyone is entitled to enjoyment of the basic legal guarantees. No one can be held responsible for a crime he has not committed. No one shall be subjected to physical and psychological torture, to corporal punishment, or to indignity or degrading treatment. The conflicting parties and armed forces do not have an unlimited choice of methods and means of war. It is forbidden to use combat vehicles and methods that will lead to unlimited, excessive pain and unnecessary losses. The conflicting parties will always differentiate between the civilian population and the fighters in order to protect the civilian population; neither the civilian population nor the civilians would be the target of the attack."

Because we are human! In addition, the Geneva Conventions regulated specifically the protection of women: • Women will be subject to special respect and will be protected more particularly against rape, forced prostitution and all other kinds of immoral attacks. • The conditions of pregnant women and mothers with dependent children, who are arrested or detained in respect of armed conflict, shall be evaluated in maximum. • The parties, in maximum, shall endeavour to refrain from obeying the death penalty for pregnant women or women with dependent children due to an offense of conflict. Death penalty for such crimes will not be performed on women having these characteristics.

Also according to the four Geneva Conventions of Common Article 3. "High Contracting Parties in the case of conflict, an armed non-international character occurring in the territory, each of the parties to the conflict shall at least be obliged to apply the following provisions: Persons, including the armed forces who left their weapons and non-combatant ones because of illness, injury, arrest or any other reason, who do not take an active part in collisions will be treated in all conditions without discrimination according to race, colour, religion and belief, gender, birth or wealth or a similar criterion. For this purpose, the persons mentioned above shall be prohibited to do the following treatments anywhere and by any means: a) violence against life and person; in particular all kinds of killing, cruel behaviour and torture b) Hostage c) Infringement upon personal dignity, especially humiliating and degrading behaviour d) Penalization and execution of penalties without a regular court decision, which provides all judicial guarantees accepted as indispensable by civilized nations International conventions, states that must effectively implement these conventions, international jurisdiction mechanisms and all components of the international community recognize that people are under guard of these basic principles and public conscience even in cases that are not regulated by the legal rules.

The protection of human life and dignity is a fundamental principle. We believe that the effect of the law and the manifestation of justice can only be possible if the action of PUBLIC CONSCIENCE and SENSE OF HUMANITY is activated. We all know that PEACE is the most BENEFICIAL for all people. But it is not as easy as war to build peace. Nevertheless, we want a law for war too, to prevent the brutality. BECAUSE we're HUMAN and we want to do befitting a human being. We say war must have law, have morality. Whether it is an international war or a local war or conflict, the above is a war crime, and everyone responsible for it must be prosecuted and accounted for not only the victims but also the whole human family. Who we are?

WE are silent scream rising from the Syrian dungeons. We are sense of humanity. We are the believers of that people, regardless of their religion, language, race, colour, must live in a dignified and humane way without being tortured and persecuted. We are the prayers and words that rise from the hearts and lips of all the people on earth, for the freedom of every women and children prisoners who are cruelly incarcerated in the Syrian war. WE, for all of us, believe that a just world where human rights are protected can only be possible with the freedom of Syrian women and children. And WE ARE RIGHT NOW! WE WANT FREEDOM FOR IMPRISONED WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN SYRIA"

Germany 'seeks extradition' of Syria's Jamil Hassan from Lebanon (AlJazeera) By Anchal Vohra
February 23, 2019

Germany has asked Lebanon to extradite Syrian General Jamil Hassan, Der Spiegel reported, after the notorious chief of Syria's Air Force Intelligence Directorate was reportedly admitted to a hospital in Lebanon. The German federal prosecutor had issued an arrest warrant against the general in June for committing crimes against humanity based on a complaint filed by Syrian refugees in Germany.

Thousands of Syrians have allegedly been tortured in detention centres under the direct control of General Hassan, Syria's longest-serving intelligence chief and considered to be among the most powerful officials in the country.

Al-Masdar, an Arabic-language news outlet, first reported on Thursday that General Hassan was in Lebanon to seek medical treatment. There has been no official confirmation on his whereabouts since. Anwar al-Bunni, a Germany-based Syrian human rights lawyer, told Al Jazeera that his sources informed him that General Hassan was being treated under the watch of Hezbollah, the Iran-backed political group and militia, and a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

"I found out through sources in Syria and then through those in Lebanon that Jamil Hassan was in a hospital in Lebanon under Hezbollah's protection," said Bunni, who is helping former Syrian prisoners seeking justice in European countries.

"Germany's foreign office called me to find out what I knew and I told them. I think they must have also collected their own intelligence."

General Hassan is a member of al-Assad's inner circle and a vociferous proponent of tougher tactics to quell the uprising that began in 2011. The US Treasury Department froze his assets because of his role in cracking down on protesters that year.

Patrick Kroker, a lawyer with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights which has also facilitated the filing of the case against General Hassan in Germany, said that the idea behind Germany's diplomatic move is to restrict the general's movement and send a message that Berlin is determined to not just "chase but also catch Hassan".

"This is big," he said. "It means that Germany did not issue the arrest warrant for symbolic reasons but is really going after him."

However, Germany has shied away from officially confirming the extradition request. Al Jazeera reached out to the country's federal prosecutor's office but had yet to receive a response at the time of publication. Lebanon's Interior Ministry denied receiving any notification from Interpol to arrest the general.

Michael Aoun, Lebanon's president, said that if General Hassan was in Lebanon, his office did not know. "If he (General Hassan) sneaked in because of the difficulty of controlling the border, it must be investigated," Aoun said.

Aoun's political party, the Free Patriotic Movement, is an ally of Hezbollah in the Lebanese parliament. However, experts said information about the possible whereabouts of the Syrian general may well have been concealed from him.

"Lebanon is under the control of Hezbollah which will never let the Lebanese government send the Syrian general to Germany," Bunni said.

Kroker agreed and said that while chances of Lebanon handing the general over might be slim, the message is clear. "He cannot rely on the benevolence of every country he travels to, not for long."

Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and its citizens, therefore, cannot be prosecuted in The Hague. Furthermore, Russia and China have vetoed several attempts to set up an international tribunal to adjudicate on the crimes, purportedly to protect high-ranking officials in the Syrian administration such as General Hassan. However, Germany's universal jurisdiction laws allow it to prosecute people for war crimes committed anywhere in the world. Just last week, two Syrian intelligence officials were apprehended by German law enforcement. Anwar R was arrested for his involvement in torturing Syrians between 2011-12 and Eyad A for assisting in the killing of two and torturing of at least 2,000 people.

Kroker attached huge significance to the arrests. "For the first time, there will be a trial and Syrians would be able to see that it is possible to get justice. In all likelihood, it would be a public trial."

These two officials were in Germany while General Hassan is unlikely to ever set foot in Europe. Germany cannot prosecute in absentia, leading experts to believe that he would escape a trial.

The state of human rights and freedoms in Ukraine, Venezuela, Syria, Myanmar, South Sudan, Yemen and in almost three dozen states will be considered during the 40th session of the UN Human Rights Council opening on Monday in Geneva (February 25 - March 22). Such topics as protecting children from violence, respecting human rights in the fight against terrorism, preventing torture, ensuring freedom of religion and cultural rights, fighting discrimination against minorities, protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, and privacy in the digital age will also be discussed.

The first three days of the session are traditionally devoted to discussions in the high-level segment. More than 90 states will present their vision of current human rights issues. On Monday, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin will speak at a session representing Russia. As the Russian Foreign Ministry reported earlier, on the sidelines of the session, events will be organized on the subject of combating discrimination on the basis of language together with Russian non-profit organizations.

This year, Russia is not among the 47 countries of the Council. Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva Gennady Gatilov said earlier that Moscow has enough opportunities to promote its initiatives.

An interactive discussion on Ukraine is scheduled for March 20, Congo - March 19, Syria - March 12, Myanmar - March 11, reports on Venezuela, Colombia and Yemen will be presented on March 20.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, President of the UN General Assembly Maria Fernanda Espinosa, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet will speak at the opening session on February 25. On the first day, the forum is scheduled for speeches by representatives of more than 30 states, including Presidents of Tunisia and Congo, Prime Ministers of Yemen and Fiji, and Foreign Ministers of Turkey and Georgia.

Syria still suffering 'staggering levels' of humanitarian need, Security Council hears (UN News)
February 26, 2019

Speaking on behalf of UN emergency relief chief Mark Lowcock, Reena Ghelani, OCHA's Director for Operations and Advocacy, said that this year, an estimated 11.7 million people will require life-saving humanitarian assistance across the country.

Nearly eight years on since mass-protests first began against the Syrian Government in 2011, she painted a picture of what life is like for some 41,000 displaced mainly women and children in Rukban camp, near the Syria-Jordan border, calling it "a dire humanitarian situation" where people struggled for survival, face hunger and lacked the most basic necessities.

Although the UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent delivered essential aid, as part of the largest convoy of the entire war - vaccines and logistical items in 133 trucks during a 10-day mission earlier this month - "the gravity of the situation for civilians in Rukban means that sustained humanitarian access is needed moving forward", she explained, noting that supplies are expected to last "only 30 days."

Moreover, she flagged that internally displaced persons (IDPs) expressed concerns over their lack of documentation, safety and security, worrying particularly about detention and military conscription.

The UN remains "extremely concerned" for civilians who remain in the last ISIL-held areas in south-eastern Deir-ez-Zor Governorate, and for those who were able to flee the fighting, Ms. Ghelani told the Council.

She pointed out that since late last year, over 37,000 people fled from Hajin to the A1-Hol camp some 300 kilometres to the north, where "three-quarters of the total population...is now made up of women and children under the age of five." Moreover, thousands more are expected to arrive at in the coming days.

"Response efforts are being scaled up in Al Hol camp, but also in Hajin and surrounding areas, despite considerable security challenges," she stated. Adding that the UN had established a transit centre midway between Hajin and A1 Hol.

Meanwhile, although the demilitarized-zone agreement between Turkey and Russia to protect millions of civilians in Idlib staved off an immediate escalation of fighting in the last rebel-held enclave in Syria, dozens of civilians have still died or been injured due to conflict increased fighting over the last few weeks.

She thanked donors for their generous \$5 billion support in 2018 and urged Member States to "ensure timely funding" for

humanitarian operations in Syria and neighboring refugee-hosting countries in 2019.

“The [pledging] Conference in Brussels on 12-14 March will be a critical marker in this regard”, Ms. Ghelani said.

Yemen sanctions renewed

Earlier on Tuesday, the Security Council adopted a resolution renewing for a year, financial and travel ban sanctions against any actors who threaten the peace, security and stability of Yemen.

The Council also reaffirmed a 2015 arms embargo against the Houthi rebel group and forces loyal to the deceased former president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and his son Ahmed Saleh.

In addition to renewing the sanctions, it extended the mandate of the Yemen Panel of Experts until March 2020, requesting that an update be presented to the Yemen Sanctions Committee by the end of July, and a final report to the Council by 28 January next year.

Last week, the Council issued a press statement stressing the “critical importance” of the parties’ implementing their commitments under the Stockholm Agreement, and called for “the immediate implementation” of the first phase of the redeployment of forces.

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Yemen

Land Mines Block Saudi-Led Assault in Yemen, Killing Civilians (New York Times) By David D. Kirkpatrick
February 17, 2019

Desperate to break through enemy lines, the Saudi-backed forces fighting in Yemen are sending untrained soldiers to clear minefields, sometimes using only their bayonets.

“I removed two and the third one exploded,” said Sultan Hamad, a 39-year-old Yemeni soldier who lost a leg clearing mines on the front line near Marib, an ancient city in central Yemen. He was among more than a half dozen soldiers waiting at a clinic in Marib to be fitted for prosthetic limbs.

Nearly four years after Saudi Arabia plunged into Yemen’s civil war, Saudi and Yemeni commanders say that hundreds of thousands of unmarked land mines planted by their opponents, the Houthis, have emerged as perhaps their most formidable defense.

The hidden explosives, the commanders say, have helped keep the conflict close to a standstill despite the superior air power and other resources of the Saudi-led coalition.

The mines have also killed as many as 920 civilians and wounded thousands, according to mine removal experts. Rights groups and other monitors say the minefields will leave Yemen riddled with buried explosives that could kill or maim unsuspecting civilians for decades before the devices can all be removed, as they have in Afghanistan, Colombia and Cambodia.

“The scale of the problem is exceptionally large, and the impact is horrendous,” said Loren Persi Vicentic of Landmine Monitor, an independent nonprofit group. “Most of the casualties we see reported are civilians.”

A Western mine-removal company hired by the Saudis estimates that the Houthis have laid more than a million mines, more than one for every 30 Yemenis and a concentration as high as that in any other country since World War II.

Crouching behind a low stone wall over the edge of a ridge in the district of Nehim on a recent overcast afternoon, Brig. Gen. Mohsen al-Khabi could almost make out the distant lights of Sanaa, the Houthi-controlled capital, just 23 miles away.

But those 23 miles might as well be 500, he said. The Houthis had planted so many land mines among the winding roads and scattered settlements of the valley, the advance of his Yemeni forces had all but ground to halt, stuck for three years in virtually the same position.

“The problem is the enemy’s inhumane weapons, the land mines and improvised explosives,” he said.

The Geneva Conventions prohibit the use of hidden mines and anti-personnel mines.

The Houthis, who control much of northern Yemen, did not respond to questions for this article. Despite the civilian casualties, Houthi officials have said that they use only anti-tank mines and only on battlefields, not mines triggered by human footsteps or in civilian areas.

“This is a war, so what do you expect us to do?” Brig. Gen. Yahia al-Sarie, a Houthi officer, told The Associated Press in December. “Receive the other side with flowers?”

During a trip to Yemen last month arranged by the Saudi-led coalition, The New York Times examined scores of defused land mines and interviewed doctors, soldiers and victims about them.

Saudi Arabia may be eager to call attention to the Houthi mines to counterbalance allegations that the kingdom and its principal ally, the United Arab Emirates, have committed war crimes by conducting airstrikes that have killed thousands of civilians and imposing a partial blockade that has threatened Yemen with famine. Some of their airstrikes have dropped cluster munitions, which can pose a long-term threat similar to that of land mines.

But all or almost all of the land mines and other explosive devices buried in Yemen appear to have been planted by the Houthis, independent monitors say. Mining is a tactic typically employed by a military force defending territory or retreating from it, as the Houthis have been since the Saudi-led intervention began.

The Saudis also say the mines provide new evidence of Houthi ties to the kingdom’s regional rival, Iran.

Over the last four years, the Saudis have recovered several Houthi missile parts that Saudi and Western officials say came from Iran.

Now an independent group, Conflict Armament Research, has concluded that certain components of mines or similar victim-triggered bombs made by the Houthis also “originate in Iran.” The group’s report was financed in part by the United Arab Emirates but also by Western governments and the European Union.

Markings on many of the older mines recovered by the Saudi-backed forces indicate that they were manufactured in Russia or Eastern Europe. The Houthis, an armed movement based in northern Yemen, may have obtained those from the stockpiles of the former government in Sanaa, which the Houthis captured at the end of 2014.

But the Houthis also appear to have established factories to mass produce thousands of their own pie-shaped land mines, each with its own Arabic serial number, according to Conflict Armament Research and other experts. Mine removal teams have dubbed the locally made mines “Yemeni large,” at about 11 pounds, and “Yemeni small,” about 9 pounds.

On a visit to the district of Hairan, in the desert of northern Yemen, Saudi-backed Yemeni soldiers showed off what they said were Houthi land mines, some disguised as small boulders with hidden infrared motion detectors. Nearby was a heaping pile of what the soldiers said was more than 4,000 mines of the pie-shaped Yemeni variety that had been recovered over the previous two months.

The Houthis were “carpeting the ground” with them, said Deif Ahmed Abdullah Saleh, a Yemeni army officer.

Saudi military officers said that the Houthis have also planted land mines inside Saudi Arabia, which may raise questions about the effectiveness of the kingdom’s border security.

The Houthis, said Brig. Gen. Faisal bin Yahia Hakami, the Saudi officer in charge of the border area around Jazan, “sneak inside the border of Saudi Arabia, they plant land mines and they run away.”

He said there were “a lot, a lot of military casualties inside the border.”

Last month, a Houthi mine blew up a family car inside Jazan province, killing a 10-year-old child, according to a Saudi military spokesman and Saudi news reports. Officials told the Saudi news agency that heavy rainfall had carried the mine across the border from Yemen.

At a clinic in Marib, soldiers were lined up awaiting rudimentary artificial limbs to replace missing feet or legs — each essentially a plastic mold to fit over a stump and a steel rod extending from the mold to the ground.

Muhammad Shumaila, a 32-year-old soldier from the southern province of Baida, had lost both feet.

“We don’t have time to defuse the land mines,” he said. “We just clear a path. If we focused on demining we would never advance.”

Yemeni officers said their forces often had no better way to clear mines than prodding them with bayonets.

“This is due to lack of capabilities,” said Zeid al-Harissi, a Yemeni army officer. His forces lack modern mine detectors as well as people trained to use them, he said, adding, “Primitive methods are easy and fast to learn.”

Dr. Muhammad Abdo al-Qubati, who runs the facility, said that 90 percent of the limb-replacement patients were hit by land mines. He said the clinic had made more than 900 artificial limbs for more than 600 people over the previous year and a half.

“The mines are our problem, the reason for the miserable situation we are suffering,” he said.

Aff Jameel, a soldier from Taiz, a city in southwest Yemen, who said his age was about 21 or 22, said he was pitching a tent in captured territory when a land mine took off both his legs below the knees.

A boy named Saleh Raken, who gave his age as 10 but looked closer to 5, had been running with two playmates near his home in Baida, he said, when a land mine blew off his lower leg.

Saleh, who is unable to read, entertains himself by playing games on his brother’s cellphone, when it has enough battery power.

“I am bored,” he said, with a gaptoothed smile. “No one plays with me.”

Children like Saleh need to new artificial limbs every six months to accommodate their growth, the doctor said.

Saudi Arabia says it will spend \$40 million on a program to teach Yemeni civilians state-of-the-art mine removal practices and to begin extracting mines from residential areas around Yemen.

The project’s manager, Ousama Algosaibi, said the project is a partnership with the British company Dynasafe, which had brought in experienced specialists from around the world. They had trained about 420 Yemenis, and the expatriates and Yemenis are now working in 32 teams around the country, including in Houthi-controlled areas.

“We do not take sides,” Mr. Algosaibi said.

Over seven months, he said, the teams have cleared about 41,000 mines, out of the estimated total of more than a million.

Many of their expatriate experts have moved from one conflict zone to another together for more than 15 years. In one group of veteran deminers working near Marib — from Bosnia, Kosovo, Croatia and two from South Africa — two had lost limbs in previous conflicts.

Last month, material they were transporting exploded. All five were killed.

Yemen government urges US to list Houthis as foreign terrorist organization (The National) By Mina Aldroubi
February 21, 2019

Yemen's government has urged the US to designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organisation, citing the Iran-backed rebels' human rights record.

The Minister of Information, Muammar Al Iryani, said late on Wednesday that the crimes committed by some members of the Houthi group amount to war crimes.

“Since the start of the war, Houthi rebels have mobilised a generation of Yemeni youths, in areas that are under their control, with terror and aggressive ideologies,” Mr Al Iryani said during a meeting with the US Ambassador to Yemen, Mathew Tueller.

The minister listed Houthi abuses against civilians as ranging from rape, torture, to disappearances, adding he did not believe the rebels were serious about finding a peaceful solution to the ongoing conflict.

Both the Trump and the Obama administration have examined the issue at hand, but both have been inconclusive.

Experts have previously warned this could complicate UN efforts to push for a political solution.

Designating the group as a terror organisation could result in the freezing of assets of its members, as well as travel restrictions and other penalties against those suspected of supporting the group.

The development came as Houthi representatives met with European officials in Brussels on Thursday.

Abdel Malik Al Ajri, rebel representative, said discussions focused on Yemen's humanitarian and political crisis and the reopening of Sanaa airport.

The airport was closed to commercial traffic in 2016, leaving thousands of Yemenis with no practical way of leaving the country. Any reopening would require an agreement between Yemen's warring sides.

Efforts were stalled during UN-led peace talks in Sweden last December, where the two sides failed to come to a unified conclusion.

Experts have repeatedly stressed that only negotiations between the two sides can lead to a political solution to the war.

"In general, in order to end a conflict, you must talk to everyone and a key question here is how these conversations are being framed," Adam Baron, visiting fellow at ECFR and International security program fellow at new America, told The National.

The war in Yemen has killed tens of thousands of civilians and has left millions suffering from food and medical shortages, pushing the country to the brink of famine.

Humanitarian chiefs concerned over Saudi and UAE aid funding for Yemen (Middle East Eye) By James Reinl
February 25, 2019

Humanitarian aid leaders have accused Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates of double standards over their large donations to Yemen, claiming that the two Gulf countries give large cash flows amid their vicious military campaign in the war-torn country.

Riyadh and Abu Dhabi are expected to pledge a sizeable chunk of money ahead of Tuesday's \$4.2bn fundraising drive in Geneva to get food, medicine and other aid to 24 million Yemenis.

While these donations doubtless save lives, aid chiefs note that Yemen's oil-rich neighbours have also been implicated in war crimes in Yemen, including bombing villages, torture and the use of child soldiers.

Jan Egeland, who previously headed United Nations aid operations, railed against the "hypocrisy of nations trading in arms or raining down shells and bombs on Yemeni civilians" in a strongly worded statement on Monday.

