

International

US sanctions Eritrean army chief over Tigray rights abuses

Ethiopia announces fresh delays to polls

WASHINGTON: The United States imposed sanctions on Monday on Eritrea's army chief over human rights abuses in Ethiopia's war-scarred Tigray region. The move by the US Treasury Department against General Filipos Woldeyohannes, chief of staff of the Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF), comes amid reports Eritrea has deployed reinforcements to parts of Tigray as fighting escalates.

Forces under Filipos' command are responsible for "massacres, looting, and sexual assaults," the Treasury Department said in a statement. "EDF troops have raped, tortured, and executed civilians; they have also destroyed property and ransacked businesses," it said.

"The EDF have purposely shot civilians in the street and carried out systematic house-to-house searches, executing men and boys, and have forcibly evicted Tigrayan families from their residences and taken over their houses and property," Eritrea angrily rejected what it called "utterly baseless allegations and blackmail."

"This is not, indeed, the first time for the US Administration to float such baseless smear campaigns against Eritrea," the foreign ministry said. "In the circumstances, Eritrea calls on the US Administration to bring the case to an independent adjudication if it indeed has facts to prove its false allegations."

The Treasury Department said any property or interests of Filipos in the United States would be frozen and US citizens are barred from conducting any business with him. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a statement saying the United States "condemns in the strongest terms human rights violations and abuses in Ethiopia, including those involving the killings, forced removals, and systemic sexual violence."

Blinken called on the Eritrean government to "withdraw its military forces immediately and permanently from Ethiopia." "At the same time, the United States continues to urge all parties to the

conflict, including the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), to end abuses against civilians, take steps to de-escalate the conflict, allow for unimpeded humanitarian access, and commit to a negotiated ceasefire," he said.

Eritrean reinforcements

Blinken expressed concern that large numbers of EDF have re-entered Ethiopia after withdrawing in June. He called on the UN Security Council and members of the international community to "come together to push for a peaceful resolution of this ongoing conflict."

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops into Tigray last November to topple the regional ruling party, the TPLF. The 2019 Nobel Peace Prize winner said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on federal army camps.

For months, the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments denied Eritreans were involved in the fighting, contradicting testimony from residents, rights groups, aid workers, diplomats and even some Ethiopian civilian and military officials. Abiy finally acknowledged the Eritreans' presence in March while speaking to lawmakers, and vowed soon after that they would leave.

Eritrea itself vowed to pull out of the region in April, but that never fully happened.

The war took a stunning turn in June after pro-TPLF forces—which were driven out of Tigray's cities and towns last November—retook the regional capital Mekele. The TPLF then launched an offensive into neighboring Amhara and Afar regions and vowed to reclaim western and southern Tigray, which were occupied by Amhara forces in the war's early stages.

Famine-like conditions

An internal European Union document dated August 20 and seen by AFP said Eritrean troops were "present in Western Tigray, where they have taken up defensive positions with tanks and



BASUNDA, Sudan: Ethiopian refugees of the Qemant ethnic group sit in a make-shift shelter in the village of Basinga in Basunda district of Sudan's eastern Gedaref region. —AFP

artillery around Adi Goshu and Humera, and possibly also along the border with Sudan." The document also cited reports that Eritrea had sent reinforcements to western Tigray in the past days while continuing to occupy a strip of territory in northern Tigray.

Meanwhile, Ethiopian authorities have postponed polls in around a fifth of the country's constituencies, extending a months-long delay which prevented citizens from voting in a June election due to ethnic violence and logistical problems.

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's party won a land-

slide in the June vote, despite a brutal war in the northern region of Tigray, which was among the areas where elections did not take place. A second batch of polling in one-fifth of the country's 547 constituencies was scheduled for September 6, but will now take place on September 30, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced in a statement late Monday. The decision followed a meeting with politicians, who told NEBE officials that "considering the current situation the country is in, it's not appropriate to hold elections currently." —AFP

News in brief

18 Europe-bound migrants drown

TRIPOLI: Eighteen migrants have drowned after their boat sank off Libya, the coastguard said yesterday, the latest tragedy on the dangerous Mediterranean Sea crossing to Europe. Rescue vessels picked up 51 survivors from Sunday night's shipwreck, a coastguard official in the port of Zuwara, 120 kilometers (75 miles) west of the capital Tripoli, told AFP. The International Organization for Migration had earlier reported 16 migrants missing, including a woman and a child. —AFP

Greece sets new restrictions

ATHENS: Greece's government yesterday announced an array of new restrictions and the end of free testing for those who remain unjabbed against COVID-19 in an effort to boost vaccination rates. Starting from September 13, unvaccinated employees in the private and public sectors will have to be tested at their own expense once or twice a week, depending on their profession. University students will also have to pay for two rapid tests a week, while school pupils will be given self-testing kits free of charge. —AFP

