

## TURK GETS 108 YEARS FOR ABUSING SYRIA CHILDREN

**ISTANBUL:** A court in Turkey has sentenced a Turkish man to 108 years in jail for sexually assaulting at least eight Syrian children at a flagship refugee camp, reports said yesterday. The 29-year-old man, identified only as Erdal E, worked as a cleaner at the tented refugee camp in Nizip in the southern Gaziantep province near the Syrian border. He was found guilty of sexually abusing eight children in the camp's toilets in exchange for payments of between 1.5 and five Turkish lira (\$0.50-\$1.70), the Dogan news agency said.

His defense had asked for his acquittal, saying an earlier confession to police had been made under duress. But the judges at the court in the southern city of

Nizip rejected the arguments, sentencing him late Friday to 108 years in jail. Prosecutors had asked for a sentence of 289 years. The camp, which is home to some 10,800 refugees, has been visited by international dignitaries and is adjacent to the Nizip container camp for Syrian refugees which was visited by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in April.

During the trial, the accused claimed he had been made a "scapegoat" to cover up the crimes of others and prevent a wider scandal. "I know very well the names of many managers and camp workers guilty of abuse... but I will not say them so as not to hurt my own family," the Hurriyet daily quoted him as saying.

### Sexually-Transmitted Disease Risk

Aid groups have warned that Syrian refugee children living in any host country are hugely vulnerable to sexual predators, with discussion of the issue largely taboo. A team from the Gaziantep chamber of doctors visited the Nizip camp in the wake of the scandal, drawing up a report which sounded the alarm over sexual abuse and the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases at the camp. Chairman Hamza Agca said there were problems with abuse of women and children, as well as early marriage and polygamy.

"We are worried about the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases due to the high rate of polygamy and early marriage at the camp as well as abuse of children," he said

last month, according to the chamber's website. Following the report, local opposition politician Mahmut Togrul of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) filed a series of parliamentary questions for Health Minister Recep Akdag, the MP said in a statement.

He requested information about the prevalence of sexually-transmitted diseases at the camp and what action was being taken to stop child abuse and child marriage. "Do you think that marrying at between 7 and 15 years has a negative effect on a child's health?" he asked.

### Afraid to Complain

In another sign of concern, a cross-party delegation from parliament's human

rights committee also visited both the tent and container camps in Nizip on May 25. Turkey is hosting over 2.7 million refugees from the conflict in neighboring Syria. Only a quarter of a million live in refugee camps, with the rest living in Turkish towns and cities. The leftwing Birgun newspaper said the accused was suspected of assaulting 30 children but only went on trial over the abuse of eight as the other families were afraid of being sent back to Syria if they filed complaints. It said all the victims were boys aged between 8-12. Turkey's emergency agency AFAD, which is responsible for the camp and has won international plaudits for its hosting of refugees, has said it has taken measures to ensure such an incident never happens again. —AFP

## US FALTERS IN CAMPAIGN TO REVIVE IRAQI REGULAR ARMY

### SECTARIAN MILITIAS GROWING IN POWER

**BAGHDAD:** A 17-month US effort to retrain and reunify Iraq's regular army has failed to create a large number of effective Iraqi combat units or limit the power of sectarian militias, according to current and former US military and civilian officials. Concern about the shortcomings of the American attempt to strengthen the Iraqi military comes as Iraqi government forces and Shiite militias have launched an offensive to retake the city of Fallujah from Islamic State. Aid groups fear the campaign could spark a humanitarian catastrophe, as an estimated 50,000 Sunni civilians remain trapped in the besieged town.

has failed to change the underlying Iraqi political dynamics that fuel the rise and growing power of sectarian militias.

Retired US Lieutenant General Mick Bednarek, who commanded the US military training effort in Iraq from 2013 to 2015, said the Iraqi army has not improved dramatically in the past eight months. He blamed a variety of problems, from a lack of Iraqis wanting to join the military to the resistance of some lower-level Iraqi officers to sending units to American training. "The Iraqi military's capacity hasn't improved that much - part of that is the continuing challenge of recruitment and retention,"

have largely watched from the sidelines as Iraqi Special Forces and Shiite militias have reclaimed land from Islamic State, current and former US military officials said. Militias have repeatedly taken advantage of the power vacuums that have emerged after Islamic State defeats. The Iraqi military operations command of Salahuddin province, north of Baghdad, is dominated by a Shiite militia leader, Abu Mehdi Mohandis, according to a current US military officer, an Iraqi security official and three Iraqi officials who monitor the province.

Mohandis serves as the chief state

mate that 10 percent to 20 percent of the 300 officers who run the Iraqi military's Operations Command have an affinity or association with either the Badr militia or the Shiite religious leader Muqtada Al-Sadr. And after Iraqi Special Forces, aided by US air strikes, captured a strategic oil refinery in the town of Baiji in October, Shiite militias looted all of its salvageable equipment, according to a senior US military official and three Iraqi government officials.