Egeland, head of the charity Norwegian Refugee Council, said 60 percent of last year's aid to Yemen came from Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the US, which has helped its Arab allies' war effort with arms, intelligence and aerial refuelling.

"They have, with other nations on both sides, contributed to the war, which has produced the shocking 24 million Yemenis in need of aid. That is more than three-fourths of the entire Yemeni population," Egeland said.

Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF director in the Middle East, said the UN children's agency had decided to continue taking cash from the UAE and Saudi Arabia because it paid for vaccination drives and other life-saving schemes.

"It was not an easy decision to make," Cappelaere told MEE.

"Even having received the money, UNICEF has never stopped being vocal about parties to the conflict, when, even having shown generosity, they continue killing children, maiming children, when schools and health facilities and water points are destroyed."

Manuel Bessler, aid chief for the government of Switzerland, which is co-hosting this week's meeting, said the fundraising goal was "astronomical" and that cash from the Middle East and Asia was needed to supplement Western donations.

Bessler said it was "important to have financial resources" from regional powers "even when they are party to the conflict" but added that this did not give them a free pass to kill civilians or bomb schools and hospitals.

"It is important, however, to emphasise that this does not in no way free them from observation of international humanitarian law," Bessler told MEE.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in Yemen in 2015 in a bid to restore President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government after the Houthi rebels in late 2014 ousted it from power in the capital, Sanaa.

The conflict, widely seen as a proxy war between Riyadh and Tehran, has been locked in a bloody stalemate that has claimed some 65,000 lives and pushed 10 million people to the brink of famine, while 7 million people suffer from malnutrition.

All sides have been accused of committing atrocities. Last year, UN experts wrote a report on the Saudi-led coalition's blockade around Yemen, blasting the coalition's air strikes on "markets, funerals, weddings, detention facilities, civilian boats and even medical facilities".

The report also accused the Houthis of using child soldiers and shelling civilians.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE claim they do their best to minimise civilian deaths. Their diplomatic missions to the UN did not immediately respond to MEE's interview requests on Monday.

Of the total \$5.2bn aid money provided for Yemen last year, the UAE gave 38.3 percent while 22 percent came from Saudi Arabia and 11.5 percent from the US, according to the UN's financial tracking service.

Delegations from some 90 countries are expected in Geneva on Tuesday, including China and other "non-traditional" donors from the Middle East and Asia, said Bessler. He hoped to achieve more than three-quarters of the \$4.2bn target.

Envoys will hear keynote speeches from UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Sweden's foreign minister Margot Wallstrom and others and take part in sessions on tackling hunger and rebuilding Yemen's ravaged economy.

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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

Palestinians Report 20 Gaza Protestors Injured by IDF (The Jerusalem Post) By Khaled Abu Toameh, Tovah Lazaroff
February 20, 2019

Twenty Palestinians were wounded on Tuesday during clashes with the IDF in the northern Gaza Strip, the Hamas-controlled Ministry of Health said.

The Palestinians were participating in the Hamas-sponsored "naval protest" near the Bet Lahia beach, according to Hamas sources. The soldiers used tear-gas to disperse the "peaceful" protesters, the sources said.

The Palestinian Red Crescent organization claimed that seven Palestinians were wounded by gunfire. Two of them were said to have sustained moderate wounds. The remaining Palestinians were taken to the hospital for tear-gas inhalation, the organization said.

The IDF said that its soldiers had responded to a violent riot of some 150 protesters who threw stones and rolled burning tires at the security forces. Some of the protesters also attempted to place explosive devices by the barrier.

Gaza border protests have been heating up as media outlets reported that Qatar is unlikely to renew its funding pledge to provide fuel for the Gaza power plant. Qatar pledged \$150 million to Gaza in the fall in an attempt to alleviate humanitarian suffering in the Hamas ruled Gaza Strip.

The United Nations and Israel hold that such funds would help quell Palestinian violence and help prevent an outbreak of hostilities between the IDF and Hamas that could lead to war.

In January Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding with the UN in January to provide \$20m. over the course of the next year for Palestinians in need.

It had already given \$30m. in cash to Hamas in November and December of last year. In January it gave \$10m. to 94,000 poor Gaza families, which was broken down to \$100 per family. It's still expected to distribute three more payments of \$10m. each to Gaza.

In addition, Qatar pledged \$60m. for fuel for a period of roughly six months that ends in April. Qatar had never spoken of renewing that pledge, but it is now presumed that no more money will be immediately forthcoming for Gaza fuel.

The money has alleviated the electricity crisis in Gaza, raising the hours of available power from about four to 12 hours a day. Part of the electricity crisis stems from severe economic sanctions the Palestinian Authority has imposed on Gaza, in an attempt to regain control of the Strip. Hamas has forcibly ruled in Gaza since 2007, after it ousted Fatah in a bloody coup.

15-year-old Palestinian Killed by Israeli Fire in Border Protests, Gaza Authorities Say (Haaretz) By Jack Khoury
February 22, 2019

A 15-year-old Palestinian boy was shot in the chest and killed by Israeli live fire on Friday in protests at the border separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, the Gaza Health Ministry said. Twenty-three others were wounded by live fire, the ministry said.

The ministry had earlier reported a 12-year-old had been killed, before correcting its announcement to say he had been critically wounded, and then finally declaring that the boy, Youssef Said Hussein al-Dayeh, was 15 and had died of his wounds.

Friday's demonstration was the 48th in a row since the weekly protests began in March.

Earlier Friday, hundreds of Palestinians broke into Bab al-Rahma on Friday, a large structure at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City that has been at the center of reignited tensions in recent days.

The police arrested 60 East Jerusalem residents in their homes on Thursday night on suspicions of incitement and rioting ahead of the Friday prayers at the Temple Mount.

On Tuesday, the military attacked a Hamas outpost Wednesday in response to the first airborne firebomb fired from the Gaza Strip since November.

In recent weeks, several thousands of Palestinians participated in the Gaza fence protests and a few dozen have been wounded every week.

According to data in a United Nations report released last month and confirmed by Israeli security officials, 295 Palestinians were killed and about 6,000 wounded by live ammunition since the demonstrations' inception.

Last week, the Gaza Health Ministry reported that 20 Palestinians were wounded by live fire in the protests, while Israel Police said a Border Police officer was lightly wounded in the leg from shrapnel after an explosive device was thrown at him.

The week before that, two teenagers, aged 14 and 18, were killed and seven other Palestinians wounded by live fire during protests at the fence, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The 14-year-old was named as Hassan Shalabi, the son of a niece of Ismail Haniyeh, the political chief of Hamas.

Earlier that week, the Health Ministry said that Ahmed Abu Jabal, 30, succumbed to bullet wounds sustained on the Gaza border the previous week.

IDF Probe of Gaza Riots Reveals Nearly 1,500 Rockets Fired Since March 30 (The Jerusalem Post) By Anna Ahronheim
February 27, 2019

The IDF has released a document detailing the year-long Great March of Return protests along the Gaza border, including new details that have not been previously released.

The Great March of Return protests began on March 30th and has seen thousands of Gazans violently demonstrating along the security fence with Israel, demanding an end to the 12-year long blockade.

According to the military, over a half million people have attended the protests since they began, with the number of Palestinians congregating at points along the border between several thousand to 45,000 each day. The rioters are provided with electricity, free wireless Internet and network connections, as well as food and drink by Hamas.

During the violent protests, Gazans have been burning tires and hurling stones and marbles as well as throwing of grenades and improvised explosive devices (including military-grade explosives) toward IDF troops. Ball bearings and other projectiles have also been hurled by protesters, often by using high-velocity slingshots.

In addition, mines and booby-trapped explosive devices with delayed detonation devices are also laid along the fence during the riots under the cover of smoke and crowds and “pose a direct threat to the lives and safety of IDF forces operating in the border area,” the military said.

According to the military, “drones used by the IDF to deliver tear gas have been felled by using electronic jamming as well as by shooting them down from the sky.”

Gazans have also launched thousands of aerial incendiary devices into southern Israel, leading to 2,000 separate fires resulting in over 35,000 dunams (approximately 8,500 acres) of land being burnt.

“This has included over 13,000 dunams (approximately 3,200 acres) of nature reserves, and over 11,000 dunams (approximately 2,700 acres) of forestry,” the document said.

The IDF also accused Hamas of “allocating explosive materials and other military means” and distributing them to protesters to sabotage security infrastructure. Gazans have also been cutting through the fence, infiltrating into southern Israel.

“Damage to the technology and physical elements of this infrastructure leaves entire sectors of the fence inoperable,” the military said, adding that “damage to engineering equipment in the area has resulted in delays in completing the underground obstacle and technology designed to detect cross-border tunnels.”

Israel has completed some 27 of 65 kilometers of the country’s new underground barrier that is designed to prevent tunnels from crossing into Israeli territory from Gaza. The barrier will be completed by an above-ground six meter high smart fence.

According to the IDF, there was a “significant spike” in individual infiltration and border attacks prior to the beginning of the Great March of Return, “in order to test the IDF’s response times and methods.” Hamas also conducted large-scale military exercises, including training infiltration and abduction scenarios “that could be executed in the event of a breach in the security infrastructure.”

Approximately 70,000 Israelis reside in southern Israel next to the Gaza Strip. According to the military, the primary threat posed along the border is the threat of abductions and killings of Israeli civilians as well as harm to residential and commercial infrastructure.

“Attacks against individuals, lynchings and abductions, as well as the overrunning of buildings and residential areas are real possibilities by persons incited to violence and with the means to carry it out. The same applies for damage to national and commercial infrastructure,” the report said, adding that “in addition, due to their vicinity to the Gaza border and exposure to the line of fire, these communities are under constant threat of sniper fire, anti-tank fire and other ground-to-ground missiles [that are] aimed towards them.”

According to the military 1,300 rockets and missiles have been fired from the Strip since March 30, 2018, with most being launched on Friday or Saturday “immediately after mass violent riots.”

In November, Hamas fired a Kornet anti-tank missile at a bus at the Black Arrow site, which only moments earlier had been filled with dozens of soldiers. Over that weekend, close to 500 projectiles were fired towards southern Israel, killing one Palestinian man and injuring dozens.

In response to the protests, the IDF has “substantially” increased its forces deployed on the Gaza border and all troops have undergone “specially developed training designed to replicate the expected elements of the Gaza border events.” Israel has also stationed counter-terrorism forces in communities along the Gaza border in order to rapidly respond to any infiltration or attacks.

The IDF has also constructed sand berms to provide defenses for IDF forces along the border, has dug long trenches and laid barbed wire behind these berms in an attempt to delay persons from reaching Israeli civilian communities.

Over the past year, the timing and frequency of the clashes has changed, with Hamas increasing their frequency with large-scale riots that occur during the week as well as at night. The night-time riots include different tactics and focus more on

psychological warfare against civilians in nearby communities, by using loud explosives and megaphones to project death threats in Hebrew.

“As of today, it is uncertain when Hamas will cease to organize and lead violent riots and attacks on the border,” the IDF document stated, adding that “Despite the ongoing and serious attacks against Israel, Israel has refrained from responding with a large scale military operation. Nevertheless, the possibility of large scale hostilities is very real.”

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Libya

Official Website of the International Criminal Court ICC Public Documents - Situation in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya

Libyan authorities help free 14 kidnapped Tunisian workers (The Washington Post)

By Bouazza Ben Bouazza

February 17, 2019

Libyan authorities helped free 14 Tunisian workers Sunday who were kidnapped by an armed group near Libya’s capital, the Tunisian government said.

The Tunisian Foreign Ministry said in a statement Sunday night that the hostages had been seized Thursday in the town of Zawiva by militants demanding the release of a jailed Libyan. The Tunisians were released and taken to offices of the Zawiva security authorities, the statement said.

Tunisian Foreign Minister Khemais Jhinaoui phoned his Libyan counterpart to thank him and the Libyan unity government for helping the hostages.

Jhinaoui earlier had pressed Libyan authorities to take action. He met Saturday with Libyan Foreign Minister Mohamed Tahar Siala on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, according to another Tunisian government statement. The Libyan minister stressed his country was working to get the Tunisians freed, according to the statement.

Details on who was holding the Tunisian workers were not made public. The 14 were abducted on the outskirts of Zawiva, a city in western Libya.

The National Commission for Human Rights in Libya said late Saturday that the Tunisians were abducted while on their way to work at an oil refinery in Zawiva. It said the armed group, which it did not identify, demanded the release of a Libyan man, also unnamed, who was detained in Tunisia on drug-related charges.

In 2015, an armed militia stormed the Tunisian consulate in Tripoli and took 10 staff members hostage.

Libya slid into chaos after a 2011 uprising that toppled long-time ruler Moammar Gadhafi. The country is currently governed by militia-backed rival authorities in Tripoli and the east.

Libya: Civilians Caught in Tightening Siege (Human Rights Watch)

February 22, 2019

Forces allied with one of Libya’s two competing governments who appear to have defeated local fighters in the Old City quarter of Derna, in eastern Libya, should immediately allow aid and medical workers into the area, Human Rights Watch said today. Civilians are credibly reported to have been trapped there within the past two weeks without access to food, water, or medical care. Any remaining civilians should be allowed to leave.

The forces of General Khalifa Hiftar, known as the Libyan National Army (LNA), should also disclose immediately the names of anyone it has detained during operations to take the city, who may number in the hundreds, according to United Nations reporting and one unconfirmed and partial list of names obtained by Human Rights Watch. They should indicate the location of all detainees and the legal basis for detaining them and ensure them due process before a judge as quickly as possible.

“With clashes in Derna subsiding, Gen. Hiftar’s forces should end the nightmare for any trapped civilians and account for the people in its custody,” said Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

Gen. Hiftar is allied with a government based in Al-Bayda, in eastern Libya, that is competing for power with a UN-recognized government in Tripoli, Libya's capital. The UN is trying to broker a peace agreement. Much of Libya is effectively under the control of local armed groups, some with ties to one or the other of the rival governments.

LNA forces besieging Derna's Old City quarter appear to have made advances in the past two weeks, according to UN reporting and Human Rights Watch sources.

At least four women and three infants in the Old City have been reported killed during fighting there since February 2, 2019, according to a February 10 statement by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. The Libyan Red Crescent's Derna branch has said via its Facebook page that it has removed 59 bodies from the Old City since February 2, without detailing their identities or the time and manner of their deaths.

Reliable information about developments in Derna is scarce. Few aid groups and journalists for international media have visited Derna in recent months, and LNA forces have tightly controlled access to the Old City. Local residents are afraid to speak on the record, fearing reprisals against themselves or relatives.

The LNA opened its offensive in Derna, a coastal city of over 100,000 residents, in May 2018 against the Derna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), a local armed group that renamed itself the Derna Protection Force (DPF). LNA forces captured most of the city, then besieged the Old City, where a group of DPF fighters held out alongside civilians.

The LNA, which came together in 2014 under Gen. Hiftar, has taken control of much of eastern Libya in what he has portrayed as a campaign against terrorist groups, a term the LNA has used to describe the DPF in Derna.

It's unclear how many local fighters and civilians remain inside the Old City. LNA forces deployed there have severely restricted movement of people and goods, preventing the delivery of food, water, fuel, and medical care to those inside, according to sources and UN reporting. The Hiftar forces are known to have allowed aid distribution elsewhere in Derna.

Since May 2018, LNA forces in Derna have allegedly detained people arbitrarily, and are believed to control detention facilities across eastern Libya in which hundreds of Derna residents are held incommunicado, without formal charge and at risk of mistreatment, according to sources and UN reports. LNA forces have detained Derna residents at their homes, and at checkpoints and other public places, sources said.

LNA forces have also deliberately damaged homes, including by arson, or turned them over to LNA supporters after their owners had fled, according to sources and UN reporting that cites claims by people who fled Derna. The scale of any such abuses is unclear.

Around two thousand or more Derna residents who fled fighting since May 2018 are displaced elsewhere in the country, in many cases citing fear of persecution by LNA forces for their community or family ties, perceived political views, or both, according to recent UN data and reporting that cites claims by displaced Derna residents.

The laws of war require all parties to a conflict to do the utmost possible to minimize the incidental loss of civilian life and damage to civilian objects, to facilitate rapid and unimpeded humanitarian relief for civilians in need, and to protect humanitarian workers from attack, harassment, intimidation, and arbitrary detention.

The laws of war do not prohibit sieges of enemy forces. However, starving civilians as a method of warfare is a war crime. All parties to a conflict should facilitate the safe movement of civilians, in particular to escape a zone of fighting or a siege.

The LNA should presume that anyone it might screen as they leave besieged areas is a civilian unless there is evidence to the contrary. Any screening process should be limited to hours, and the LNA should grant anyone it detains all protection for detainees provided under Libyan and international law.

Under the laws of war, the LNA must take all steps to find, identify, and dispose of the dead with respect, and to mark any grave, or ensure that a competent second party does so. It should ensure that remains are returned to families if possible and requested, and that personal effects are always returned.

LNA forces have a record of alleged abuses, some of which constitute war crimes. Abuses include summary executions, some of which have been captured on videos posted online; torture; desecration of bodies; and looting and burning homes.

"The LNA should investigate allegations of abuse by its members and hold those responsible accountable," Whitson said. "It should also ensure safe conditions for Derna residents displaced by the fighting to return home."

Forces loyal to Russia-backed strongman Haftar kill civilians, raze 100 homes in Libya (Breitbart)

By Edwin Mora

February 26, 2019

Libyan National Army (LNA) forces loyal to the Russian-backed strongman Gen. Khalifa Haftar reportedly killed civilians, including children, and set dozens of homes ablaze after capturing Libya's southern city of Murzuq over the weekend, two lawmakers representing each of the rival governments asserted.

Haftar has gained control of much of eastern Libya with the help of Russia, neighboring Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), among other countries. He has surfaced as the top rival of the internationally recognized government based out of Tripoli.

Haftar represents the Tobruk-based rival government in eastern Libya.

Human rights groups have accused the LNA of committing war crimes in the past. Citing eyewitnesses and two members of parliament (MP), each representing the two rival governments in Libya, news outlets report that Haftar's LNA has killed at least 19 civilians and looted and burned up to 100 homes after taking control of the Murzuq (or Merzek) region in southern Libya last Friday.

Mohamed Linu, a member of Libya's internationally recognized parliament, indicated to Al Jazeera that the LNA "killed civilians, including children, and set fire to more than 30 houses in the southern city of Murzuq."

"The politician said that farms were also destroyed and more than 100 cars were stolen," Linu added.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu Agency (AA) quoted Mohammad Adam Lino from the pro-Haftar rival government as telling Libyan television that the LNA "burnt down 90 houses, including those of my brothers and father."

"He added that the bodies of 19 people had been transferred to [a] hospital in Merzek region in southern Libya," AA noted.

The Tobruk-based parliament did issue a statement condemning the attack and conceding that Murzuq's home was a target, the Middle East Monitor (MEMO) reported.

Citing eyewitnesses, MEMO noted that the LNA troops "attacked and looted" civilian properties in Murzuq.

One of the witnesses told Al-Araby Al-Jadeed that "more than 100 houses in Al-Desa neighborhood and 17 others in Sokra were burned and looted, in addition to the arrest of 50 people at least until Sunday morning."

Last month, Haftar's LNA launched an offensive in southern Libya, claiming that al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) operated in the area. The battle in Murzuq, however, pinned the LNA against the South Protection Force, which is mainly comprised of armed elements from the local Toubou tribes, MEMO reported.

Libya descended into chaos after the U.S.- and NATO-backed overthrow of dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 became a fertile ground for the likes of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Haftar served under Gaddafi before going into exile in the United States after falling out of the dictator's favor. News outlets have compared Haftar to the dictator, crowning him the "New Gaddafi."

Since 2011, Libya's political turmoil and deteriorating security conditions have yielded two rival governments — one in Tobruk led by Haftar and the other in internationally recognized Tripoli.

Earlier this month, pro-Haftar troops took control of the biggest oilfield in Libya — Sharara — further cementing their power.

At the end of January, the Geneva-based Libyan group, Human Rights Solidarity, accused the LNA of "the war crimes of murder, mutilation, torture, cruel treatment, outrages upon personal dignity, and the targeting of civilians," according to the Independent. The LNA denied the allegations.

Russia has reportedly provided military assistance to strongman Haftar and his forces. Moscow denies this.

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Gulf Region

Iran Guards Commander Ties Pakistan, Saudi, UAE to Deadly Attack (Bloomberg) By Golnar Motevalli
February 16, 2019

The commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards criticized Pakistan for providing support to terrorists who killed 27 personnel in a suicide bomb attack in southeast Iran this week.

Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari said Pakistan's government was sheltering groups behind the Wednesday attack and "had to be held accountable for the crime," the semi-official Tasnim News Agency reported. The attack coincided with a U.S.-led summit in Warsaw focused on rallying support against Iran.

The general also singled out the United Arab Emirates and regional rival Saudi Arabia in connection with the incident, warning that Iran's "patience" with them "will be different." Jafari accused them of acting on behalf of the U.S. and Israel.

The attack, in Iran's southeast Sistan-Baluchistan region bordering Pakistan, was the single deadliest assault on the IRGC since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s.

UAE signs \$1.3bn in deals as arms fair opens amid criticism (Al Jazeera)

February 18, 2019

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has signed weapons deals worth \$1.3bn with local and international companies at the opening day of an arms fair in Abu Dhabi.

The Gulf nation, which alongside Saudi Arabia has been mired in the devastating war in Yemen for nearly four years, announced 33 deals on Sunday, including a \$355m deal with Raytheon to provide surface-to-air Patriot missiles.

Yemen's Houthi rebels have repeatedly fired ballistic missiles into Saudi Arabia, and have also claimed attacks on the UAE.

In November 2017, the rebels said they fired a missile towards a nuclear plant in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the UAE, while in August, they claimed to have struck Dubai airport with an armed drone.

Both charges were denied by the UAE.

Other deals at the International Defense Exhibition in Abu Dhabi (IDEX) saw Australian firm EOS Defence awarded with a \$316m contract to provide ground and naval systems, while contracts awarded to UAE firms amounted to around \$300m.

One manufacturer at IDEX displayed a model of a machine gun for sale that is in the hands of Emirati-backed groups in Yemen. Armoured personnel carriers and tanks used in the war could also be seen at the show.

Emirati officials avoided discussing Yemen, however US officials linked arms smuggling there to Iran.

"My assumption is there are still things going into Yemen that I need to stop," James Malloy, the head of the US Navy's 5th Fleet command that oversees the region told the Associated Press news agency.

"It is destabilising. It delays peace there. It exacerbates the disastrous humanitarian crisis that we're facing in Yemen and delays humanitarian efforts coming in," Malloy said.

"We see the world trying to end this thing and one group doing nothing to end it - probably the opposite."

The UAE entered Yemen's war in March 2015 alongside Saudi Arabia and a host of other Arab countries to restore Yemen's internationally recognised government.

The countries claimed they wanted to restore President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government after a civil war broke out between his supporters and those loyal to the Houthis.

Since then, Saudi air raids have hit markets and hospitals, killing thousands, while the UAE has largely handled ground operations in the conflict.

Rights group Amnesty International criticised the arms fair after Belgium's FN Herstal 5.56mm Minimi machine gun was being advertised for sale. The weapon has been seen in the hands of Emirati-aligned armed groups.

"The ongoing carnage against civilians in Yemen - including at the hands of the Saudi Arabia and UAE-led coalition and the militias it backs - should give serious pause to all states supplying arms," Patrick Wilcken, Arms Control and Human Rights Researcher at Amnesty International said in a statement.

"It beggars belief that they would continue to market and sell billions of dollars' worth of advanced weaponry to armed forces that are committing war crimes and exacerbating the world's worst humanitarian crisis."

The war in Yemen has pushed the Arab world's poorest country to the brink of famine and has killed an estimated 60,000 people.

According to the charity Save the Children, an estimated 85,000 children may have starved to death over the past four years of war.

Government helped company sell weapons to Saudi Arabia (9 News)

February 20, 2019

Australia is still considering whether to ban arms exports to Saudi Arabia, which has been accused of war crimes in Yemen and the brazen murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

However, the federal government continues to approve weapons sales to the kingdom, bucking a growing international trend.

"We keep those matters under review," Foreign Affairs Minister Marise Payne told a Senate estimates hearing in Canberra on Wednesday.

"Australia reserves the right to exercise options in relation to these matters."

Defence officials confirmed they have granted export permits to an Australian company that sold 500 weapons mounting systems to Saudi Arabia.

The federal government also provided the company financial assistance.

"We are promoting an industry in Australia that has got some advanced systems," Defence official Tom Hamilton told the committee.

"Any exports would be subject to our export compliance regime."

Greens leader Richard Di Natale repeatedly asked if the weapons systems would be used in Yemen.

Mr Hamilton did not directly answer the question, but said Australia always assessed the risk of weapons being used to commit human rights abuses.

"If we assess that they would ... we would not approve the permit," he said.

Italy, Denmark and Finland have all announced plans to follow Germany's lead in banning arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

The US Congress has also called for an end to support for Saudi Arabia, while the UK House of Lords has deemed arms sales to the kingdom illegal.

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ASIA

Afghanistan

The FBI Is Dismantling Its War Crimes Unit (Foreign Policy) By Aaron Glantz

February 18, 2019

The FBI is dismantling a special unit that investigates international war crimes and

hunts down war criminals—including suspected torturers and perpetrators of genocide, Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting has learned.

The unit, which was created a decade ago and has its roots in federal efforts to hunt down Nazis living in the United States after World War II, has had a hand in many high-profile prosecutions.

Most recently, its investigators helped take down the Liberian warlord Thomas Woewiyu, whom agents found living a quiet life in Philadelphia. At trial, witnesses said Woewiyu's men herded civilians through checkpoints decorated with severed heads and strings of human intestines. He was convicted of perjury last July.

Now, human rights advocates worry that criminals like Woewiyu could evade justice. "These are difficult cases to prove because they need rock-solid investigations," said Beth Van Schaack, a law professor at Stanford University who was deputy ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues in the Obama administration. Scrapping the FBI unit "is inevitably going to jeopardize prosecutions," she said.

In a statement, the FBI confirmed the shuttering of the war crimes unit but argued its dissolution "in no way reflects a reduced commitment by the FBI" to enforce human rights law. The agents previously dedicated to human rights work will continue that work as members of the FBI's civil rights program, the agency said.

But the move could run afoul of Congress, which mandated the unit's establishment and funds its work every year as part of the FBI's budget. Sources tell Reveal that most of the agents previously dedicated to human rights likely will now be assigned to other jobs and worry that perpetrators of torture and genocide will be free to act with impunity.

In addition to finding international war criminals living in the United States, the FBI's human rights unit also has investigated and apprehended perpetrators of war crimes against Americans abroad, along with Americans who commit war crimes themselves—such as military contractors accused of killing civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan or U.S. citizens who fight alongside the Islamic State. All those efforts now could fall through the cracks.

Human rights advocates, who have become increasingly concerned with President Donald Trump's embrace of ruthless autocrats such as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, worry that the move could be political.

"We worry when we see something go from a tweet that is very hostile to a policy that is very hostile," said Dixon Osburn, the executive director of the Center for Justice and Accountability, a legal nonprofit that brings human rights cases in civil court.

One of the center's recent legal victories highlights the work the FBI unit needs to be doing, Osburn said.

In February 2012, the American journalist Marie Colvin was killed in an artillery assault on a media center in Homs, Syria. The center sued, and on Jan. 30, U.S. District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson ruled that "the defendant, the Syrian Arab Republic, engaged in an act of extrajudicial killing of a United States national by planning and executing an attack on the Baba Amr Media Center, and is liable to plaintiffs for the resulting injuries."

"A targeted murder of an American citizen, whose courageous work was not only important, but vital to our understanding of warzones and of wars generally, is outrageous," Jackson wrote, "and therefore a punitive damages award that multiples the impact on the responsible state is warranted."

She ordered the Syrian government to pay the Colvin family's funeral expenses and more than \$300 million in compensatory and punitive damages.

With the civil verdict in hand, Osburn said the government should be aggressively pursuing a criminal case against the Syrian officials responsible for her killing.

"You have the determination that an American was murdered by senior leaders of a foreign government," he said. "This is the sort of case where the FBI could invest some resources, the sort of case you could lose if you don't invest in."

But with the shuttering of the FBI's human rights unit, that seems less likely, especially with frequent tweets from Trump that seem to glorify human rights violations.

"When the Twittersverse starts ruling the budgets, that's when we get concerned," Osburn said.

How the Navy plans to deal with drug use and war crimes allegations in the SEAL community (NavyTimes)

By Geoff Ziezulewicz

February 13, 2019

The Navy's top SEAL is probing what went wrong with his service's premier special warfare teams and how he can fix them.

Pointing to a series of high-profile scandals and ongoing war crimes trials, Naval Special Warfare commander Rear Adm. Collin Green told an audience at the U.S. Naval Institute's West 2019 convention here that he's commissioned a 90-day review to explore "what we're doing in the schoolhouse, what we're not doing, what we're doing relative to leader development and hard ethical decisions, combat ethics, and seeing if we're addressing that."

Green's statements came after Task & Purpose reporter Paul Szoldra asked what the command was doing to respond to reports of SEALs failing urinalysis tests for drug abuse and being charged for war crimes.

The SEAL leader was participating in a panel about military readiness and the session's moderator — retired Vice Adm. James Zortman — tried to shoot the question down, but Green agreed it was an important issue for his community of special operators and he didn't flinch at addressing it.

"We are looking hard, as a learning organization, to self-assess, to see if we are assessing and selecting the right people, and are we holding them accountable," Green said.

Green said that the review will include "hard discussions," and he pointed to a grueling tempo of operations SEALs have faced since Sept. 11, 2001.

"We've been at war for 17 years," he added.

Green commissioned the assessment on Jan 1. in the wake of a November memo from the head of U.S. Special Operations Command, Army. Gen. Raymond A. Thomas III.

Green will report the findings to Thomas in March, according to Naval Special Warfare spokeswoman Cmdr. Tamara Lawrence.

In his memo, Thomas called on members of the U.S. military's shadowy special forces community to "operate with the highest standards of ethics and honor."

"We routinely operate around the world in environments where exposure and temptations to be influenced by local norms are a reality," Thomas wrote. "Never give the American people or our allies cause to doubt our will to execute at the highest standards of tactical and moral excellence."

Thomas urged them to continue serving "with honor and integrity" both "on and off the battlefield."

Green's study is being conducted in the midst of ongoing war crimes trials targeting SEALs who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, including the high-profile prosecution of Chief Special Warfare Operator Edward "Eddie" Gallagher.

Authorities accuse Gallagher of fatally stabbing a wounded teenage Islamic State prisoner of war outside the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2017 and shooting at innocent civilians with his sniper rifle.

Gallagher's commanding officer at SEAL Team 7's Alpha Platoon, Lt. Jacob X. "Jake" Portier, also faces charges for allegedly trying to conceal the purported war crimes.

Both men have denied wrongdoing.

Four SEALs stationed at Village Stability Platform Kalach in the Chora District of Afghanistan's Uruzgan Province also have been charged in San Diego for their alleged roles in the May 31, 2012 beating of bound prisoners at the hands of Afghan Local Police militiamen, with one detainee possibly dying after the interrogations.

Like Portier and Gallagher, they insist they're innocent, too.

Prosecutors also say a pair of Navy SEALs are linked to the June 4, 2017, death of Army Special Forces Staff Sgt. Logan Melgar at his residence in Bamako, Mali.

SEALs also have been dogged by reports of rising drug abuse problems in their teams and the early 2018 conviction of Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Gregory Kyle Seerden for recording images of child sexual abuse on his cellphone.

Swedish Court Says Abuses Against ISIS Fighters Still War Crimes (Human Rights Watch) By Belkis Wille
February 24, 2019

On February 19, a Swedish court convicted a former Iraqi officer for war crimes against Islamic State (also known as ISIS) fighters in Iraq. The evidence was pictures and videos he had posted on Facebook of himself with the bodies of men who had been beheaded. The Orebro district court sentenced the 38-year-old defendant to 15 months in prison for an outrage against personal dignity. This judgment may not seem particularly important given larger matters of justice related to ISIS – but it is.

International humanitarian law prohibits, as a war crime, humiliating and degrading treatment of people, including of the dead.

At a time when leaders and politicians around the world seem to have little difficulty justifying abuses against ISIS suspects, this court is reminding us that war crimes are war crimes, regardless of the ideologies or misdeeds of the victims, or indeed the just cause of the perpetrators.

This conviction also signals to Iraqi courts the need to be holding military personnel accountable for torture, executions on the battlefield, and mutilating or desecrating corpses.

Videos posted during past battles by Iraqi officers proudly committing war crimes against ISIS suspects are not hard to find on social media. When I have confronted Iraqi authorities, and even US-led coalition partners, with this material, they have frequently use the same refrain: But ISIS did so much worse, ISIS was truly evil.

While ISIS committed countless atrocities, dismissing war crimes on that basis reveals a deeply disturbing impulse for Iraqis and coalition forces to use the ISIS standard – a group that massacred civilians, promoted sex slave auctions and burned people alive in cages – as the one to compare themselves to. It's a scary standard.

The Swedish court decision is important because it reminds us that law exists to push us to be more humane, not to be discarded in a race to the bottom.

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Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)

Official Website of the Extraordinary Chambers

Official Website of the United Nations Assistance to the Khmer Rouge Trials (UNAKRT)

Cambodia Tribunal Monitor

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Bangladesh International Crimes Tribunal

War criminal Sayedee's son Masud sent to jail (Dhaka Tribune) By Arif Mostafa

February 19, 2019

A court in Pirojpur sent war crimes convict Jamaat-e-Islami leader Delwar Hossain Sayedee's son, Masud Bin Sayedee, to jail, rejecting his bail plea on Tuesday.

Pirojpur Additional District and Sessions Judge Shamsul Haque issued the order when Masud appeared before the court and sought bail.

Earlier, Masud got six months bail from the High Court in the case.

According to the case statement, Masud was holding a meeting at a house in the Saeedkhali area of Indorkani upazila on December 25.

On information, police raided the house and detained two Jamaat activists and recovered 5 petrol-bombs and some cocktails from their possession, while Masud fled from the police.

Later, Ohiduzzaman, sub-inspector of Indorkani police station, filed a case against twelve people, including upazila chairman Masud and Jamaat supporters Md Zakir Hossain and Obaidullah.

Masud Sayedee was elected chairman to Indorkani upazila in 2014.

Bangladesh's largest Islamist party in turmoil (ucanews.com) By Stephan Uttom and Rock Ronald Rozario
February 22, 2019

Resignations of leaders leave Jamaat-e-Islami struggling to regain its former influence

Bangladesh's largest Islamist political party faces an existential crisis as its leaders split and resign over reforms and rebranding of the party.

Jamaat-e-Islami, a long-time ally of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country's second-largest party, has seen a series of resignations of leaders amid infighting over the party's course of action.

Jamaat jointly ruled the country with the BNP from 2001-06, but it has been in tatters since 2010 when Bangladesh's ruling Awami League party set up a war crimes tribunal to prosecute politicians, mostly from Jamaat, for their crimes against humanity during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War.

Jamaat opposed Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan and was accused of collaborating with Pakistan's army to carry out a genocidal crackdown against Bengali civilians that saw about three million killed and tens of thousands of women raped during the nine-month war.

The tribunal found dozens of Jamaat leaders guilty of war crimes and handed down death and life sentences. Five top leaders have been hanged since 2013.

Terming the tribunal a tool for "political vengeance" and sentences "politically motivated", Jamaat supporters held violent protests that saw hundreds killed and injured across the country.

In response, the government sued and arrested thousands of Jamaat leaders and activists. Jamaat's offices across Bangladesh have been largely shut down.

In 2013, the Supreme Court banned Jamaat from contesting elections after describing the party's Islamist charter as "conflicting" to Bangladesh's secular constitution. Last year the Election Commission cancelled the registration of Jamaat, disqualifying the party from using its weighing scale logo for any political purpose.

However, dozens of Jamaat leaders contested the Dec. 30 national election in 2018 using the BNP's "sheaf of paddy" logo. The election saw the Awami League win by a landslide, while the opposition alliance led by the BNP won only eight out of 300 parliamentary seats. All Jamaat candidates were defeated.

The latest blow came when barrister Abdur Razzaq, an assistant secretary general of Jamaat now living in London, resigned from the party on Feb. 15 citing its failure to apologize for its role in the 1971 war and bring reforms to its charter.

Razzaq joined the party about 30 years ago and was the chief defense counsel for Jamaat leaders facing war crime trials.

"I appealed to bring fundamental changes to Jamaat's objectives, plans and programs in view of the change in world politics, and particularly, the upheavals in Muslim countries. As usual, there was no response," Razzaq was quoted as saying by the Dhaka Tribune on Feb. 17.

In the following days, five leaders from district units of Jamaat also resigned. On Feb. 16, Jamaat expelled a senior party leader for his alleged anti-party activities.

Local media reported that Jamaat has formed a five-member committee to make reforms. It will work on the formation of a new party, its constitution and other strategies to make them acceptable to the country's people, the Daily Star reported on Feb. 17.

Rasheda Rownak Khan, a political analyst in Dhaka, said Jamaat must change to survive.

“The political landscape of Bangladesh has changed over the years and Jamaat’s so-called Islamist politics has lost its appeal to people. Whether it forms a new party and re-emerges, it cannot attract wider society unless it apologizes for its mistakes and changes the party’s charter to a truly democratic party. It’s a long way for the party,” Khan told ucanews.com.

Father Anthony Sen, a member of the Catholic bishops’ Justice and Peace Commission, echoed those sentiments.

“I think Jamaat leaders are realizing that people won’t accept them anymore unless they change. Most people believe in progressive and democratic politics, so Jamaat’s politics based on religion and communalism makes no appeal to them,” Father Sen told ucanews.com.

Any Jamaat leader involved in war crimes will face trial (The Daily Star) By The Daily Star
February 27, 2019

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Anisul Huq yesterday said if any Jamaat-e-Islami leader is found to have links with war crimes, he will have to face trial -- no matter which name the party takes in future.

“Jamaat’s appeal against the High Court judgement that cancelled its registration as a political party is currently pending with the Appellate Division. If the apex court upholds the High Court order, Jamaat’s registration will finally be scrapped and they will not be able to operate in Bangladesh as a political party,” he told reporters.

The minister was talking to the press at the secretariat after receiving the proclamation of New York state governor to observe September 25 as “Bangladesh Immigration Day” from Muktohdara Foundation.

Muktohdara Foundation general secretary Biswajit Saha and member Eusuf Reza handed the proclamation to the minister.

The law minister further said the government is considering appointing 30 percent public prosecutors in the current tenure through the Judicial Service Commission and the rest will be appointed from the political quota.

“We are considering increasing salaries of public prosecutors. I hope the salary hike will become effective from July 1, 2020. We would need an extra Tk 267 crore for this. I have already talked to the prime minister in this regard,” he said.

Meanwhile, the law minister at a separate programme at the Supreme Court yesterday said e-judiciary system will be introduced in the country in phases.

He said this while inaugurating e-filing service at Solicitor Bhaban at the Supreme Court. He added that this technology will help detect corruption and increase accountability.

The law minister said the attorney general office and solicitor office will be brought under CCTV camera coverage within a month.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam at the programme said e-filing service would also be introduced at his office and other judicial offices.

“E-filing service would become handy in stopping bail fraud,” he said.

Presided over by Law Division Secretary Abu Saleh Sheikh Md Zahirul Haque, the inauguration function was addressed by Solicitor Jesmin Ara, among others.

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War Crimes Investigation in Burma

Trafficker held with 12 Rohingyas (The New Nation) February 15, 2019

Two human traffickers and 12 Rohingyas have been detained from a hotel in Cox's

Bazar by the Rapid Action Battalion.

They were held from Hotal Rajmoni at Bazarghata around 10:00am Thursday, said RAB-7 commander Major Md Mehedi Hasan.

The human traffickers have been identified as Nurul Islam, 22, from Chunti at Chattogram's Lohagara Upazila and Zahid, 27, a Rohingya man from Myanmar.

"Around three people managed to flee before the RAB team got there. We caught 12 Rohingyas. Four of them are women and eight are men."

The two smugglers had assembled the Myanmar refugees there in order to go to Malaysia by sea, the detainees have told the elite police unit.

A case will be filed over the incident, said the RAB official.

Myanmar army chief denies systematic persecution of Rohingya (Reuters) By Elaine Lies
February 15, 2019

Myanmar's army chief, who is facing international calls that he be prosecuted for genocide against the Rohingya Muslim minority, has denied any systematic army persecution and said such accusations were an insult to his country's honor.

In his first detailed interview since the Myanmar military launched a crackdown in 2017, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing cast doubt on U.N. estimates that some 730,000 Rohingya had fled to Bangladesh, and on their accounts of abuses by his forces, saying the refugees had been told what to say.

"Criticism without any certain proof hurts the nation's dignity," Min Aung Hlaing told Japan's Asahi Shimbun daily in an interview published on Friday.

Myanmar forces launched their offensive in Rakhine State in 2017 in response to a series of attacks by Rohingya insurgents on security posts near the Bangladesh border.

A U.N. fact-finding mission last year said the military campaign, which refugees say included mass killings and rape, was orchestrated with "genocidal intent" and recommended charging Min Aung Hlaing and five other generals with the "gravest crimes under international law".

U.N. refugee chief Filippo Grandi told reporters in Geneva that he had not seen the interview but Myanmar's government had signed an agreement with the United Nations last year recognizing that there had been violence and that people had fled across the border and that they had a right to return.

"If some people among our interlocutors have different views, we stick by the letter of that memorandum of understanding, which recognizes these problems and indicates precisely what solutions need to be carried out," he said.

A U.N. rights investigator said last month that Min Aung Hlaing and others should be held accountable for genocide against the Rohingya and doing so was necessary before refugees could return.

Myanmar has consistently denied the accusations of murder, rape and other abuses by its forces though Min Aung Hlaing acknowledged that "a number of security men may have been involved".

Min Aung Hlaing, in the interview on Thursday in the Myanmar capital, Naypyitaw, raised questions not only about the number of people who had fled, but also about their motives.

"It's possible to think that the reasons they moved to Bangladesh were things like living with relatives or fleeing to a third country," he said.

"All of them are saying the same thing, which I believe somebody told them to say."

The Rohingya have faced discrimination in Buddhist-majority Myanmar for generations.

They are generally regarded as illegal immigrants from South Asia and few of them have Myanmar citizenship.

Many have sought better lives elsewhere in Asia while occasional military crackdowns over the decades have sent waves of people fleeing to Bangladesh.

The U.N. Human Rights Council in September voted to set up an “ongoing independent mechanism” for Myanmar that would collect, consolidate, and preserve evidence of crimes that could be used in any eventual court case.