Over the past year, US military officers have struggled to ensure that militias do not seize American weaponry delivered to the main Iraqi army supply depot in Taji and to a brigade in the Saqlawiya region. "We would transfer arms to units in those areas - and either because of corrupt commanders or outright robbery - they would end up in the hands of the militia groups," said one US officer. The officer noted, however, that controls have been tightened and the number of cases was small. "You can't eliminate it entirely. It's just not realistic."

### 'An Official Body'

Iraqi government and senior paramilitary leaders said the reports of poor training and Shiite militia dominance in the military are false. They said the militias follow the orders of the prime minister and his military commanders. Iraqi defense ministry spokesman Brigadier General Yahya Rasool called the militias "an official body connected with the office of the commander-in-chief of the armed forces." He said they take their orders only from government officials and "have a great role in supporting the army forces and the federal police."

Mohammed Bayati, a former human rights minister and senior Badr group leader, now commands forces in northern Salahuddin Province. He said the Shiite paramilitaries fall under the army, police and regular military chain-of-command. Bayati told Reuters that any reports of militias operating on their own were false. "Yesterday, I was in the Salahuddin Operations Command," he said. "All orders are coming from the police and army leadership." The Shiite militias "are supporting the army and police."

The spokesman for the government umbrella body that oversees the militias, Ahmed Al-Asadi, said the Shiite forces did not loot the Baiji refinery. "I deny totally such allegations," he said. Islamic State, he said, stole and destroyed equipment. The office of Prime Minister Abadi and the Iraqi Embassy in Washington didn't respond to requests for comment. —Reuters



**FALLUJAH:** Fighters take a selfie while firing artillery against Islamic State militants in this May 29, 2016 photo. —AP

The continued weakness of regular Iraqi army units and reliance on Shiite militias, current and former US military officials said, could impede Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi's broader effort to defeat Islamic State and win the long-term support of Iraqi Sunnis. The sectarian divide between the majority Shiite and minority Sunni communities threatens to split the country for good.

Critics agree that there have been some military successes, citing the continued victories of American-trained Iraqi Special Forces, who have been fighting Islamic State for two years. But the presence of 4,000 American troops

said Bednarek. "Our (officers) train who shows up, and the issue is we are not sure who is going to show up."

Two senior US military officers and Bednarek said that with few exceptions, the most effective and only truly non-sectarian Iraqi government fighting force is the Iraqi Special Forces, sometimes called the Counter-Terrorism Service. American officials expressed worry that the Special Forces units may burn out after nearly two years of continuous combat.

### Militia Influence

Across Iraq, regular Iraqi army units

administrator for Shiite paramilitary forces. The US Treasury sanctioned him in 2009 for allegedly attacking US forces in Iraq. He was also convicted in absentia by Kuwaiti courts for the 1983 bombings of the US and French embassies in Kuwait. The Fifth Iraqi Army Division in eastern Diyala province is considered to be under the command of the Badr group, a powerful Shiite militia and political party with strong ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, according to four current and former US military officers.

In Baghdad, US military officers esti-

## W SAHARA INDEPENDENCE LEADER ABDELAZIZ BURIED

**BIR-LAHLLOU, Western Sahara:** Mohamed Abdelaziz, leader of the Western Sahara independence movement Polisario Front who died of lung cancer this week, was buried on Saturday in the disputed territory. The 68-year-

old Abdelaziz, who died on Tuesday, spent more than 40 years fighting for independence for the territory, and was buried in part of the Western Sahara not controlled by Morocco. A detachment of Polisario fighters presented

arms to their former leader whose coffin was draped with the flag of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which the movement proclaimed in 1976.

Abdelaziz had been secretary general of the group for most of its decades-long struggle to win independence for the former Spanish colony, but succumbed to a "long illness" on Tuesday. On Friday, his body was displayed in a camp for Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, 1,800 km southwest of the Algerian capital Algiers, to allow delegations and dignitaries to pay homage.

Algeria is the Polisario Front's main backer, and Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal was among those who paid tribute to Abdelaziz in Tindouf. Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika decreed eight days of mourning after the independence leader's death. Abdelaziz had led the Polisario since 1976, three years after the group was founded to struggle for independence for the territory, which Morocco annexed in 1975.