Myanmar has said it “absolutely rejects” that the International Criminal Court (ICC) has jurisdiction to rule on its actions, a point Min Aung Hlaing repeated in the interview.

Myanmar is not a party to the Rome Statute that established the Hague-based court.

“We will not accept any instructions that threaten Myanmar’s sovereignty,” he said.

Eight Paletwa Villages Report Damage From Fighting Between Tatmadaw, AA (BNI Multimedia Group)

February 18, 2019

Eight villages in Chin State’s Paletwa Township have suffered damage due to clashes between the Burmese military and the Arakan Army (AA), local sources say.

Fighting occurred near Kha MOUNG Wa village in late January, with the Burma Army reportedly attacking the AA through the use of helicopter gunships; shells landed in the village.

According to one resident, all of the people in Kha MOUNG Wa fled.

“We fled because of the air attack. Bombs landed in our village. All of the houses have already collapsed, so we cannot live in our village,” a villager from Kha MOUNG Wa told Khonumthung News. “We lived in this village for so many years. Now we have had to leave. We had to leave our belongings behind. This is a very difficult situation for us.”

In a recent interview with VOA, the Burma Army’s Brig-Gen Zaw Minn Htun denied that there was shelling from helicopters in Paletwa Township.

The other communities affected by fighting include Kin Talin, Khaw Sa Chaung, Ku Chuang Phya, Sa tin Wa, Phwe Lite Wa, Pe Taung and Thar Yar Kone. A total of around 1,000 people took refuge in Paletwa and Kyauktaw townships, and others fled across the border to Bangladesh.

According to a volunteer working with internally displaced people (IDP) in the area, Ko Tin Tun Aung, there are no IDP camps established in Paletwa Township and people fleeing the fighting have had to stay in the homes of relatives.

“The Chin State government isn’t effectively helping the IDPs. Therefore, we have to help our Rakhine IDPs as much as we can,” he said, adding that ethnic Rakhine IDPs have been placed in another Rakhine village, the name of which he did not reveal for security reasons. “Authorities may threaten IDPs, telling them they must return home,” Ko Tin Tun Aung explained.

Khonumthung News reported that the Burma Army sent reinforcement troops into Matupi Township, in southern Chin State, concerning many locals that clashes in the area will intensify.

Bodies of Three Murdered Ethnic Daingnet Found in Maungdaw (The Irrawaddy) By Min Aung Khine

February 18, 2019

Three missing members of the Daingnet ethnic community of Thinbaw Hla Village in Rakhine State’s Maungdaw Township were found dead on Saturday according to the village administrator.

The three men were reported to have gone out crabbing on Friday, and their buried bodies were recovered the following day, said village administrator U Maung Sein Tun.

“They went to catch crabs and didn’t come back, so we searched for them the following day and found an earth pile in the bush near the village of Kun Thee Pin. We dug the earth pile and found their bodies,” he told The Irrawaddy.

Maungdaw Township administrator U Myint Khaing, who together with the township judge and a forensic doctor recovered the bodies, confirmed that the three victims had had their throats slit.

The three victims, aged 29, 30 and 40 respectively were cremated in Thinbaw Hla on Saturday evening.

These frequent killings of ethnic people in Maungdaw highlight the lack of rule of law and security here, said U Khin Maung Than, chairman of the Arakan National Party’s Maungdaw Township chapter.

“[Government] leaders don’t seem to be very interested in the problems facing ethnic people in Maungdaw. There is no rule of

law and the culprits have never been arrested. I feel like [government leaders] don't care at all about the safety of locals," U Khin Maung Than told The Irrawaddy.

In October last year, a 14-year-old boy was killed while traveling from Kha Maung Seik Village to his home village of Aung Zan in northern Maungdaw Township.

Indian Troops Seal Off India-Myanmar Border (The Irrawaddy) By Moe Myint

February 18, 2019

At least two infantry companies from the Indian army have been deployed in Mizoram, a state located at the border with Myanmar's Paletwa Township in southern Chin State as fighting intensifies in the area between the Myanmar Military and the Arakan Army (AA).

The Assam Tribune reported on Sunday that the troops are stationed in Mizoram's southwestern Lawngtlai District. The troops are deployed with the intention of preventing AA fighters from entering Indian territory and to assist the villagers displaced from the conflict zones. It said AA rebels and government troops have been fighting along the Kaladan River in Myanmar's Paletwa Township since earlier this month.

The report says troops began arriving at the border on Saturday.

AA spokesperson U Khine Thukha confirmed to The Irrawaddy on Monday that they have learned the Indian military recently stationed more than 500 soldiers along the border between the Mizoram villages of Parva and Lungpuk, covering a distance of at least 22 kilometers.

U Khine Thukha remarked that this is the first time in recent years that such heavy military presence has been seen at the border. There are widely-held suspicions that the Indian army may be trying to work in cooperation with the Myanmar military against AA rebels.

"My message to the Indian government is that collaborating with ICC-wanted war criminals (Myanmar's military) is totally inappropriate. India should not cooperate with the ICC criminals," said U Khine Thukha, referring to accusations against the Myanmar military of committing war crimes against the Rohingya in Rakhine State in late 2017.

Over the weekend, unconfirmed claims that high-ranking Burmese military officers secretly met their Indian army counterparts were widely spread across social media. However, The Irrawaddy's calls to Brig-Gen Zaw Min Tun, spokesperson for the Military's Office of the Commander-in-Chief, went unanswered on Monday.

Reports from Mizoram said that about 1,750 people from Chin State's Paletwa Township sought refuge in 2017 as a result of Myanmar military-led operations against the AA. As of September 2018, some 200 refugees were still sheltering in Mizoram, refusing to go return to their villages in Myanmar out of fear of the return of unpredictable armed clashes in the region.

Recent clashes between the AA and government troops forced a number of residents to flee from Paletwa across the border to Mizoram on Saturday, though the number of displaced has not been confirmed.

India's reinforcements along the Myanmar-India border come amid what many see as strengthening ties between the Myanmar and Indian militaries. In late January, Myanmar's military seized the headquarters of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang (NSCN-K) in the Naga Self-Administered Zone of Sagaing Region without resistance from the Naga rebels.

A military announcement last week accused the NSCN-K of violating the bilateral ceasefire agreement by sheltering members of Indian militant groups from Assam and Manipur which are fighting against Indian government troops. It claimed they arrested six NSCN-K members and two Kathae rebels. The NSCN-K signed a regional-level ceasefire agreement with the military in 2012 and since then, no major armed clashes with government troops have occurred in the region. The leaders of NSCN-K denied the military's allegations.

On Monday afternoon, Myanmar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) issued a letter of condolence to the family members of those in the Indian army who were killed in Thursday's suicide bomb attack in Kashmir on Feb. 14.

The AA announced on its official website on Sunday that they had fought with military troops in Rathedaung Township's Yae Soe Chaung Village on Feb. 14, killing 10 government troops. They also announced that they had carried out a mine attack on a highway express coach carrying government soldiers in Ponnagyun Township on Feb. 17, leaving a number of troops wounded and seeking medical treatment in Sittwe. The AA denounced the military's attempt at disguising its troops as civilians by transporting them in private transport.

Locals relief groups have estimated that the armed violence in northern Rakhine State has displaced more than 6,000 residents while aid shipments from international relief agencies are being blocked by army officers on the ground, with the exception of those from the World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

As of this week, about 40 locals are in detention in the area on accusations of having ties with the AA, which have been declared an unlawful association.

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AMERICAS

North & Central America

The FBI Is Dismantling Its War Crimes Unit (Truthdig) By Aaron Glantz

February 15, 2019

The FBI is dismantling a special unit that investigates international war crimes and hunts down war criminals – including suspected torturers and perpetrators of genocide, Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting has learned.

The unit, which was created a decade ago and has its roots in federal efforts to hunt Nazis living in the United States after World War II, has had a hand in many high-profile prosecutions.

Most recently, its investigators helped take down the Liberian warlord Thomas Woewiju, whom agents found living a quiet life in Philadelphia. At trial, witnesses said Woewiju's men herded civilians through checkpoints decorated with severed heads and strings of human intestines. He was convicted of perjury in July.

Now, human rights advocates worry that criminals like Woewiju could evade justice.

"These are difficult cases to prove because they need rock-solid investigations," said Beth Van Schaack, a law professor at Stanford University who was deputy ambassador-at-large for war crimes issues in the Obama administration. Scrapping the FBI unit "is inevitably going to jeopardize prosecutions," she said.

In a statement, the FBI confirmed the shuttering of the war crimes unit but argued its dissolution "in no way reflects a reduced commitment by the FBI" to enforce human rights law. The agents previously dedicated to human rights work will continue that work as members of the FBI's civil rights program, the agency said.

But the move could run afoul of Congress, which mandated the unit's establishment and funds its work every year as part of the FBI's budget. Sources tell Reveal that most of the agents previously dedicated to human rights likely will now be assigned to other jobs and worry that perpetrators of torture and genocide will be free to act with impunity.

In addition to finding international war criminals living in the U.S., the FBI's human rights unit also has investigated and apprehended perpetrators of war crimes against Americans abroad, along with Americans who commit war crimes themselves – such as military contractors accused of killing civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan or U.S. citizens who fight alongside the Islamic State. All those efforts now could fall through the cracks.

Human rights advocates, who have become increasingly concerned with President Donald Trump's embrace of ruthless autocrats such as Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, worry that the move could be political.

"We worry when we see something go from a tweet that is very hostile to a policy that is very hostile," said Dixon Osburn, executive director of the Center for Justice and Accountability, a legal nonprofit that brings human rights cases in civil court.

One of the center's recent legal victories highlights the work the FBI unit needs to be doing, Osburn said.

In February 2012, American journalist Marie Colvin was killed in an artillery assault on a media center in Homs, Syria. The center sued, and two weeks ago, U.S. District Court Judge Amy Berman Jackson ruled that "the defendant, the Syrian Arab Republic, engaged in an act of extrajudicial killing of a United States national by planning and executing an attack on the Baba Amr Media Center, and is liable to plaintiffs for the resulting injuries."

"A targeted murder of an American citizen, whose courageous work was not only important, but vital to our understanding of warzones and of wars generally, is outrageous," Jackson wrote, "and therefore a punitive damages award that multiples the impact on the responsible state is warranted."

She ordered the Syrian government to pay the Colvin family's funeral expenses and more than \$300 million in compensatory and punitive damages.

With the civil verdict in hand, Osburn said the government should be aggressively pursuing a criminal case against the Syrian officials responsible for her killing.

"You have the determination that an American was murdered by senior leaders of a foreign government," he said. "This is the sort of case where the FBI could invest some resources, the sort of case you could lose if you don't invest in."

But with the shuttering of the FBI's human rights unit, that seems less likely, especially with frequent tweets from the president that seem to glorify human rights violations.

"When the Twitterverse starts ruling the budgets, that's when we get concerned," Osburn said.

The Other Americans: Guatemalan Congress Seeks to Grant Amnesty for War Crimes (The Progressive) By Jeff Abbott
February 19, 2019

Guatemalan congressional members are actively pursuing a reform to the country's National Reconciliation law that will provide amnesty to military officials convicted or accused of committing war crimes. If passed, the reform would require the release, within twenty-four hours, of more than thirty military officials convicted of committing atrocities during the war.

The reform was first proposed by Congressman Fernando Linares Beltranena of the conservative National Advancement Party, and other congressional members in 2017. The measure, which the Guatemalan congress took up in February, changes the National Reconciliation law that was passed ahead of the signing of the 1996 peace accords. Guatemala's civil war raged from 1960 to 1996.

The law granted amnesty for guerrillas for crimes against state forces, as well as for other crimes except torture, sexual violence, genocide, and forced disappearance. The new reforms would give a blanket amnesty to those already prosecuted and convicted, or those now under investigation.

Opposing the changes are the families of war victims.

"We are against the reforms to the National Reconciliation law and the implementation of amnesty," Rosalina Tuyuc, the coordinator for the organization National Coordination of Widows of Guatemala, told me. "It would leave those material and intellectual actors responsible for violations of human rights."

Tuyuc adds, "Reforming the National Reconciliation law would be a step back for the culture of peace, a step back for the access to justice for the indigenous peoples, and more so a step back for the victims that were affected by the armed conflict. It would be a negative message: that in Guatemala you cannot prosecute for crimes against humanity, that it remains in impunity."

Sandra Moran, a congresswoman with Guatemala's leftwing political party, Bancada Covergenicia, agrees the proposed reform would be a setback for the already fragile Guatemalan democracy.

"[The reform] would impede the continuation of the cases [against military officials]," Moran said. "Justice in Guatemala would lose."

The United States Department of State is also wary of the proposed reforms.

"The United States is deeply concerned about the proposed amendment to the national reconciliation law in Guatemala,"

Robert Palladino, the State Department deputy spokesman, said in a press statement.

“The trials held in Guatemala for crimes related to human rights violations and abuses have restored dignity to the victims’ surviving families, inspired increased trust in state institutions, and served as a positive example to other nations seeking to address a legacy of conflict,” Palladino said.

Yet the administration of Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales has rejected this criticism, saying “We Guatemalans should resolve our problems.”

Indigenous groups and associations of victims have filed injunctions against the reform in Guatemala’s Constitutional Court. One is on behalf of thirty-six Achi Mayan women who suffered violent rapes during the internal armed conflict by members of the Guatemalan government-backed civilian defense groups at a military base in the 1980s.

The women are currently part of an ongoing court case against six men that is scheduled for a hearing in late April. Their story is one of many that attest to the crimes against humanity that occurred in Guatemala at the hands of military officials.

More than 200,000 people were killed during Guatemala’s thirty-six-year-long internal armed conflict, with another 45,000 forcibly disappeared. The United Nations-backed Commission for Historical Clarification determined that the Guatemalan military, with support from the United States, was responsible for 93 percent of the atrocities, and the guerrillas were responsible for 3 percent. Responsibility for the remaining 4 percent was not determined.

The commission also determined that 83 percent of the victims were indigenous Maya, while 17 percent were non-indigenous ladinos. As a result, the commission concluded that acts of genocide occurred during the war.

While the Guatemalan state has faced criticism in the twenty-one years since the signing of the peace accords for its failure to implement the agreements made between leftist guerrillas and the government that ended the war, it has made efforts to strengthen an independent judicial system.

“One of the important areas after the signing of the peace accords was the achievement of justice,” Moran said. “The cases that have arrived to the courts have contributed to knowing the truth [of what occurred].”

A number of high-profile cases against former military officials for crimes against humanity have occurred in the years since the end of the war that have exposed the brutality of what occurred in the course of the war.

The most famous of the trials occurred in 2013 against former dictator General Efraín Ríos Montt. The former U.S.-backed dictator was found guilty of committing genocide against the Ixil Mayan people between 1982 and 1983. Yet the decision was overturned in May of that year by Guatemala’s supreme court. Further attempts to convict the former dictator ended with his death in April 2018.

Many other cases have successfully convicted military officials, including sexual slavery of Q’eqchi Mayan women in Sepur Zarco, Alta Verapaz, the massacre of the village of Dos Erres, Petén, and the forced disappearance of fourteen-year-old Marco Antonio Molina Theissen in 1981.

Other cases are currently being investigated by Guatemalan prosecutors, including into the campaign of forced disappearance coordinated by military officials at the military base in Coban, Alta Verapaz, and into the rape of the Achi Mayan women. If the reform is passed, these cases will not advance and the victims and their families remain without justice.

“If justice and the truth are a step towards not repeating [the past], then impunity is one step for the repetition,” Moran said. “This is not about those leaving in twenty-four hours from prison, who are now old, but rather the impacts for future generations.”

Guatemala amnesty bill stirs fears of impunity and revenge of ex-military (Los Angeles Times) By Leila Miller
February 25, 2019

Legislation that would grant amnesty to anyone convicted or accused of human rights violations during Guatemala’s long-running civil war has raised fears that dozens of perpetrators of forced disappearance, torture and sexual violence could soon walk free.

Backed by military elites and their allies, including members of the party of President Jimmy Morales, the proposed law passed the first of three congressional readings in January. A second discussion was scheduled for Wednesday.

If enacted, the bill would mandate the release within 24 hours of dozens of officials and military officers convicted of crimes related to the 36-year armed conflict and a halt to ongoing or new investigations of internationally recognized rights violations

connected to the civil war.

During the fighting that lasted from 1960 to 1996 between leftists and the government, about 200,000 people were killed. Among the bloody actions was a military campaign against indigenous communities considered allies of Marxist guerrillas fighting the government.

A United Nations-backed truth commission in 1999 found security forces guilty of “multiple acts of savagery” and genocide against Maya communities, and held the government accountable for more than 90% of the killings, disappearances and other human rights violations.

Hundreds of protesters marched from the Supreme Court to the Congress in Guatemala City on Monday. (Johan Ordonez / AFP/Getty Images)

For more than a decade, the United Nations-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala has helped strengthen the capacity and autonomy of the attorney general’s office and the judiciary in Guatemala, which was critical to the progress made in war crimes prosecutions in recent years, wrote Jo-Marie Burt, a Latin American Studies expert at George Mason University, in an email.

Verdicts between 2008 and 2018 resulted in more than 30 convictions of military officials and state actors, as well as one of a guerrilla fighter, according to Burt. That included the 2013 sentencing of former dictator Gen. Efraim Rios Montt for genocide and crimes against humanity. (His conviction was later overturned and he died while he was being retried last year.)

But those backing this bill have found support in the party of Morales, who was elected in 2015. They have recently stood by Morales in his clashes with institutions tasked with investigating crime and corruption.

“It’s an attempt to undermine that,” Eric Olson, an expert on Central America at the Seattle International Foundation, said of the bill’s supporters. “They’re under threat by the justice system in Guatemala.”

In January, the government said it was expelling the U.N.-backed commission, known by its Spanish acronym as CICIG, despite rulings from the country’s highest court to allow commission members to enter the country. The CICIG had brought fraud charges against Morales’ brother and his son, and had also opened an investigation into Morales related to illegal campaign donations.

“The sectors that have been hurt by the justice system are pushing back,” said Viviana Krsticevic, the executive director of the Center for Justice and International Law, a Latin American human rights organization. “The government has been willing to protect its social and economic base even at the cost of challenging international agreements and principles.”

Claudia Paz y Paz, a former attorney general of Guatemala during the prosecution of Rios Montt, said that previous attempts to gain amnesty have never advanced this far. The president, however, she said, has many supporters who have been implicated in human rights crimes who favor the legislation.

“They are committed to returning to the past and guaranteeing impunity, whether it’s for crimes from the war or cases of corruption,” she said.

Olson, who works at the Washington office of Seattle International, said that legislators may be empowered by what they see as support from the Trump administration. Although the U.S. released a statement expressing concern about the law, it did not strongly defend the CICIG against attacks from Morales’ government, which last May moved its embassy to Jerusalem shortly following the U.S.

After Morales announced his plan to shut down the commission, U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo sent a tweet praising Guatemala’s relationship with Washington and thanking it for its “efforts in counter-narcotics and security.”

“I think there’s this perception among these circles in Guatemala that they won’t have a heavy price to pay if they move in this direction,” said Olson. “There’s a perception that they have succeeded in weakening the CICIG, and there’s a perception that the U.S. has been less than vigorous and hard on them.”

Juan Francisco Soto, the executive director of the Center for Human Rights Legal Action in Guatemala, said that reconciliation after the war means “understanding that justice guarantees that these things won’t happen again in Guatemala.”

“These are processes that have taken years, and victims have pushed them forward,” he said. “It mocks victims after so much fight.”

Ana Lucrecia Molina Theissen spent decades trying to obtain justice for her sister’s torture and her 14-year-old brother’s forced disappearance in 1981. Marco Antonio was abducted after his sister, an activist, escaped from a military base where she

had been sexually assaulted and tortured. In 2004, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled that Guatemala was responsible for the forced disappearance, and last May, Guatemala convicted four military officers involved in either or both cases.

“In many ways, this was a situation that we expected because the people and sectors that support [the bill] aren’t passive — they have a lot of power,” she said. “This is a return to the fight, as well as the realization that justice in Guatemala is still very fragile.... We’ve spent 36 years suffering, and seeing it [justice] fall in an illegitimate way turns us into victims again.”

The bill, introduced in November 2017, needs 80 votes from Congress’ 158 legislators to pass. On Feb. 20, those in opposition walked out of the session so that its supporters fell short of the quorum needed to discuss the bill.

The proposal would reform Guatemala’s 1996 National Reconciliation Law, which permits amnesty for crimes that could be considered political but excludes amnesty for international abuses like genocide, torture and other crimes against humanity. The proposal claims that the greater number of charges against military officials and state agents compared with guerrillas points toward “judicial harassment of only one side of the conflict, the military,” and says there was no genocide during the war.

Fernando Linares Beltranena, the congressman who introduced the bill, holds that people cannot be convicted for crimes that were not stipulated in Guatemala’s penal code at the time.

“All this law is doing is giving life to what was approved but not implemented 23 years ago,” said Beltranena. “It was better to have an amnesty than to have bloodshed. But we got an unequal, one-sided prosecution by judges and prosecuting attorneys who sided with one faction of the conflict and mostly those who are being prosecuted are military.”

The bill has received pushback from the U.N., the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and other human rights groups that say it violates Guatemala’s international obligations to investigate human rights violations.

The Inter-American Court has previously considered amnesty laws passed by Latin American countries invalid, and if the law passes, Krsticevic said, she expects the court to declare it void. Its decisions are considered legally binding by countries that have accepted its jurisdiction, such as Guatemala. In 2001, for example, it determined that the amnesty legislation Peru adopted in 1995 to shield those implicated in human rights violations did not have legal effect.

Congresswoman Sandra Moran, who opposes the bill, has expressed concern that “it’s only a matter of time” until it passes. Many worry those convicted would seek retaliation if released.

“There is a lot of fear about the risk to the victims, the prosecutors, and the people that gave testimony or declarations to help shine light on the truth during the trials,” she said.

The mounting tension coincided with Monday’s “Day of Dignity” for the victims of the internal armed conflict — the anniversary of the 1999 U.N.-commissioned report on the war. This year, the amnesty bill was at the forefront of protests by human rights and victims groups.

Edwin Canil, the leader of a victims group, joined hundreds of people who marched from the Supreme Court to the Congress. Many, he said, came from communities that bore the brunt of the violence during the war, and held handmade signs with photos of the disappeared.

Canil was 6 years old when he survived a massacre in Guatemala’s Ixcán region that killed members of his family.

“There’s been an enormous setback to democracy in the country,” he said. “It’s outrageous. Once again, we feel completely unprotected — as we felt during the armed conflict.”

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South America

Report slams Colombia for promoting officer tied to slayings (The Washington Post) By Christine Armario
February 27, 2019

Human Rights Watch is denouncing Colombia's government for appointing at least nine officers to key army positions despite credible evidence implicating them in serious human rights violations during the country's long civil conflict.

The human rights organization released a report Wednesday condemning the government of President Ivan Duque for promoting Gen. Nicasio de Jesus Martinez Espinel as army chief and promoting eight other officers linked to abuses.

The men are "credibly implicated" in what is known as the "false positive" scandal, in which security forces killed several thousand civilians during the height of the military's offensive against leftist guerrillas and counted them as rebels to inflate combat deaths to obtain coveted bonuses, the group said.

"The Colombian government should be investigating officers credibly linked to extrajudicial executions, not appointing them to the army's top command positions," said Jose Miguel Vivanco, Americas director for Human Rights Watch.

He said their appointments send a troubling message to troops: "That engaging in these abuses may not be an obstacle for career success."

Martinez Espinel denied any wrongdoing and in response to the report said he trusted fully in Colombia's justice system to clear his name.

"God and my subalterns know how we've acted," he said.

It's not the first time Human Rights Watch has accused Colombia's government of turning a blind eye to wartime violations in making army promotions. In 2017, the group expressed concern that four colonels and one general strongly linked to the extrajudicial killings were on a list of candidates for promotions.

Colombian courts have convicted hundreds of mostly low-ranking soldiers for their roles in the "false positive" killings but more senior army officers have largely escaped unscathed.

The country's special peace tribunal is also reviewing the cases. The court was established following the signing of a 2016 peace deal with the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia to end Latin America's longest-running armed conflict. Those who fully confess to any crimes are unlikely to spend any time in jail.

Human Rights Watch notes that Martinez Espinel was second-in-command of the 10th Brigade during years for which prosecutors have opened investigations into 23 killings.

The group said a document it had obtained indicates Martinez Espinel certified the payment of about \$400 to an informant who provided information leading to "excellent results" in which two purported guerrillas were killed. Martinez Espinel said he had "no idea" if he had made the payments.

Human Rights Watch said courts concluded the two dead were Hermes Carillo, an indigenous civilian, and 13-year-old Nohemi Pacheco. Two soldiers and a former paramilitary were convicted in 2011 of abducting them from their home, murdering them and putting weapons on their bodies so that they appeared to be rebels killed in combat.

Under international law commanders can be held responsible for crimes carried out by subordinates that they knew about or should have known about.

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Hate Attack: Chief Rabbi of Argentina Viciously Beaten Inside His Home; Remains in Serious Condition (The Yeshiva World) February 26, 2019

Chief Rabbi of Argentina Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich was attacked and severely beaten during an early morning break-in at his Buenos Aires home on Monday. He suffered nine fractured ribs and a punctured lung, along with other injuries.

Officials at the AMIA [the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association, one of the country's most prominent Jewish groups] stated the 62-year-old rabbi was "beaten and savagely attacked by a group of strangers who entered his house."

The rabbi's wife was tied up as the attackers stole money and valuables from their home. It is also reported that as they ran through the home, they told the rabbi "we know who you are, you are the rabbi of the AMIA."

The attack came just a day after seven Jewish graves were defaced with Nazi symbols in San Luis in western Argentina. The

country is home to nearly 200,000 Jews – one of the world’s largest Jewish populations outside Israel. Rabbi Davidovich has been chief rabbi since 2013.

In 1994, the AMIA building was targeted in a bomb attack that killed 85 people and remains the country’s deadliest terrorist incident. Much of the evidence was subsequently lost or contaminated and no-one has been convicted in connection with the bombing.

Argentine President Mauricio Macri sent a tweet repudiating the attack and vowing aid to find the attackers. His human rights secretary, Claudio Avruj, said that Argentina needs to build a society “where there are no signs of anti-Semitism, and we cannot be indifferent.”

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin phoned Davidovich “to find out how you are and to express my concern about the safety of the large Jewish community you lead,” according to a statement from his office.

“The State of Israel will do everything necessary to protect Jews wherever they choose to live and will take any steps to protect us from danger. We will not allow those who seek our harm us to pursue us,” he added.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu responded, “I send wishes for a quick recovery to Argentina Chief Rabbi Gabriel Davidovich and his wife who were viciously assaulted.

“We must not let anti-Semitism rear its head. I strongly condemn the recent acts of anti-Semitism and call on the international community to take action against it.”

Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Yitzchak Herzog stated, “Wishing Rabbi Davidovich a full recovery from the brutal attack he and his wife endured in their Buenos Aires home. We must relentlessly fight this disgusting hatred.

“The Jewish Agency together with the Government of Israel and other Jewish organizations will embark on a battle against the alarming rise of anti-Semitism across the globe.”

Minister of Diaspora Affairs (New Right) Naftali Bennet added, “This terrible attack on the chief rabbi in Argentina must be condemned by everyone. All our thoughts and prayers are with Rabbi Davidovich for his full and speedy recovery – but thoughts and prayers are not enough. Enough is enough – it is time for action.

“Today the leaders of the world in Europe, in South America, all over are failing in their responsibility to learn the lessons of the past. But unlike the past, today we have Israel, and every Jew around the world must know they have a home here; we are waiting.

“But for Jews who want to live in Argentina, or France, or England, or the US or anywhere, we are also here. We will stand up against Antisemitism. A strong Israel is the only answer – our enemies should know; Jewish blood is not cheap.

“I call on Argentina’s government to make a very clear stand in words and actions – the criminals who did this must be found and brought to justice.”

Ex-child soldier fights for trans rights in Colombia (Reuters) By Anastasia Moloney
February 21, 2019

When Colombia’s FARC guerrillas turned up at the home of Cristian Camilo Gonzalez nearly two decades ago and shoved him into a truck when he was just aged 14, his happy childhood ended abruptly.

Growing up in a rural hamlet, Gonzalez knew from an early age he was different from the other boys. He did not play football and was attracted to boys and women’s clothes.

And despite being raised as a Catholic in a conservative home, his parents allowed Gonzalez to be different.

But once forced into the ranks of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrilla group, he quickly learned that being gay can have fatal consequences.

“Under their rules, homosexuality was banned and punished even by death,” Gonzalez, now 33, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“For the FARC, homosexuality was seen as a Yankee affliction and a crime. My sexuality was incompatible with their rules.”

Fighters who disobeyed the rules were punished, and their fate was decided by the FARC’s council.

“Once there was a council to rule on two women who were found kissing each other. One was transferred to another camp, the other was shot dead,” Gonzalez said. “It was after this that I knew I had to leave.”

After a year in rebel ranks, a rare opportunity to escape arose when Gonzalez was ordered to get medical supplies in a nearby village. He never returned.

“It was a huge risk,” Gonzalez said. “I walked for days until I was sure they had lost my track.”

Gonzalez’s ordeal offers a rare insight into the experiences of LGBT+ people in the FARC, who have so far remained largely hidden and invisible.

But following a 2016 peace deal between the government and the FARC ending 50 years of war between the two sides, human rights abuses committed by all sides are slowly coming to light.

COMING OUT

For Gonzalez, having escaped from the FARC was a chance to come out of the closet without fear of being killed.

Surviving as a street vendor and sex worker in various cities across Colombia, Gonzalez had relationships with men, and then gradually transitioned from a man to a woman.

Gonzalez changed his name to Darla Cristina. She started to wear women’s clothes and make-up, and then got buttock and breast implants.

Gonzalez says she knows of only three other former FARC rebels who have become transgender women.

“Armed groups have never recognized that LGBT people made up their ranks,” Gonzalez said. “We couldn’t then come out as transgender or gay. But there must be many of us.”

According to former rebel Olga Cedenó, who spent 34 years with the FARC and who is now a member of the group’s political party, more ex-combatants are coming out.

Under the peace deal, thousands of rebels who handed in their weapons are living in designated settlements across rural Colombia as they transition into civilian life.

“I know of several women in the settlement I live in who are having open lesbian relationships,” Cedenó said.

“During the war this existed but it was very clandestine. In peace time, things are different.”

HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Colombia’s peace accord recognizes that different groups in society, including LGBT+ people, suffered and experienced the conflict in different ways, said Roman Huertas, a researcher at The Ideas for Peace Foundation (FIP), a think tank based in Bogotá.

“Before 1991, homosexuality in Colombia was a crime and was considered to be an illness. The peace accord reaffirms their right to diversity,” Huertas said.

Colombia also recognizes that LGBT+ people were specifically targeted by armed groups because of their sexual orientation.

Of Colombia’s nearly 8 million war victims, most of whom were displaced by the violence and who are recorded on the government’s official list, about 2,000 are LGBT+ people.

Under the peace deal, a truth commission and war tribunals have been created to document, collect testimonies and uncover what happened in the war that killed about 220,000 people, including abuses committed against LGBT+ people.

Gonzalez says that before she transitioned to being a woman, she was sexually abused by a FARC commander, who would force himself on her while she slept in a jungle tent.

“Coming out of the closet is talking about what we feel and what we experienced,” Gonzalez said.

“I’m showing I can contribute to peace and reconciliation and that it’s possible to forgive.”

Far more is known about how LGBT+ people were targeted by right-wing paramilitary groups, who fought against the FARC and who demobilized from 2003 onwards.

Research by Colombia's National Centre for Historical Memory reveals the paramilitaries were particularly cruel.

This included forcing gay men to take part in boxing matches, while "corrective rape" was used against gay men and transgender people to instill fear in communities and as a way of imposing social control.

On the other hand, M19, a left-wing rebel group that demobilized in the early 1990s, had a more liberal attitude towards its LGBT+ members, said Theresia Thylin, a researcher who has studied Colombia's armed groups.

"They even had a unit, during a very short time, of homosexual men, for example, that was known by the senior commanders," she said.

TRAILBLAZER

Having survived the war and left behind her job as a sex worker, Gonzalez is now fighting to promote equal rights for LGBT+ people in the socially conservative city of Pasto, the capital of Colombia's southern province of Narino.

Gonzalez is the first transgender person to study at a university in Narino, and the first transgender woman in Colombia to run for local councillor. In 2012, she was also the first transgender woman to be employed by the mayor's office.

"The reaction was: 'How can a prostitute work at the mayor's office?'," Gonzalez said.

Her work has included denouncing police aggression against sex workers of different backgrounds and has led to police officers being fired, Gonzalez said.

While at city hall, Gonzalez campaigned to get public policy and funds in place to promote LGBT+ rights, including access to jobs and healthcare, along with projects to help dozens of sex workers get off the streets and set up their own businesses.

DEATH THREATS

But her high-profile activism has come at great personal cost.

Since 2011, Gonzalez says she has narrowly survived two assassination attempts - one involving a gun and another a knife. Three star tattoos on her shoulder cover the stab wounds.

The attacks, which she has reported to the police, have so far gone unsolved.

In all Gonzalez says she has received about 10 death threats, sent by email or pamphlets. The last threat came in September, saying: "Stop your campaign corrupting society."

"The threats aim to send a message of terror - to stop people claiming their rights," Gonzalez said.

Such is the danger Gonzalez faces that the government included her in its protection scheme for at-risk social leaders in 2016. Since then, Gonzalez moves around in a car and has two bodyguards provided by the government to protect her.

Despite the risks, Gonzalez shows steely resolve. She is determined to achieve her dream of becoming Colombia's first elected transgender councillor on her third attempt in October, when local elections will be held.

"I'm here to break stereotypes. To show we can do it," said Gonzalez. "That we're not reduced to just being in the hairdressers or in the street."

Argentine Novice Speaks Out Against Torture, Abuse In Convent (QCostarica) February 20, 2019

Novices in Argentina have begun sharing their experiences of abuse, torture, and humiliation executed within the walls of the convent by their priests.

"He sent me to the basement alone to clean it. A while later, he appeared behind me telling me that I was one of his favorites and he wanted to protect me. A moment later, he jumped on me and began to touch me," a former nun named Sandra Migliore told Perfil during an interview.

She was 16 years old.

As detailed in her 2015 memoir, "Race of Vipers," Migliore was sent to the Santa Rosa de Viterbo school in San Lorenzo to begin her novitiate with the Franciscan sisters in 1983.

In her ethnography, Migliore recounted the stories of abuse, sexual abuse and physical torture administered by superiors and religious guides throughout her eight years in the San Lorenzo convent. At least 12 other novices were mistreated during her stay in the Catholic institution.

“Since (novices) were not allowed to talk to each other, we did not know that the abuses were systematic. At the time, I thought that what had happened to me had been a moment of weakness for the superior,” said Migliore, noting that one of their superiors, Sister Viviana Fleitas, was among her primary abusers.

Extreme punishment akin to medieval torture was forced upon the young religious hopefuls, Perfil reported after a thorough investigation. Metal- studded whips, hair shirts, gags- in “honor” of their vows of silence, and a steady diet of bread and water were forced upon the novitiates.

“In my congregation there was also the use of sackcloth on the legs and hips. It is like a belt with pinches, which is attached to the flesh to cleanse sins. Even the Mother Superior, Viviana Fleitas, used to use it” Migliore said.

These “sacrifices” made in “the name of God,” which have long been criticized by members of the Catholic church, caused serious psychological trauma for the women who have since abandoned the idea of a religious life, the former nun said.

Migliore said that although the Church has not commented on her writings, many women have thanked her for her courage in publishing her experiences.

“The women who suffered wrote to me privately; some have married, have had children and their family knows nothing about abuses. Many of them still have nightmares. I do not want to criticize the faith; I only tell what happened to me and my colleagues at one time, so that it is known,” the author said.

The culture of abuse within the walls of Catholic establishments around the world has gained international attention as every week a new abuse allegation arises against a priest, religious person, or church volunteer.

Three Chilean nuns shared their stories of sexual abuse Friday, describing the multiple times they were embraced and fondled during the 1990s and 2000s by several priests.

While in India, nuns publicly accused male religious leaders of rape within their community.

Pope Francis admitted nuns have been used as “sex slaves” and repeatedly abused by priests and bishops in the past. He said the Church has “suspended several clerics” and the Vatican has been “working (on the issue) for a long time,” he said. The abuse was “still going on, because it’s not something that just goes away like that.

A Rome-based congregation, the International Union of Superiors General (USIG) also openly condemned the sexual, verbal, or emotional abuse executed against nuns which, they said, impairs the dignity, health and development of a victim.

Catholic bishops, Vatican officials, experts and heads of male and female religious orders from around the globe are expected to attend the four-day meeting beginning Thursday.

The meeting which aims to prevent the “abuse of minors and vulnerable adults”, comes as the 1.3 billion-member Church still struggles to enact a concerted, coordinated and global effort to tackle a crisis that is now more than two decades old.

Will Colombia’s narcos be allowed to snitch at war crimes tribunal? (Colombia Reports) By Jake Kincaid
February 13, 2019

More than 300 narcos and paramilitaries want to add their side to the convoluted history of the armed conflict and testify to organizations before the war crimes tribunal and truth commission.

The group, calling itself the Committee of Prisoners for the Truth of Colombia, sent a letter from La Picota prison in Bogota to the Special Judiciary for Peace, the United Search for the Disappeared and the Truth Commission, three investigative bodies investigating war crimes.

“Many of those who have signed below have been murderers but also victims,” the letter reads. “We consider that there will not be a complete reconciliation, much less an integral reparation for the victims if we do not tell the public our individual and collective part.”

Drug traffickers and war lords have previously said to also have damning information about the country’s politicians and security forces.

The list of signatories includes a wide range of participants in the armed conflict: members of the military, the AUC paramilitary groups, guerrilla groups ELN, AUC, FLN, FARC and EPL, drug trafficking group “Los Rastrojos“, and drug traffickers.

The group offers to reveal detailed lists with names of financiers and atrocities committed during the conflict.

Among the signatories is notorious drug trafficker “Gordo Lindo,” who worked for Medellin Cartel in the 1980’s, then the illustrious Cifuentes clan.

Former President Alvaro Uribe, who’s brother had two children with a Cifuentes sibling, allowed the narco to demobilize with paramilitary groups AUC, after the narco paid the paramilitaries to be allowed to take part in their 2003-2006 demobilization.

A court later ruled he was ineligible.

“Tom,” the former boss of the Medellin crime syndicate “Oficina de Envigado,” also wants to speak the truth.

Hacker Andres Sepulveda also signed the letter. Sepulveda was imprisoned for intercepting confidential military intelligence and spying on the peace process with the FARC to influence the 2014 elections on behalf of the Democratic Center party of President Ivan Duque, who won the 2018 elections.

Politicians accused of corruption and crimes against humanity have also offered to take part in the transitional justice system.

Those allowed to stand trial before the war crimes tribunal are immediately released.

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Venezuela

Violence Erupts at Venezuelan-Brazilian Border Ahead of ‘Aid’ Deadline (Venezuela Analysis) By Ricardo Vaz
February 22, 2019

At least one person died and several were wounded in the Venezuelan town of Kumarakapay, on the border with Brazil.

According to reports, clashes erupted between the indigenous Pemon people and the Venezuelan National Guard as the latter moved tanks to shut down the border with Brazil. Local Mayor Emilio Gonzalez told Associated Press that security forces had fired tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowd. There were reports of a second casualty, and 12 to 14 wounded, which have yet to be confirmed.

President Maduro ordered Venezuela’s southern border with Brazil closed on Thursday. The measure took effect at 8 PM and will stay in place until further notice.

During a video conference with several armed forces commanders, Maduro instructed Major General Mantilla Oliveros, commander of the Guyana region defense, to strengthen security measures along the border in order to “protect the people.”

“Provocations need time in order to be dismantled,” he added.

Tensions along Venezuela’s borders have increased in recent weeks following self-proclaimed “Interim President” Juan Guaido’s pledges, with the backing of the US and allies, that humanitarian aid would make its way into Venezuela “no matter what.”

Venezuelan authorities have vowed not to let the aid enter, seeing it as a possible spark for foreign intervention and stressing that the aid amount pales in comparison to losses incurred by sanctions. International agencies, including the Red Cross and the United Nations, have also criticized attempts to “politicize” aid.

Reports emerged that aid was being prepared both in Brazil and in the Dutch Antilles, with the respective borders shut down on Thursday and Wednesday, respectively. On Thursday, Maduro likewise floated the possibility of closing the border with Colombia.

Humanitarian aid has been stockpiled in the Colombian town of Cucuta, a few miles from the border, with February 23 the date set by Guaido for aid to enter. Food and medical supplies, originally reported to meet the needs of 5,000 people for 10 days, was transported by US military planes to Cucuta.

The Venezuelan opposition has been registering thousands of volunteers to mobilize and bring in the aid at the border, while billionaire British media mogul Richard Branson is hosting a "Live Aid"-style concert on the Colombian border which opened on Friday morning.

The Venezuelan government has responded by hosting a concert of its own on the Venezuelan side of the border, also underway on Friday, as well as pledging to bring 20,000 CLAP boxes of subsidized food and medical attention to communities in Cucuta.

Venezuelan authorities also reported on Thursday that the European Union had pledged US \$2 billion worth of aid, termed as "technical assistance," to be channeled through the United Nations.

According to Nicolas Maduro, the amount was pledged by the International Contact Group, headed by Uruguay and the European Union. The Venezuelan president also announced that 7.5 tonnes of medicine, supplied by Russia and the Panamerican Health Organization would be arriving shortly. A larger shipment of over 900 tonnes of medicine, bought from Cuba and China, also arrived on February 14.

Vice President Delcy Rodriguez told press on Thursday that Caracas had requested food and medical aid from the United Nations, but that the Venezuelan government was willing to support some of the costs.

'They will torture you': ex-Venezuelan soldiers on the risk of defecting (The Guardian) By Joe Parkin Daniels
February 22, 2019

A month ago, Harry Solano was a sergeant in Venezuela's national guard. Now he is an exile who meets members of the opposition in hotels across the Colombian border, always scanning the room to see who might be listening.

Solano was part of a dissident group within the armed forces that staged an uprising at a national guard post in Cotiza, a Caracas suburb last month. They aimed to reach the Miraflores presidential palace and force embattled President Nicolás Maduro out of office.