Local Sahrawi people are campaigning for the right to self-determination, but Morocco considers the territory to be part of the kingdom and insists its sovereignty cannot be challenged. Abdelaziz's successor will be selected at an extraordinary conference within 40 days. The president of the Sahrawi National Council, Khatri Addouh, will lead the group in the interim, according to Polisario sources. —AFP



**BIR LAHLLOU:** Mourners and members of the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army pray next to the coffin of Polisario Front's secretary general Mohamed Abdelaziz during his funeral yesterday in the disputed territory of Western Sahara. —AFP



**ISTANBUL:** People shout slogans against Germany yesterday as they hold the Turkish national flag in front of the German consulate after the German parliament recognized as genocide the massacres of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire. —AFP

## ERDOGAN: TURKEY WILL NEVER ACCEPT GENOCIDE 'BLACKMAIL'

**ISTANBUL:** President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned yesterday Turkey would never accept charges the Ottoman Empire committed genocide against Armenians in World War I, saying the accusations were being used as "blackmail" against Ankara. In his most bitter reaction yet to the vote by the German parliament Thursday to recognise the killings from 1915 as genocide, Erdogan threatened to leave Europe "to its own worries" if such disputes were not resolved.

"The issue here is not the Armenians... The Armenian issue is used all over the world as a convenient blackmail against Turkey and has even started to be used as a stick," he said in a televised speech. "I am addressing the whole world. You may like it, you may not. Our attitude on the Armenian issue is clear from the beginning. We will never accept the accusations of genocide."

He said that during World War I, what remained of the Ottoman Empire was "under siege from all sides" and "of course a number of measures were taken to restore order in Anatolia". Referring to Germany's guilt over the Holocaust, Erdogan scoffed that it was the "last country" to make such accusations. He added Germany would also be better advised to re-examine the slaughter of indigenous Namibians under the German Empire over a century ago, which Berlin has yet to officially term a genocide.

### 'Leave to Your Worries'

The vote in the German parliament added yet another bone of contention to Turkey's troubled relationship with the European Union, which it has sought to join since 1987. "Either

we find solutions to our problems in a fair way. Or Turkey will stop being a barrier in front of the problems of Europe. We will leave you to your own worries," Erdogan added to cheers, without specifying further. The dispute sparked alarm over the potential damage to relations between Turkey and Germany at a sensitive time when the two sides are working together to implement a deal seeking to halt illegal migration to the EU.

The concerns have been amplified after the departure earlier this month of prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu, who was seen as more pro-EU than Erdogan, and his replacement by the president's close ally, Binali Yildirim. Erdogan warned the EU against "hypocrisy" and using "your propaganda machines, Armenians or terror groups." "Don't deliver blows below the belt in the media or the economy," he added.

### 'Look Me in the Face'

Armenians say some 1.5 million of their people were killed in a genocidal campaign by Ottoman forces - ordered by Minister of War Enver Pasha and other top officials - to wipe them from Anatolia. But Turkey insists similar numbers of Muslims and Armenians were killed during wartime conflict sparked when Armenians joined forces with invading Russian troops in the hope of carving out their own state. Erdogan said in comments published in Turkish newspapers earlier that he wondered how German officials could look Turkey's leaders in the face after the vote in the Bundestag, which prompted Ankara to withdraw its ambassador and warn of further consequences. —AP



**CAIRO:** Egyptian Journalists Syndicate president Yahya Kallash (center), secretary general Gamal Abd El-Rahim (second right) and freedoms committee chief Khaled El-Balshy (right) march and shout slogans after leaving the courthouse yesterday. —AFP

## TRIAL OPENS OF EGYPTIAN JOURNALIST UNION LEADERS

**CAIRO:** The trial of three top members of Egypt's journalists' union accused of allegedly harboring two fugitive colleagues opened yesterday with one defendant calling it an attack on public freedoms. Egyptian Journalists Syndicate president Yahya Kallash, secretary general Gamal Abd el-Rahim and freedoms committee chief Khaled Elbalshy have been charged with aiding fugitives after two reporters sought by police staged a sit-in at the union's offices.

Their arrest following a May 1 police raid on the union building to detain two reporters from an opposition website accused of inciting demonstrations drew condemnation from rights groups. Yesterday's hearing lasted just a few minutes and the trial was adjourned to June 18 at the request of defense lawyers who asked for more time to review the case, an AFP reporter and one of the lawyers said. The three are currently free on bail. "This trial is a new attack against public freedoms," Elbalshy told AFP. "We should

not let this pass," he added. His lawyer Ahmed Abdelnaby said the defense team asked for an adjournment in order to review the prosecution file against their clients. "The accusations are not serious and there is no evidence" against them, Abdelnaby said. He said the trio risk a two-year jail sentence if convicted of harboring fugitives and on charges of "publishing false news". Around 50 supporters demonstrated outside the court brandishing pens and signs that read: "Journalism is not a crime," the AFP reporter said.

Earlier this week, the European Union said the indictment of the journalists' syndicate members was "a worrying development". "It reflects broader limitations on freedom of expression and press freedom in Egypt," an EU spokesperson said in a statement. Rights activists accuse President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi of running an ultra-authoritarian regime that has violently suppressed all opposition since toppling Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013. —AFP