People took to the streets in support, and violent clashes with police carried on for days, but their attempt ultimately failed. Two dozen plotters were swiftly arrested, and countless others have not been seen since that night. Maduro had sent a clear warning to other would-be dissidents: he may be weakened but for now he still commanded the levers of power in Caracas.

"The normal soldiers, people like me, suffer the same as everyone else," says Solano. "It is fear that keeps lower ranks [of the military] in line. Fear created by the knowledge that if you speak out publicly, they will torture and kill you and your family."

Cúcuta, the Colombian border city where he is hiding out, has become infiltrated with spies, Solano says, accusing a man who hails him as a friend as one of them. Military defectors are of particular interest to both sides in the power struggle currently setting Venezuela on edge.

Juan Guaidó, the opposition leader and self-declared interim president, commands the backing of the US and dozens of other countries, but he has not been able to persuade the military to defect in numbers significant enough to shift the balance of power.

Maduro and his late predecessor, Hugo Chávez, won their senior officers' loyalty by rewarding them lavishly for their service, promoting over a thousand to the rank of general, handing out lucrative positions at PDVSA, the state oil company, and allegedly turning a blind eye to involvement in drug trafficking, illegal mining and extortion.

Guaidó and his his allies are trying to whittle away at this support with Saturday's planned controversial delivery of humanitarian aid sent by the US. They are also trying to sideline those generals by tapping into discontent among rank and file soldiers.

He aims to force these soldiers' hand by offering them a hard choice: follow their orders and deny fellow Venezuelans much-needed food and medicines, or disobey Maduro publicly. But Solano knows first-hand what it means to go up against Maduro.

Solano alleges that his niece was raped and tortured by DCGIM, a military intelligence wing, when it became aware of his involvement in last month's uprising.

He had already begun the complicated journey to Colombia, but his house was ransacked, and other members of his family were detained. A side business, a small shop below his Caracas home, was sacked.

“They [the authorities] are a mafia who control people only with violence,” Solano said. “They already know the people in their hearts are with Guaidó so they have to resort to barbarism.”

A slew of defections have already taken place, but mostly among officers safely beyond Maduro’s reach. His defence attache to the embassy in Washington announced his support for Guaidó last month, and a handful of other generals have switched sides. On Thursday, a former spy chief also threw his weight behind the young opposition leader.

The mass military exodus so many were hoping for has yet to materialise however, and not for a lack of trying. In late January, Guaidó canvassed military bases across the country, promising soldiers in a letter distributed to officers that they would be given amnesty if they “contribute to the reestablishment of democratic order”.

It is an effort bolstered by international pressure, with the Trump administration – Guaidó’s most prominent backer – calling on the military to allow aid into the country and side with their man.

“You will find no safe harbour, no easy exit and no way out. You will lose everything,” Donald Trump said in a speech at Florida International University in Miami on Monday before large US and Venezuelan flags. “We seek a peaceful transition of power, but all options are open,” he added, reviving fears that a military intervention could be on the cards.

Raúl Daniel Alvarenga was a sergeant major in the Venezuelan army, serving from 1997 until 2013, when he resigned in protest and fled the country.

“My escape to Colombia was like a movie,” he says, detailing a journey that involved dodging the police and sleeping in homeless shelters. “It’s naive to think people will just switch sides in the face of such intimidation.”

Six years later, Alvarenga says he still lives on edge, keeping his intelligence and special operative skills honed. “I’m always ready,” he says. “Lamentably, in Venezuela if they catch you, they will torture you physically and psychologically.” US condemns Venezuela military over border killings as aid showdown looms (The Guardian) By Emma Graham-Harrison, Patricia Torres, Joe Parkin Daniels
February 22, 2019

The US has condemned Venezuela’s military after soldiers shot dead two people and injured 15 others trying to keep the country’s border with Brazil open for aid deliveries.

The White House warned in a statement: “Egregious violation of human rights by [President Nicolás] Maduro and those who are following his orders will not go unpunished.”

The US also urged the armed forces to allow humanitarian aid to pass peacefully into the country, the day before supporters of presidential challenger Juan Guaidó plan to challenge the authority of Caracas by trying to ship food and medical donations into the country.

On Friday evening, Guaidó defied a government travel ban to appear at a star-studded aid concert inside the Colombia border, drawing the biggest cheers of the evening, even after hours of performances from musicians including Maluma, Alejandro Sanz and Luis Fonsi, famous for the global hit Despacito.

He did not take to the stage, perhaps because the concert was billed as a non-political, humanitarian fundraiser, that backers compared to the 1985 Live Aid event.

But the big screens showed him in the crowd, and when the floodlights came up after a final rendition of John Lennon’s hit Imagine the thousands-strong audience began chanting “yes he can” in Spanish.

“I can’t believe he came,” said Nancy Salinas, who had crossed from the Venezuelan city of San Antonio to attend. “He cares about us, unlike the tyrant [President Nicolás] Maduro.”

Guaidó’s appearance was both a surprise and a show of power, because Venezuelan authorities had barred him from leaving the country after he declared himself “interim president” in January, claiming Maduro’s election was voided by fraud.

Amid the rising tensions, US national security adviser John Bolton announced on Friday evening that he had cancelled a planned trip to South Korea to focus on events in Venezuela.

Since Guaidó’s declaration, he has been recognised as the country’s rightful leader by more than 50 countries, including the

United States and many regional powers. The presidents of Chile, Colombia and Paraguay all came to the concert on Friday.

On Saturday the opposition will test whether he can transfer a wave of popular support and international recognition into political power, by attempting to bring aid across the border into Venezuela.

“The humanitarian aid won’t solve all of Venezuela’s problems,” said Villka Fernandez, a concert organiser and former political prisoner. “But it signals the end of the regime of Maduro and his criminal cronies.”

Maduro has called the planned deliveries a “provocation”, barred them from entering the country, and claimed relief supplies are coming from Russia instead.

He has blocked the border with Brazil and the maritime border with several islands, as well as ordering military and police units to reinforce crossings with Colombia.

He had responded to the international show of support for Guaido in Colombia by promising a concert of his own on Friday, but it started late and drew a crowd of just a few thousand, many of them bussed in from surrounding towns to watch a show that included uniformed military dancers.

Both concerts was held on the Tienditas bridge connecting Colombia and Venezuela, on a temporary stage in front of containers and an oil truck Venezuelan government forces used to blockade the crossing.

On the Colombian side, a campsite had been set up near the concert site, for volunteers to spend the night before trying to take the aid across.

“Tomorrow is the day we’ve all been waiting for. Tomorrow is the day we can go home,” said Eduardo Espinel, who has lived in Cucuta for three years, and runs a foundation for Venezuelan migrants.

Guaidó, of the Popular Will party, has re-energised an opposition that was fractured and ineffective for years. By promising aid deliveries, he found a powerful way to channel discontent with the government into political action.

Venezuelans face widespread hunger and medicine shortages, and hyper-inflation running at around 2 million percent a year has made salaries virtually worthless. As the country’s economic crisis deepened, more than one in ten have fled abroad.

The security forces have so far largely stood by Maduro, despite opposition efforts to win them over including offers of an amnesty, but their loyalties may be tested if large numbers of civilian volunteers try to import much-needed aid in defiance of the ban.

Video shared by opposition figures heading to the border in a “caravan” from Caracas appeared to show armed national guard members at barricades were barely resisting when crowds pushed them aside so that buses could pass.

In a political boost for the opposition, Chavez’s former spy chief turned against Maduro this week, denouncing him as dictator and calling for aid to pass.

But the security forces are likely to be under strict orders to bar aid regardless of who carries it, and with elite units stationed along the Colombian border, there are worries any showdown could end in bloodshed.

“It’s hard to see a situation this weekend that avoids the military stopping that aid from coming in,” said Rocío San Miguel, a Caracas-based defence analyst. “The military structures towards that border make it impossible that they will let that aid through.”

On the Colombian border, opposition supporters desperate for change said they were undeterred by the threat of violence. “This is a dictatorship that has already taken everything from us, our food, our homes, our medicines,” said Rafael Alfonso Silva, who had come to assist with logistics, having fled Venezuela two years ago. “They have nothing left to take.”

Despite bellicose threats to the existing regime from American officials, including Donald Trump, Guaidó and his supporters have insisted they do not want a foreign military intervention or violence on the ground.

“We are not talking about an intervention like the ones you see in films, with helicopters and planes landing,” said Dignora Hernández, a legislator from the Vente Venezuela opposition party, who had also travelled to the border.

“we are talking about authorising – according to the constitution – a peaceful mission to allow humanitarian aid to pass.”

Apart from the campsites near the concert site, details of how and where the opposition will try to breach the border are still unclear.

Although much of the media focus has been on the Colombian border, where flows of migrants are high and the two planned concerts have drawn international attention, aid has been stockpiled in several other locations including the border with Brazil and the island of Curaçao. A ship loaded with supplies is also sailing from Puerto Rico.

Venezuela: at least four dead and hundreds injured in border standoff (The Guardian) By Emma Graham-Harrison, Joe Parkin, Clavel Rangel.
February 23, 2019

At least four people have been killed and hundreds injured in a wave of violence that convulsed Venezuela's border regions on Saturday, as opposition activists tried to defy a government ban to bring food and medical supplies into the country.

After the failed attempt to breach government blockades, opposition leader Juan Guaidó declared the fight would continue, and said “we must keep all our options open for the liberation of our homeland”.

He will head to Bogotá for a meeting on Monday with US vice-president Mike Pence, and other regional leaders in the Lima Group.

Florida senator Marco Rubio responded to Guaidó's comments, saying he had spoken to regional leaders. He said President Nicolás Maduro's regime on Saturday had “opened the door to various potential multilateral actions not on the table just 24 hours ago”.

Although Guaidó did not secure the mass defections he had hoped for, at least 60 border guards deserted their posts and fled into Colombia, as other members of security forces loyal to Maduro used teargas and rubber bullets to force back protesters and halt civilian convoys escorting aid supplies.

Three trucks of aid caught fire as they approached the first border checkpoints at the Santander and Simón Bolívar bridges connecting Venezuela to Colombia. It is not clear how those fires were started. There were injuries on both sides of the crossing, with Colombian authorities reporting at least 285 wounded.

In the south, opposition activists claimed aid had reached Venezuela, but although two trucks did leave Brazil they stopped just a few metres inside the border, a national guard checkpoint between them and any possible recipients.

Beyond the security forces was the town of Santa Elena de Uairén, which saw the worst of the violence, with both pro-government armed gangs and national guard members taking to the streets to try and disperse opposition supporters.

At least four people were killed and 18 injured by gunfire, according to campaign group Foro Penal, and the town's hospital was overwhelmed by the influx of dead and injured.

The first casualty of the aid delivery attempt had come in the same area on Friday, when a military convoy opened fire on indigenous protesters.

Humanitarian aid is much-needed in a country racked by hunger, hyperinflation and food shortages. But opposition leaders also hope their attempt to deliver supplies will undermine Maduro and encourage defections from security forces that have largely remained loyal to Caracas.

Maduro addressed a rally in the capital, insisting he was “stronger than ever” and calling volunteers trying to ship aid “traitors”.

He denounced the food and medical supplies as an American pretext to destabilise his government, and told the crowd he had broken off diplomatic relations with Colombia because the country was being used for “attacks against Venezuela”.

After his speech, as teargas billowed at the country's borders, he danced with his wife onstage in a bizarre display of nonchalance.

Guaidó, who had declared himself interim president in late January, had claimed a premature victory at about noon local time, announcing that the first aid had already crossed the border from Brazil.

But they went only a few metres inside Venezuela, and by evening the two small trucks loaded with donations had driven back into Brazil, citing security concerns.

By the end of Saturday, which the opposition had made a deadline for aid shipments to cross the border, it appeared the two sides had settled into an uneasy standoff.

Colombia announced late on Saturday that it would close all the border crossings for two days, to check for damage after attempts to take aid across were met with fierce violence.

The most serious clashes were on the Santander bridge separating Cúcuta and the Venezuelan town of Ureña. There volunteers escorted aid trucks up to a security cordon but were pushed back by rubber bullets and teargas, while gangs loyal to Maduro and opposition supporters threw stones at each other.

“I was crossing the bridge when a rubber bullet hit me,” said Carlos Juancho, a student from Merida, wounded in the neck. “This is how Maduro treats his people.”

The opposition perhaps thought civilian convoys would test how far ordinary soldiers were willing to go to protect the government. Whatever their orders, many were expected to be uneasy about opening fire on unarmed fellow Venezuelans.

There were at least 60 members of security forces in the area who crossed the border they were ordered to defend, Colombian immigration officials said. Guaidó took to Twitter to encourage others to join them.

“In my position as commander in chief of the armed forces, I declare that soldiers who cross the border will not be considered traitors to their homeland,” Guaidó said in a tweet.

But there were not enough defections to allow aid to pass the border crossings. Although Guaidó has won a wave of popular support and been recognised as Venezuela’s leader by the US and many of its allies, he has so far struggled to persuade the country’s military to back his cause en masse.

Promotions and lucrative commercial opportunities have helped keep senior officers loyal, while many in the lower ranks are terrified of being punished for defection.

One of the defectors who crossed on Saturday said it had taken courage to leave. “Brother, I have been thinking about this for days,” he said, in a video shared on social media. “It wasn’t something I decided overnight.”

Many others in the security forces agreed with him but were too afraid to defect, he said. “You can’t say anything against the government.”

Friday’s attack near the Brazil border suggested the military were under heavy pressure from senior officers. Local officials said the attack was the first time in living memory the armed forces had opened fire on indigenous people in the Gran Sabana area, a tourism hotspot famous for spectacular scenery.

The violence began again early on Saturday on the other side of the country, police firing teargas at Venezuelans trying to cross into Colombia in Ureña. Most were not protesters but simply heading across for work or personal reasons.

“We are frightened that what happened yesterday at the other border is going to happen here, with people killed and injured,” said Aurora Albarracin, 55.

Later in the day, protests in towns on the Venezuelan side of the border also turned violent, with protesters throwing stones and bottles, burning military uniforms and setting a government bus on fire, and riot police responding with teargas. Armed pro-government gangs also opened fire on civilians in the town of San Antonio, wounding at least 11 people.

Rallies around the country aimed to persuade soldiers that they could switch sides. In Caracas, marchers headed for the Carlota military airport in the heart of the city.

“I would tell the soldiers today: put reason and feeling ahead of your weapons,” said Daniel Bruce, an intensive care doctor who said his hospital didn’t have basic medical supplies. “You are also Venezuelans and you suffer the same as us when you go to the hospitals,” he said.

“I’m marching because I believe in the rebirth of my homeland, and I believe that my patients have a right to humanitarian aid. Today is not about ideology, it is about human lives and dignity.”

Venezuelan President Breaks Ties With Colombia Amidst Deadly Aid Crisis (NPR) By James Doubek, Shannon Van Sant, Cat Schuknecht
February 23, 2019

At least four people were killed and hundreds injured as opponents of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro clashed with Venezuelan security forces over the weekend.

Anti-Maduro activists were largely unsuccessful in their efforts to bring shipments of food and medicine into the country

Saturday, according to reports from the borders with Colombia and Brazil.

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro announced Saturday that his government had broken diplomatic ties with Colombia after the government there aided opposition activists in seeking to bring the aid into Venezuela.

"Patience is exhausted, I can't bear it anymore, we can't keep putting up with Colombian territory being used for attacks against Venezuela," Maduro said in a speech. "For that reason, I have decided to break all political and diplomatic relations with Colombia's fascist government."

Colombian diplomats were given 24 hours to leave Venezuela. Foreign minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo said Colombia would blame Venezuela's president if anything happened to its diplomats, Reuters reported.

"Colombia holds the usurper Maduro responsible for any aggression or violation of the rights of Colombian officials in Venezuela," said the foreign minister.

Maduro's declaration added to the tension in a rapidly escalating political and humanitarian crisis that has resulted in violent confrontations between activists and Venezuelan security officials.

The first two deaths occurred Friday during violence in a Venezuelan town near the border with Brazil. More than a dozen were injured, according to multiple reports.

The White House responded by saying it "strongly condemns the Venezuelan military's use of force against unarmed civilians and innocent volunteers."

On Saturday afternoon, two more were killed and 18 were wounded in a separate clash in the town of Santa Elena de Uairen on the Venezuelan side of the border with Brazil, The Associated Press reported.

Meanwhile, along the border with Colombia, troops fired tear gas to keep people away from border bridges. Hours later, a truck carrying humanitarian aid caught fire as it attempted to cross the border into Venezuela, Reuters reported.

The clashes come as opposition activists are attempting to bring international aid into Venezuela to address food shortages, medical shortages and a mounting refugee crisis.

Juan Guaidó, the leader of the opposition, has called for Venezuela's military to defy orders from Maduro and allow aid shipments into the country.

Opposition leaders said at least one truck successfully conveyed aid across the Brazil-Venezuela border on Saturday.

Guaidó — who has declared himself Venezuela's legitimate interim president and has been recognized as such by the United States and dozens of other countries — appeared with the presidents of Chile, Colombia and Paraguay at a concert in Cúcuta, Colombia Friday.

On Saturday, the AP reported that Guaidó said he plans to meet U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday, when Pence is set to land in Bogotá, Colombia, to discuss the Venezuela crisis with regional leaders.

In a series of tweets late Saturday, Guaidó said he'll be part of that meeting and that "we must have all options open to achieve liberation" for the country. After Saturday's events, he tweeted, he no longer sees talks with the military as a path toward peace. "They are soldiers who at some point had an illusion for the military career and are now prisoners of terror," he wrote.

Guaidó is banned from leaving Venezuela but reportedly said he crossed the border with the help of the armed forces.

Five members of the Venezuelan armed forces deserted their posts on Saturday and joined Guaidó, calling him Venezuela's "constitutional president," according to the AP. The moment was captured in a video that Guaidó posted to his Twitter account.

On Friday, thousands had gathered in Cúcuta for a benefit concert organized by billionaire Richard Branson to pressure the Maduro government to allow humanitarian aid into the country.

The State Department said Friday it was "pre-positioning" an additional 178 metric tons of aid in Boa Vista, Brazil, near the Venezuelan border.

But Venezuelan Vice President Delcy Rodríguez tweeted on Friday that the government would implement a "temporary total closure" of three main bridges between Cúcuta and Venezuela. It came a day after Maduro ordered the border with Brazil closed.

Maduro views the aid shipments as a Trojan horse meant to destabilize his government. Maduro "says it's kind of a pretext for a U.S. invasion of his country," noted correspondent John Otis in an interview with Weekend Edition Saturday.

"The opposition wants to get rid of Maduro, who's been in power for the last six years during this economic meltdown," Otis said. "The Trump administration is fully behind Guaidó's efforts to try to get humanitarian aid across the border to sort of try to provoke a mutiny and bring down Maduro."

But beyond the political fight, Venezuela's need for aid — in the form of food and medicine — is genuine.

Venezuela has faced a growing humanitarian crisis for years, with shortages of food and spiraling inflation that's driven millions from the country. The United Nations said Friday that 3.4 million people have now left Venezuela, many on foot.

For those who haven't left, an estimated 80 percent of Venezuelan households are food insecure, which means they do not have a reliable source of food, Tamara Taraciuk Broner, a senior researcher with Human Rights Watch, told NPR.

"You see people, vulnerable people, eating off the trash," Broner said, citing a report by universities in Venezuela that indicates "people have lost an average of 11 kilos [24 pounds] in one year."

Broner said that in some cases, the "government has made a deliberate attempt to hide the official data on the extent of the crisis."

"The only time that a health minister decided to release epidemiological data in recent times, in January 2017, the bulletin that she released indicated that only in 2016, in just one year, maternal mortality increased by 65 percent, and infant mortality increased by 30 percent.

"In a way, that's very consistent with the repression in this government. That minister was immediately fired, and since then, there has been no official data released by the Venezuelan government," Broner said.

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TOPICS

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Appoint TRC, CIEDP members without delay (The Himalayan Times) By Roshan S Nepal
February 16, 2019

With less than two months remaining for the expiry of the tenure of members of two transitional justice mechanisms, victims of the decade-long Maoist conflict have said the government and political parties should immediately begin the process of appointing new members to avoid any possible vacuum in the commissions.

Through an amendment to the Transitional Justice Act, the government has extended the tenure of members of the two commissions till April 13, and tenure of the commissions by one year, with provisions for another one-year extension.

As per the act, a five-member recommendation committee headed by former Supreme Court chief justice will recommend members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons. The recommendation will then be approved by the Cabinet. Even if the government wants to continue the existing members, which is against the victims' demand for restructuring the commissions, the act needs to be amended again.

Against this backdrop, the victims said it was already late for the formation of the recommendation committee, and any further delay would raise the chances of the commissions existing without members after April 13. TRC Chairman Surya Kiran Gurung and member Lila Udasi Khanal have already tendered their resignation. Moreover, the victims have demanded their meaningful participation in the process of selecting new TRC, CIEDP commissioners. The international community has also

been pressing the government to appoint competent members in the two mechanisms in a transparent manner.

“The government and political parties have not consulted us on the matter so far. There’s a trend of doing everything at the eleventh hour without meaningful consultation. We are not going to accept any decision imposed on us by the government and political parties,” said Suman Adhikari, former chairman of the Conflict Victims Common Platform.

The government and political parties, on the other hand, have yet to reach a consensus on the matter. They are currently weighing two options — first amending the TJ Act in line with the Supreme Court’s verdicts and restructuring the commissions later, or first restructuring the commissions and amending the act later.

But with the winter session of the Parliament expected to run for just over a month and the next House session going to be the budget session, the government must act fast if they go with the option of amending the act first, according to victims.

Even if they go with the second option of restructuring the commissions first, they do not have the luxury of delaying or fast-tracking the process because victims have been seeking broad-based consultations and transparent commissioner selection process, they said.

“So the government and parties should begin consultations immediately to avoid any situation of vacuum in the TRC and CIEDP,” said Ram Bhandari, adviser to the Conflict Victims National Alliance. “Competent commissioners should be appointed through a transparent appointment process on the basis of broad-based consultations with all stakeholders, especially the victims.”

Secretary at the PM’s Office Ramesh Dhakal, who is actively involved in the act amendment process, said the government was holding consultations with stakeholders.

Ranil talks of truth commission as Tamils urge ICC referral (Tamil Guardian) February 16, 2019

As Tamils across the North-East and diaspora called for Sri Lanka to be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) to ensure justice for the genocide of 2009, Sri Lanka's prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe renewed talk of a truth and reconciliation commission.

Previous reports of such a commission were widely criticised by Tamil groups and human rights organisations.

The timing of Ranil’s renewed proposal, which was put forward to the Cabinet last week, was viewed cynically by families of the disappeared who reiterated that nothing but an international mechanism of justice would suffice.

On Monday, mothers in Vavuniya who have been protesting for over 700 days, wrote to the UN Human Rights Council, urging member states not to extend the time given to Sri Lanka to implement the co-sponsored resolution and instead refer it to the ICC.

“We lost friends who were protesting with us, the mothers of abducted, who died because of the extreme psychological effect on them,” the letter to the UN Human Rights Council read.

“Unless there is an investigation by reliable sources like the ICC, the situation will get worse among the mothers and with their health.”

The resolution was due to be debated at the upcoming UNHRC session in Geneva next month following a two year extension granted in 2017. However, reports suggest the resolution will be rolled over again by another two years.

Tamil organisations across the North-East and diaspora have criticised reports Sri Lanka will be granted a further two years to implement the resolution, highlighting the state’s long history of failure to provide justice for Tamils

Last week the former chief minister of the Northern Province, C V Wigneswaran also criticised any decision to grant Sri Lanka more time, arguing that nothing has been gained by extra time given so far.

“There is a need for the UN to take immediate actions regarding this, because nothing came out of giving time so far. They said that they will repeal Prevention of Terrorism Act but they haven’t done anything yet. If they won’t do a small thing like that, do you think they would fulfil the rest of it?”

“Giving time won’t bring anything to Tamils. It will only benefit the government.”

Victims push against reappointment of transitional justice body officials (The Kathmandu Post) By Binod Ghimire

February 24, 2019

As the terms of the officials of two transitional justice bodies near completion, conflict victims have demanded “a free and fair process” for appointing new chairpersons and members and called on the government not to re-appoint the incumbent officials.

Conflict victims’ organisations say since the incumbent officials were primarily responsible for the lackadaisical performance of the two transitional justice commissions, they shouldn’t be reappointed after mid-April.

The amendment to the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, which has come into effect after authentication from the President, has set mid-April as the final deadline for incumbent officials to retire.

The amendment doesn’t stop the reappointment of the incumbent officials, but they have to go through a new selection process.

The Act envisions formation of a five-member committee headed by a former Supreme Court chief justice to recommend chairpersons and members of the two commissions. The recommendation then needs Cabinet’s approval before appointment.

“We are strongly against repeating the incumbent officials. It would be meaningless to restructure the commissions if the same persons take charge again,” said Bhagiram Chaudhari, chairperson of the Conflict Victims Common Platform. He said the platform has clearly presented its stand on the issue to the government officials.

The victims’ leaders came with the demand after learning that two members from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, picked under then CPN (Maoist Centre) and Nepali Congress quotas, are lobbying for their reappointment.

The Conflict Victims National Network, another group of insurgency-era victims, // also demanded that the government immediately form the recommendation committee and ensure that the appointment process is free and fair.

The network, according to General Secretary Phanindra Luitel, has decided not to be a part of the commission. He said they have made it clear to the government representatives that members of the network are not interested in getting appointments to either of the commissions.

Though TRC Chairperson Surya Kiran Gurung and member Lila Udasi Khanal have already resigned, three members and the entire team of the disappearance commission continue to hold their posts.

Following the demands from the conflict victims and a section of human rights activists, the government, through the legal amendment, decided to restructure the two commissions, and to bid farewell to the 10 officials who were appointed more than four years ago.

Four years since their formation, the commissions haven’t started detailed investigation into a single case.

The truth commission is sitting on 63,000 cases while the disappearance commission has around 2,500 cases to investigate. The new leadership will have a maximum of two years to complete the investigation and recommend penalty and reparations.

This is what life is like for those who were disabled in the decade-long civil conflict (The Kathmandu Post)

By Kishor Sharma

February 23, 2019

On June 16, 2011, Ananda Pandey had returned from school and gone to the fields to weed maize when he found a strange object buried under a stone. Curious, the 12-year-old began to dig it out. Suddenly, it began emanating noise and smoke. It was too late when it occurred to him that the object could be a bomb. He panicked and tried to run away, but he tripped on the vines of a bean plant and fell down. The improvised explosive device (IED) went off in his face. Shrapnel cut into his face, chest and arms.

Villagers carried him in a doko — a basket made from bamboo — to take him to Jumla from his village in Kalikot. When treatment wasn’t possible there, he was brought to Nepalgunj. He underwent two surgeries--one for his face and another his chest. When Pandey regained consciousness, he overheard doctors saying that one of his eyes had been completely destroyed but there was still hope for another one. It turned out to be mere assurance for encouragement. The IED took away Pandey’s eyesight.

Pandey’s accident occurred five years after the formal signing of the CPA. In fact, the rebel Maoists had already led the

government once by then. Three years after the incident, the government formed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it was only mandated to look into incidents that took place during the conflict period (1996-2006). So, Pandey was left to fend for himself.

Surendra Khatri's story is similar to that of Pandey. He was 18-years-old when lost both his limbs in an IED explosion on June 26, 2006, five months before the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the Government of Nepal and the then rebel Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist). The bomb had been planted and left behind by the rebel Maoists during the deadly Beni attack in 2004.

"When we talk about conflict victims, we tend to think of either murder or disappearance. Those who've been disabled as a result of the conflict have never been acknowledged, even if the incidents took place during the conflict," says Khatri, from Beni.

For Bhagwati Gautam, 51, who lost her leg during the height of the armed conflict, in February 2002, while travelling from her village to Khalanga, Rukum with her friends, the state has neither provided her with any assistance nor assurance.

The state has always been apathetic towards individuals living with disabilities caused by the conflict. Records from the erstwhile Ministry of Peace and Reconstruction show the distribution of compensation to 9,820 disabled conflict victims. However, the government has no records for civilians rendered disabled during the conflict.

Khatri argues that it is mostly security personnel and Maoists cadres who were provided with compensation. Some of whom are even 'fake' disabled victims. "Civilians without political connections never received anything at all. We are raising concerns for justice and we are capable of fighting for our rights," says Khatri.

As a part of their campaign, on February 19, disabled conflict victims formed an 11-member National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims, led by Khatri. They held a two-day national conference in Lalitpur that announced a three-point Lalitpur Declaration, a charter detailing their short-term and long-term demands, their position on the ongoing transitional justice process, and suggestions for national and international non-governmental organisations and the donor community.

A photo exhibition, titled '14 Stories: Memories of War' was on display at the Administrative Staff College in Jawalakhel, from February 19-23, to raise awareness about their plight.

"We are the ones who live with the horror of war. We have to live with the scars of the conflict forever, but the state does not identify us as conflict victims," says Khatri. "The state and former rebel group who is in government now should be held accountable. We want everything that a citizen of this country is entitled to."

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Terrorism

How the Navy plans to deal with drug use and war crimes allegations in the SEAL community (The Navy Times) By Geoff Ziezulewicz

February 13, 2019

The Navy's top SEAL is probing what went wrong with his service's premier special warfare teams and how he can fix them.

Pointing to a series of high-profile scandals and ongoing war crimes trials, Naval Special Warfare commander Rear Adm. Collin Green told an audience at the U.S. Naval Institute's West 2019 convention here that he's commissioned a 90-day review to explore "what we're doing in the schoolhouse, what we're not doing, what we're doing relative to leader development and hard ethical decisions, combat ethics, and seeing if we're addressing that."

Green's statements came after Task & Purpose reporter Paul Szoldra asked what the command was doing to respond to reports of SEALs failing urinalysis tests for drug abuse and being charged for war crimes.

The SEAL leader was participating in a panel about military readiness and the session's moderator — retired Vice Adm. James Zortman — tried to shoot the question down, but Green agreed it was an important issue for his community of special operators and he didn't flinch at addressing it.

"We are looking hard, as a learning organization, to self-assess, to see if we are assessing and selecting the right people, and

are we holding them accountable,” Green said.

Green said that the review will include “hard discussions,” and he pointed to a grueling tempo of operations SEALs have faced since Sept. 11, 2001.

“We’ve been at war for 17 years,” he added.

New legal bombshells explode on two Navy SEAL war crimes cases

New legal bombshells explode on two Navy SEAL war crimes cases

Two SEALs offer up damaging testimony against a chief special warfare operator accused of war crimes -- and suggest the command did not initially investigate the sprawling allegations of misconduct, new legal documents show.

Green commissioned the assessment on Jan 1. in the wake of a November memo from the head of U.S. Special Operations Command, Army. Gen. Raymond A. Thomas III.

Green will report the findings to Thomas in March, according to Naval Special Warfare spokeswoman Cmdr. Tamara Lawrence.

In his memo, Thomas called on members of the U.S. military’s shadowy special forces community to “operate with the highest standards of ethics and honor.”

“We routinely operate around the world in environments where exposure and temptations to be influenced by local norms are a reality,” Thomas wrote. “Never give the American people or our allies cause to doubt our will to execute at the highest standards of tactical and moral excellence.”

Thomas urged them to continue serving “with honor and integrity” both “on and off the battlefield.”

Green’s study is being conducted in the midst of ongoing war crimes trials targeting SEALs who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, including the high-profile prosecution of Chief Special Warfare Operator Edward “Eddie” Gallagher.

Authorities accuse Gallagher of fatally stabbing a wounded teenage Islamic State prisoner of war outside the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2017 and shooting at innocent civilians with his sniper rifle.

Gallagher’s commanding officer at SEAL Team 7’s Alpha Platoon, Lt. Jacob X. “Jake” Portier, also faces charges for allegedly trying to conceal the purported war crimes.

Both men have denied wrongdoing.

Four SEALs stationed at Village Stability Platform Kalach in the Chora District of Afghanistan’s Uruzgan Province also have been charged in San Diego for their alleged roles in the May 31, 2012 beating of bound prisoners at the hands of Afghan Local Police militiamen, with one detainee possibly dying after the interrogations.

Like Portier and Gallagher, they insist they’re innocent, too.

Prosecutors also say a pair of Navy SEALs are linked to the June 4, 2017, death of Army Special Forces Staff Sgt. Logan Melgar at his residence in Bamako, Mali.

SEALs also have been dogged by reports of rising drug abuse problems in their teams and the early 2018 conviction of Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Gregory Kyle Seerden for recording images of child sexual abuse on his cellphone.

War crimes trial to continue even if Jamaat seeks mercy: Quader (The Daily Star) February 16, 2019

Road, Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader today said that the war crimes trial would continue even if Jamaat-e-Islami seeks apology for its crimes against humanity during the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971.

Quader, also general secretary of ruling Awami League, came up with the remarks while talking to reporters at the political office of the party at Dhanmondi in Dhaka.

“It’s not clear yet why the matter of seeking mercy by Jamaat has appeared after 47 years of independence. It might be their political strategy. However, they have not said anything officially yet over the matter. Even if they seek mercy, the trial of war criminals which is underway would not be stopped,” said Quader.

Responding to another question, he said, “What would be the big difference if Jamaat changes its name...it is like old wine in new bottle. It is all the same if there remains the same old ideology in the new name.”

Former Guantanamo Bay prisoner Omar Khadr wants court to terminate eight-year sentence for war crimes (National Post) February 26, 2019

Former Guantanamo Bay prisoner Omar Khadr is asking an Alberta court to declare his eight-year sentence for war crimes to have expired.

The sentence, which was imposed in 2010 by a military commission in the United States, would have ended last October had Khadr remained in custody.

But the clock stopped ticking when an Alberta judge freed him on bail in May 2015 pending Khadr’s appeal of his military conviction — a years-long process that has no end in sight.

His lawyer, Nate Whitling, has told a judge in Edmonton that Khadr had served three years and five months of his eight-year sentence when he was granted bail.

Whitling noted his client has since been on bail for three years and nine months.

The lawyer said the appeal, in the meantime, hasn’t advanced “even an inch” in the U.S.

“Mr. Khadr’s sentence essentially is frozen in time,” Whitling told Chief Justice Mary Moreau on Tuesday.

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled the punishment handed Khadr for alleged acts committed in Afghanistan when he was 15 years old was to be a youth sentence.

His application asks the judge to place Khadr under conditional supervision for one day then declare his sentence served.

“He’s been an upstanding citizen since being released,” said Whitling. “There’s just nothing negative to say about Mr. Khadr.”

One hurdle Khadr must overcome is proving the Alberta court has jurisdiction. The international treaty under which he was transferred to Canada from Guantanamo Bay could be interpreted as precluding such a review. If that view prevails, his application asks the judge to declare that part of the treaty unconstitutional.

Khadr spent years in U.S. detention at Guantanamo Bay after he was captured and accused of tossing a grenade that killed special forces soldier Christopher Speer at a militant compound in Afghanistan in 2001.

Since his release on bail, Khadr has lived in Edmonton and Red Deer, Alta., without incident. The court has eased some of his initial bail conditions, but several remain in place.

Those conditions include not having access to a Canadian passport, a ban on unsupervised communication with his sister who lives in Georgia, and a requirement to notify his bail supervisor before leaving Alberta.

Khadr’s case has ignited divisive debate among Canadians over terrorism, human rights and the rule of law since it was revealed in the summer of 2017 that the federal government had settled a lawsuit filed by him for a reported \$10.5 million.

The payout followed a ruling by Canada’s Supreme Court in 2010 that Khadr’s charter rights were violated at Guantanamo and that Canadian officials contributed to that violation.

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Piracy

Singapore’s Submarine Invincible Launches (The Maritime Executive) February 18, 2019

Singapore's first Type 218SG submarine, Invincible, was launched at the thyssenkrupp Marine Systems' shipyard in Kiel on Monday.

After construction and outfitting is completed, Invincible will undergo intensive testing before being handed over in 2021.

Invincible is the first in a series of four of the Type 218SG submarines. The contract for the first two submarines was signed in

2013 and the contract for the second batch in 2017. After handing over the Invincible in 2021, the second submarine is scheduled to be delivered in 2022. The third and fourth submarines are scheduled to follow from 2024 onwards.

The Singaporean submariner's creed reads: "To our adversaries, we are Invisible. To our enemies, we are Invincible." It is a statement that every submariner recites from the first day of training. In that context the Republic of Singapore Navy decided to christen the new class of submarines the Invincible-class.

The second-in-class will be named Impeccable, carrying the hallmark of excellence, inspiring her crew to always attain the highest standards. The third will be named Illustrious for her to leave stories to inspire generations to come. The fourth and final boat will be Inimitable – peerless, distinctive and second-to-none.

The Type 218SG submarines will have 50 percent greater endurance than Singapore's previous class of submarines and greater weapons-carrying capability.

Singapore sits astride two of the busiest sea lines of communication in the world – the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca – through which about one-third of the world's maritime trade is transported. The maritime industry is a significant feature of Singapore's economy and contributes around seven percent of its gross domestic product.

The maritime environment around Singapore faces security challenges such as terrorism, shipping of illegal arms, weapons of mass destruction and piracy, said Singapore Minister for Defence, Dr. Ng Eng Hen, at the launch. "The seaborne terrorist attacks such as the 2008 Mumbai attack, where 10 terrorists who arrived via boats killed more than 160 people, demonstrate the real possibility and grave consequences of terrorists infiltrating a country from the sea.

"In Asia, defense spending has increased significantly, reaching \$447 billion in 2017. It has exceeded that of Europe combined. This is an increase of approximately 61 percent from its spending in less than a decade ago. Many countries are modernizing their armed forces. Thailand, for instance, approved a plan to acquire the first of three submarines in 2017. China announced plans to expand its submarine fleet by the end of the decade. Indonesia, India and South Korea have plans to expand and modernize their submarine fleets. And in this context, the acquisition of the new Type 218SG submarines is timely," said Ng.

Also on Monday, Singapore's Defence Science and Technology Agency (DSTA) and thyssenkrupp Marine Systems signed a Memorandum of Understanding in Kiel to collaborate on new technologies such as additive manufacturing and data analytics for naval applications. Under the agreement, DSTA and thyssenkrupp Marine Systems will explore the use of additive manufacturing to produce submarine spare parts.

Italian Senate Blocks Migrant "Kidnapping" Case Against Salvini (The Maritime Executive) February 19, 2019

On Thursday, an Italian senate committee voted 16 to 6 to block a trial for Interior Minister Matteo Salvini, who has been under investigation for kidnapping after he ordered 150 maritime migrants held on board an Italian coast guard cutter.

On August 15, 2018, the Italian cutter Diciotti took aboard 190 migrants from an overloaded boat off Lampedusa. The crew sent 13 survivors ashore for medical care, then spent four days at sea while Italy and Malta debated where she would be permitted to dock. Italian transport minister Danilo Toninelli eventually allowed the Diciotti to enter the port of Catania, Sicily, but Salvini insisted that the migrants could not disembark unless they were taken in by other nations. He relented in part on August 22, allowing 27 minors to get off the cutter, but 150 individuals were held until August 26, when the Catholic Church and the governments of Albania and Ireland agreed to accept them.

Prosecutors in Catania opened an inquiry into whether Salvini had abused his authority and committed an act of kidnapping by holding the migrants on board, offenses punishable by up to 15 years in prison. Salvini initially said that he was "not at all" afraid, and expressed willingness to be arrested for his decision. In January, a court in Sicily ruled that the case should proceed to trial - an action that the Italian Senate has the authority to block.

Salvini is the leader of the populist League party, which is a partner of the Five Star Movement in Italy's current governing coalition. Five Star came to power by campaigning for accountability: the movement's leader, Luigi Di Maio, once asserted that "we cannot allow a minister of interior under investigation to remain in office," referring to a case against Salvini's predecessor.

With the current interior minister under investigation, Five Star faced a challenging test of principle. Ultimately, the party put the matter to an online referendum, asking its supporters to vote whether or not Salvini should be prosecuted. Nearly 60 percent of respondents favored halting the investigation, and the Five Star-led committee voted accordingly.

Three Navy Ships Will Protect South Africa from Pirates and Illegal Fishing -Here's What They Look Like (Business Insiders South Africa) By Jay Caboz

February 26, 2019

Construction has started on three new military vessels to protect South Africa's coastline.

The vessels will aid in protecting the country from threats such as trafficking, illegal fishing and piracy. They form part of the South African Navy's Project BIRO and hopes to relieve its ageing fleet in protecting 1.5 million square kilometres of coastline.

"This new Multi-Mission Inshore Patrol Vessels (MMIPVs) will cater for the roles and obsolescence of Navy vessels such as the Strike Craft, Mine Countermeasures Vessels and the Torpedo Recovery Vessel that have been in service for more than 40 years," said Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, Minister of Defence and Military Veterans, this weekend.

The navy budgeted R1.5 billion for the vessels, which was signed and approved in October 2017.

They are to be constructed locally at Damen Shipyards Cape Town (DSCT), who won the tender. The vessels need to include 60% local content (excluding high-end items such as marine engines, propulsion systems, electronics systems and generators).

The Minister stated that the vessels delivered by Project BIRO will be "work horses" of the South African Navy, reducing the load off the Navy's existing fleet of frigates.

"While prevalence of piracy has somewhat declined, the extent of maritime crime observed – including trafficking, illegal fishing and smuggling – has been on the increase indicating that the maritime domain lacks law enforcement. The new vessels would be well suited to this task," said Mapisa-Nqakula.

South Africans can expect the first vessel by early 2021 and on the water protecting our seas by June of that year. The second and third are scheduled for delivery in 2022 and 2023, respectively.

With a length of 62.2 metres the vessels will be capable of travelling at a max speed of 20 knots, or around 37 kilometres an hour.

The P1571 vessels will be built according to a patented Damen Axe Bow design. This aims to ensure high sustained speed even in South Africa's notoriously rough waters. A key point of the ships' design is that it can reduce vertical acceleration and bow slamming when going through heavy surge.

The keel laying ceremony for the new vessels took place this weekend. The tradition involves placing a newly minted coin under the keel (the primary structural backbone of the ship around which the hull is built) and building over it.

The coin laid at the DSCT event was a commemorative medal made in honour of the late President Nelson Mandela's 1993 Nobel Peace Prize win.

The keel bar is then lowered on top of the coin and welded closed – a privilege that went to Nobelungu Tshangase from Velddrif on the West Coast, the top performing apprentice at Damen's training school. The school has educated over 150 young people from previously disadvantaged communities since 2010.

"Over the years, our shipyard has undertaken many projects for local and international clients but none as significant as Project BIRO. This project is being built and delivered within the agreed specifications, timelines, and budgets," said Sam Montsi, DSCT Director.

Shipper's Council , Navy Partner to End Sea Piracy, Other Crimes (Daily Trust) By Chris Agabi
February 27, 2019

The Nigerian Shippers Council (NSC) and the Nigerian Navy have agreed to partner to end piracy and other crimes on Nigerian territorial waters to improve ease of doing business at the country's sea ports.

The commitment was made by the Executive Secretary, Nigerian Shippers Council (NSC), Engr. Hassan Bello and the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral, Ibok E. Ibas, when the former paid a visit to the naval chief in his office yesterday.

The visit, which was the first of its kind, was aimed at forging partnerships between both institutions that have critical roles to play in making Nigerian ports efficient and profitable.

Speaking to journalists at the sidelines of the visit, the ES NSC said the council, as an economic regulator of the ports, is worried about the profiling of Nigerian sea ports as highly dangerous to the point of insurers charging war premium on ships and cargo coming into the country.

He said the profiling made cargo coming into Nigeria very expensive, adding that NSC, the Nigerian Navy and other agencies will partner to end that narrative.

He also noted relative improvements in the security of Nigerian waters based on the robust interventions of the Navy.

“We are here to commend and compliment the efforts of the Nigerian Navy. So far we have reduced incidences on attacks on ships. We are trying to fashion out a harmonised strategy so we can even reduce the incidences at ports. We are going to have a committee made up of senior principal members of the Navy and Shippers Council to work out the details and see areas we will collaborate.

“One of the areas is information sharing. We need to take the information provided by the Navy into international fora like the Global Shippers Forum, IMO and other international organisations, so that they would know and appreciate the efforts that the Nigerian Navy has made for the protection of ships coming into Nigeria,” he explained.

Commenting, the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice Admiral Ibas, said the Nigerian Navy remains committed to improving security in the maritime space, adding that it has carried out a couple of measures and strategies that have yielded positive results.

“The navy rolled it score card and there is clear evidence that in the past three years the fortunes of the nation in maritime has been on the positive path, the policies have also contributed greatly in the reduction of piracy,” he said.

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Gender-Based Violence

Outraged by renewed fighting and continuing human rights violations in South Sudan, UN Human Rights Experts urge all parties to stop conflict, end impunity and respect provisions of the revitalized peace agreement (ReliefWeb) February 20, 2019

With thousands of people once again forced to flee their homes because of ongoing violence in South Sudan, the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan urges the Government of South Sudan and all parties to the conflict to respect the cessation of hostilities and implement the revitalized peace agreement signed five months ago.

In its third report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva, the Commission finds that continuing violence and human rights violations, including rape and sexual violence, may amount to war crimes.

Since its December 2017 update to the Human Rights Council on the magnitude of the crimes of rape and sexual violence perpetrated in South Sudan, the Commission notes the situation has markedly worsened, with documented cases showing a surge in rapes between November and December 2018, particularly in Northern Liech state.

“There is a confirmed pattern of how combatants attack villages, plunder homes, take women as sexual slaves and then set homes alight often with people in them,” commented Commission Chairperson Yasmin Sooka.

“Rapes, gang rapes, sexual mutilation, abductions and sexual slavery, as well as killings, have become commonplace in South Sudan. There is no doubt that these crimes are persistent because impunity is so entrenched that every kind of norm is broken,” she added.

UNICEF reports that 25 per cent of those targeted by sexual violence are children, including the rapes of girls as young as 7. Elderly and pregnant women have also been raped. The Commission also received reports of male victims of sexual violence. Sexual and gender-based violence against men and boys is even more underreported than that against women and girls as there is a greater level of stigma. even raping and killing the young and the elderly.

The Commission documented a case study on Leer, in Southern Unity state, where more than 8,000 young men were recruited to fight with the words: “you go and get cattle from Mayendit, also abduct and rape beautiful women you find here, loot their properties”. The men were also told that this was the perfect time to seek revenge for relatives they had lost in the conflict and that they would never have another such opportunity.

Noting that a lack of accountability for decades of violence during the struggle for independence helped to fuel the current conflict in South Sudan, the report stresses that sustainable peace requires a tangible and credible pursuit of accountability and justice that meets the needs of the many thousands of victims.

“We do acknowledge the efforts of the Government to hold some perpetrators accountable for gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law, such as the trial and conviction of SPLA soldiers in the Terrain Hotel case,” stated Commissioner Andrew Clapham. “However, we also have to note that pervasive impunity remains the norm,” he added.

The Commission has long been concerned about the lack of progress in establishing the Transitional Justice mechanisms, particularly the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, the Commission for Truth Reconciliation and Healing, and the Compensation and Reparation Authority, which were adopted in the 2015 Peace Agreement. It notes that the Revitalized Agreement has reaffirmed the importance of these institutions to build sustainable peace. It fully expects that concerted efforts will be made by the Revitalized Government, the African Union and Regional Governments to ensure these bodies are set up and contribute to the consolidation of peace in South Sudan.

The Commission has also looked at the allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeepers of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). From January 2018 to 2019, seven such cases involving 18 alleged UNMISS perpetrators were registered in the UN Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Database. These cases were swiftly investigated by the UN mission, resulting in the repatriation of peacekeepers implicated in sexual activity with women in one of the Protection of Civilians sites. The Commission has further recommended that the current database, which only reflects incidents involving UN Peacekeepers, should be expanded to include personnel of implementing partners.

The Commission also notes a link between the conflict and the political economy of South Sudan, where even before independence, there were concerns about the misappropriation of natural resources, particularly oil. The oil producing areas of the country have become increasingly militarized by Government forces, including by the National Security Services, which have expanded their involvement in the oil sector. The state-owned Nilepet oil company’s operations have been characterized by a total lack of transparency and independent oversight, allegedly diverting oil revenues into the coffers of elites in the government. Furthermore, oil revenues, and income from other natural resources such as illegal teak logging, have continued to fund the war, enabling its continuation and the resulting human rights violations. The Commission notes South Sudanese activists have urged the Commission and the AU to ensure that the mandate of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan incorporates such crimes.

The Commission underlines that in implementing the Transitional Justice agenda in South Sudan, victims and vulnerable communities, especially women and those internally displaced and refugees, are core stakeholders who must be included in the design and implementation of such mechanisms. The Commission welcomes the provision in the Revitalized Peace Agreement that women must make up 35 per cent of participants at all levels in the Transitional Government institutions, including the Transitional Justice mechanisms, and urges all parties to respect and implement this important provision.

The Commission also calls on the region and wider international community to invest, politically and materially, in these Transitional Justice mechanisms, essential for building sustainable peace, as well as supporting the people of South Sudan in rebuilding all aspects of national life, especially the rule of law.

The Mandate of the Commission includes the collection and preservation of evidence. The Commission has continued to document violations, build dossiers on perpetrators, collect evidence and preserve it for future accountability processes. In this report, the Commission details three cases studies in which the incidents and events have been extensively documented taking account of those who allegedly have command responsibility for the crimes. The names of these alleged perpetrators are contained in a confidential dossier which will be handed over to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva. The acts described as war crimes in our report are also human rights crimes under the Torture Convention and the Convention on Enforced Disappearances – both monitored in Geneva. All states parties to those instruments are obliged to prosecute or extradite persons found on their territory suspected of such crimes.

“The evidence we have collected and preserved will be available to the prosecutor of the future Hybrid Court and other transitional justice mechanisms,” noted third Commission member stated Barney Afako, “This evidence may be used beyond South Sudanese bodies – it may be available on request to regional and state parties for future prosecutions.”

South Sudan’s challenges are immense, says the Commission, given the protracted conflict, its ethnic dimensions and deep divisions; the inability of the population to access the economy; the lack of financial capacity and capable organisational and human resources; and what is perceived to be a dysfunctional and predatory elite system of government.

“With sustained political will and effective leadership,” concludes Commission Chair Yasmin Sooka, “The transitional justice framework and mechanisms can help to bring accountability, reconciliation and healing as South Sudanese deal with the past and secure their future stability and prosperity.”

The United Nations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement today pledged to step up action to prevent, end and respond to sexual and gender-based violence in and around conflict.

Through their work in conflict zones around the world, the two organizations see the enormous and lasting damage caused by sexual and gender-based violence, which is used as a tactic of war to dehumanize victims and destabilize entire communities and societies.

“Too often sexual atrocities are accepted as an inevitable by-product of war. This must end. The law is clear: rape and other forms of sexual violence are a violation,” said International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) President Peter Maurer, speaking on behalf of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. “Today we pledge to do better for the survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. We demand an end to sexual atrocities used as a tactic of war; and we demand a change in attitudes that blame survivors, not the perpetrators.”

“The world is growing ever more aware of the ubiquity of sexual and gender-based violence in and around conflict,” said UN Secretary-General António Guterres. “We must do more to prevent and it, and to hold the perpetrators to account. I am proud that the UN and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are coming together to better address these crimes. We will replace impunity with justice; and indifference with action. Survivors -- their experiences, needs and demands -- will be at the heart of everything we do.”

The two leaders were accompanied by Julienne Lusenge, a distinguished human rights activist who works with survivors of wartime sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

“It is time to stop using women's bodies as battlefields,” said Ms. Lusenge. “I am pleased to join my voice with the United Nations and Red Cross Red Crescent movement, to emphasize the need for direct and adequate action. Direct support to grassroots women's organizations will enable us to treat victims and survivors in the Democratic Republic of the Congo within hours and provide them with access to legal services, transforming them from victims into agents of change and protectors of humanity.”

At today's meeting, the United Nations and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement pledged to listen to survivors and victims of these crimes; to enable their voices to be heard; and to support them both directly and through local organizations, particularly women's organizations, that work in conflict zones.

The United Nations is directing all staff to promote women's participation in conflict prevention and resolution and in all formal peace processes;

The UN is instructing its peace operations around the world to make sure they have policies and systems in place to prevent conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence; and to pursue justice for victims and survivors based on their needs and aspirations;

-The UN is directing its peace operations and where relevant, other field presences to ensure that they are staffed with gender and protection advisers at the appropriate level to respond to this crisis, to provide input into decision-making at senior levels, and to consult with local communities;

The UN is stepping up efforts to mobilise resources for grassroots organisations, particularly women's organizations, that are on the frontlines of preventing and responding to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, through mechanisms such as the Women, Peace and Humanitarian Fund.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is today launching an appeal for approximately \$27 million in funding to help us better respond to the issue of sexual violence in 14 countries, including expanded services in Colombia, improved responses in Syria and new services in the Central African Republic;

The International Committee of the Red Cross for the first time ever will place dedicated specialists on conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence in six countries this year to increase the on-ground coordination of our response to the needs of women, men, boys and girls;

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies will continue to strengthen their efforts to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence through capacity building and deployments of dedicated specialists.

The UN and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement called on governments, who have the primary responsibility to prevent and respond to conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, to ensure victims and survivors receive adequate care and justice.

Specifically, they urged governments to:

Ensure there is adequate protection for victims and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict in their legal frameworks and policies;

Put measures in place to protect detainees from conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence;

Provide training for police and armed forces to prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence in and around conflict;

Investigate and prosecute perpetrators of crimes related to sexual and gender-based violence in conflict;

Ensure support for organisations working with victims and survivors of such violence;

Provide survivors and victims with ready access to physical and psychological care.

Above all, they urged governments to be guided by the voices, needs and demands of survivors and victims, and to put them at the heart of prevention and response.

Secretary-General Guterres and President Maurer spoke on the side-lines of the Human Rights Council, where both leaders stressed the need for States to re-commit to international humanitarian law and international human rights law and for a surge in multilateral efforts towards a comprehensive response to sexual and gender-based violence in and around conflict.

UN, ICRC Address Sexual, Gender-Based Violence in Conflict Situations (Voice of America) By Lisa Schlein
February 25, 2019

Heads of the United Nations and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement are pledging more action to prevent and end sexual and gender-based violence during conflicts. In Geneva, two humanitarian groups announced they have launched an effort to end the use of rape as a weapon of war.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says he has met many victims of rape and brutal sexual violence in war zones from the Democratic Republic of Congo to the former Yugoslavia. Guterres says he has heard firsthand accounts from Rohingya refugees who were gang-raped while trying to escape violence in Myanmar.

He says the place and circumstance of the abuse may differ, but the pain and trauma remain the same.

"Let me be clear. Sexual and gender-based violence in conflict is not only a horrendous and life-changing crime, most often perpetrated against women and girls," Guterres said. "It is also used as a tactic of war, to terrorize families, dehumanize communities and destabilize societies, so that they struggle to recover for years or even decades after the guns fall silent."

Guterres says sexual and gender-based violence in conflict is now widely recognized as a war crime that is preventable and punishable.

Congolese human rights activist Julienne Lusenge is president of the group Sofepadi and the director of the Congolese Women's Fund. For her, the suffering endured by women and young girls who have been violated by men at war is an every day personal matter.

"During this month of February, our medical center Karibuni Wa Mama a Bunia received in one week 28 children who were victims of serious sexual offenses, including a baby of two years," she said. "We continue to see women who have been captives held by various different armed groups in our regional offices."

Not only are these women used as sex slaves, but she says they also are victims of forced marriages, forced labor, physical and psychological violence, and inhuman and degrading treatment.

Lusenge says her organization provides survivors of these atrocities medical, psychological and legal support. She says in the past 20 years her group has been organizing socio-economic rehabilitation for victims. She says the communities as a whole — traditional leaders, young people, and survivors themselves are involved in this struggle.

"Women come to us as victims, but they go home as agents of change," Lusenge said. "Once they have been instructed on their rights and on the laws, which punish sexual violence, they join the fight at our side."

The president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, says sexual violence too often is accepted as an inevitable by-product of war. He says this must end. He says the law is clear that rape and other forms of sexual violence are a

violation and those guilty of these crimes must be held accountable and punished.

Maurer says the ICRC will do more on behalf of victims.

"Today, the International Committee of the Red Cross is launching an appeal of \$27 million to help us better respond to sexual violence in 14 key countries, including expanded services in Colombia, improved responses in Syria and new services in Central African Republic," he said. "For the first time, we will place dedicated specialists in six countries this year to increase the field coordination and response of the ICRC."

Among its many recommendations, the U.N. and ICRC are urging governments to ensure survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in conflict receive adequate protection. They are calling for measures to protect detainees from sexual abuse. They also say governments must provide training for police and armed forces to prevent these atrocities from occurring.

They agree with Julienne Lusenge, who says it is time to stop using women's bodies as battlefields.

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Commentary and Perspectives

Knock-on effects of war kill 300 babies every day - charity (Reuters) By Lin Taylor
February 14, 2019

Starvation, disease and a lack of aid are killing 300 babies a day in warzones around the world, with the number of children caught up in conflicts nearing a 30-year high, Save the Children said on Friday.

Afghanistan, Yemen, South Sudan, Central African Republic and Syria were among the worst conflict zones for children in 2017, the charity concluded from an analysis of U.N. data for the five years to the end of that year.

In all, more than 500,000 babies died during the period from the knock-on effects of conflict - hunger, hospital attacks and reduced aid - according to the data, which excludes those killed in attacks.

"From Yemen to Syria and South Sudan, children are bearing the horror of armed conflict," said Kevin Watkins, head of Save the Children, in a statement.

Yemen's almost four-year war has killed tens of thousands of people, caused the economy to collapse and brought millions of people to the brink of famine, according to the United Nations.

Children there are at risk of malnutrition, diarrhea, cholera, and diphtheria - a disease that spreads as easily as the common cold, said Save the Children. Five million children in Africa have died over the last 20 years because armed conflict deprived them of access to basic healthcare or clean water, the Lancet medical journal said in a report last year.

Save the Children said a fifth of all children worldwide - about 420 million - lived in a conflict zone in 2017, 30 million more than the year before and the highest number since 1990.

It said the U.N. data showed the number of "grave violations" against children - from sexual violence, armed recruitment and restricting aid - rose to a record 25,000 in 2017 from 10,000 in 2010.

"Some are treated as collateral damage in urban bombing. Others are deliberately targeted for killing, abduction and recruitment by armed groups. Millions go hungry because humanitarian aid is obstructed," Watkins said.

"The war on children must end, and those who commit crimes against children will be held to account," he added.

Palenstinians' lawsuit in U.S. vs. Adelson, others is revived (Reuters) By Jonathan Stempel
February 19, 2019

A U.S. appeals court has revived a \$1 billion lawsuit by Palestinians seeking to hold billionaire Sheldon Adelson and more than 30 other pro-Israel defendants liable for alleged war crimes and support of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip.

In a 3-0 decision on Tuesday, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit said a federal district judge wrongly concluded in August 2017 that all of the plaintiffs' claims raised political questions that could not be decided in American courts.

The plaintiffs, including 18 Palestinians and Palestinian-Americans as well as a Palestinian village council, alleged a conspiracy among many defendants to expel non-Jews from the disputed territories, and accused the defendants of committing or aiding in genocide and other war crimes.

Other defendants included the billionaire Larry Ellison, Bank Leumi BM and Bank Hapoalim BM, construction and support companies such as Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co and Volvo AB, 13 nonprofits, and the United States.

The lawyer for the plaintiffs did not immediately respond to requests for comment. A lawyer for the individual, nonprofit and corporate defendants, as well as the U.S. Department of Justice, did not immediately respond to similar requests.

In dismissing the case, U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan in Washington had said it was "inappropriate" for her to resolve the issue of the settlements, because it was "close to the heart of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and central to the United States' foreign policy decision-making in the region."

But in Tuesday's decision, without ruling on the merits, Circuit Judge Karen LeCraft Henderson said the only political question concerned who had sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied territories.

She said courts could rule on whether the defendants conspired to expel non-Jews or committed war crimes "without touching the sovereignty question, if it concluded that Israeli settlers are committing genocide."

Henderson said that presented a "purely legal issue" because genocide violated the law of nations, and could support the plaintiffs' claim under the federal Alien Tort Statute.

Adelson is the chief executive of casino company Las Vegas Sands Corp. Ellison is the chairman of Oracle Corp, the database software company he co-founded.

The case is Al-Tamimi et al v Adelson et al, D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, No. 17-5207.

U.N. reports mass rape, killings, torture in South Sudan, seeks oil scrutiny (Reuters) By Tom Miles
February 20, 2019

U.N. investigators have identified perpetrators of pervasive rape and killings and torture in secret safe houses in South Sudan, and believe oil revenues have driven much of the violence in its civil war, a report said on Wednesday.

The U.N. Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan recommended further investigation of evidence that proceeds from South Sudan's oil-based economy had been channeled to government forces and militias linked to reported war crimes.

The Commission said the army, national security, military intelligence, rebel forces and affiliated armed groups had committed serious human rights breaches, and it had drawn up a confidential list of suspects including army and opposition commanders, two state governors and a county commissioner.

Its 212-page report detailed people being held for years and tortured in secret, vermin-ridden detention centers, children being run down by tanks, rape of girls as young as seven, and babies being drowned, starved or smashed against trees.

In some stricken areas, 65 percent of females and 36 percent of males may have been sexually abused, according to the report.

Although South Sudan's main warring parties signed a peace deal in September, widespread violence, especially rape, has continued.

A member of the three-person commission, Andrew Clapham, said it was outraged by reports of further fighting between government forces and the rebel National Salvation Front, which was not part of the peace agreement, in the Yei River area.

"There are thousands of civilians who have been forcibly displaced following a scorched-earth policy in which the parties to the conflict are attacking the villages, torching the homes, killing civilians and raping women and girls," Clapham said.

The United States, Britain and Norway jointly expressed their alarm at the reports of escalating violence in Yei. "These military actions, and the trading of blame, must stop," they said in a joint statement.

Clapham said that more than 5,000 refugees had reached neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo and up to 20,000 people were expected to be displaced by the latest fighting.

The report cited a close connection between oil and the conflict. A law ensuring that South Sudan's oil-producing regions and communities received two and three percent of its oil revenue respectively had triggered a redrawing of provincial boundaries and ethnic conflict.

"We feel the national security services are very much involved in the siphoning off of oil money," said Clapham.

The Human Rights Council should get to the bottom of the sums involved and where the money was going, he told reporters, noting that health and education spending was "minuscule".

"If you are involved in oil extraction in that area and you are asked to assist one side or the other, you could be accused of complicity in war crimes. There are Council members that we think have a responsibility to look more carefully at this."

South Sudan is one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. This year the United Nations needs \$1.5 billion for live-saving aid for its population and \$2.7 billion for its refugees.

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WORTH READING

Child Soldiers in International Classrooms: Unqualified Perpetrators, Erratic Witnesses and Irreparable Victims?

Barbora Holá and Thijs Bouwknecht

Research Handbook on Child Soldiers Washington and Lee Studies Paper No. 2019-10

January 31, 2019

International criminal trials deal with perpetrators and victims of mass atrocity crimes. Child soldiers have appeared in international courtrooms as perpetrators, witnesses and victims. However, these various encounters were often inappropriate, uncomfortable and uneasy. This Chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of child soldiers in international courtrooms focusing on the Special Court for Sierra Leone and the International Criminal Court. It analyzes trials with and about child soldiers, describes applicable legal rules, discusses existing practices and identifies core challenges. The Chapter unpacks an empirically grounded overview of law's encounters with child soldiers and then normatively problematizes that encounter. In both international and internationalized courtrooms, child soldiers have been characterized, adjectively, as unqualified perpetrators, erratic witnesses and irreparable victims.

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Grotian Moment: The International War Crimes Trial Blog:
<http://law.case.edu/grotian-moment-blog/>

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