UN request on migrants in Belarus

WARSAW: The UN refugee agency yesterday urged Poland to take in a group of migrants believed to be from the Middle East who have been stranded on the border with Belarus for more than two weeks. Thousands of migrants—mostly from the Middle East—have crossed the border from Belarus into the eastern EU states of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland in recent months. Brussels believes the influx is being deliberately engineered by the regime in Minsk in retaliation against EU sanctions—an accusation that Belarus denies—and Poland has called it a "hybrid attack" on the bloc. —AFP

Two Nigerian officers killed

KANO: An armed group attacked Nigeria's main military training academy in the country's northwest yesterday, killing two officers and kidnapping another in a brazen assault on the high-security base. The attack on the Nigerian Defence Academy, the country's elite officer training school, is a blow to a military that is battling jihadists in the northeast and heavily armed criminal gangs in the northwest. "The security architecture of the Nigerian Defence Academy was compromised early this morning by unknown gunmen," said Major Bashir Muhammad Jajira, spokesman for the academy in Kaduna state.

Morocco navy rescues 400 migrants

RABAT: The Moroccan navy has rescued more than 400 migrants since Thursday, after their makeshift boats ran into trouble on the dangerous sea crossing to Europe, state media reported. The 438 migrants, most of them from sub-Saharan Africa, were given first aid before being taken to the nearest Moroccan port, an officer told the state-run MAP news agency late Monday. Earlier this month, a merchant ship rescued 33 migrants who had spent two weeks adrift in the Atlantic Ocean en route for the Canary Islands. Fourteen fellow migrants lost their lives. —AFP

Jailed Chadian ex-leader Habre dies in Senegal

DAKAR: Former Chadian president Hissene Habre, who was serving a life term in Senegal for war crimes and crimes against humanity, has died, Senegalese Justice Minister Malick Sall said yesterday. He was 79.

"Habre is in his Lord's hands," Sall told the television channel TFM. The Chadian consulate said he had died of COVID-19. Habre, who ruled Chad from 1982 to 1990, was convicted of war crimes and crimes against humanity at an African Union-backed trial in the Senegalese capital Dakar in 2016.

He seized power in Chad in 1982, but fled to Senegal in 1990 after he was in turn overthrown. Habre's rule was marked by brutal crackdowns on dissent, including alleged torture and executions of opponents. Some 40,000 people are estimated to have been killed under his leadership of the semi-desert country.

In exile in Dakar, Habre lived a quiet life in an upmarket suburb with his

wife and children. But the former dictator—who was dubbed "Africa's Pinochet"—was finally arrested in 2013 and tried by a special tribunal set up by the AU under a deal with Senegal. Habre began serving his life sentence in the Cap Manuel penitentiary in Dakar. His supporters voiced concern for his health and pushed for more lenient detention conditions given his advanced age.

Last year, a Senegalese judge granted him a two-month furlough designed to shield him from coronavirus. Groups representing Habre's victims recognized his right to be treated humanely, but fiercely resisted preferential treatment for the former dictator.

'Pitiless'

Reed Brody, a lawyer who represented Habre's victims, said in a statement yesterday that he had been calling "for months" for the former dictator to be vaccinated against COVID. AFP was unable to independently verify whether Habre had received a jab. Brody was nonetheless withering about Habre's legacy, saying he would "go down in history as one of the world's most pitiless dictators."

Attempted murder probe over German university 'poison attack'

BERLIN: German prosecutors launched an investigation into attempted murder yesterday after a poisoning at a university left one student in a critical condition and six others in need of medical attention. The victims at the Technical University Darmstadt, half an hour by train from Frankfurt, had consumed food or drink to which a "harmful substance" had been introduced.

Police say packets of milk and water containers were among the items spiked over the weekend with the chemical, which they described as having a noticeably "pungent smell". Anyone feeling unwell or whose "extremities turn blue", should seek medical attention immediately, police said, citing one of the potential effects of the poison.

Police said they have called up a team of 40 people to investigate the incident,

and are working at "full speed" to identify a culprit. The affected building, part of the Department of Materials- and Geosciences, was cordoned off and any foodstuffs on site taken away for investigation. Overnight, forces carried out further searches across the campus but found no "relevant objects".

As of yesterday, there was "no acute danger", according to authorities. One 30-year-old student was in a critical condition as of Monday, police said. No update has so far been provided.

'Shocked'

In a statement, the university described the events as a "poison attack". "We are shocked by the apparent offence that happened," university president Tanja Bruhl said in a statement.

"My sympathy is with those affected,



DAKAR: Former Chadian President Hissene Habre has died at the age of 79 in Senegal, where he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2016 for crimes against humanity after an unprecedented trial, Senegalese Justice Minister Malick Sall said yesterday. —AFP

Habre "slaughtered his own people to seize and maintain power... burned down entire villages, sent women to serve as sexual slaves for his troops and built clandestine dungeons to inflict torture on his enemies," Brody said. Habre's conviction in 2016 was seen as a turning point for pursuing rights abusers in Africa,

where the International Criminal Court (ICC), located in The Hague, was becoming increasingly unpopular. The former dictator was ordered to pay up to 30,000 euros (\$33,000) to each victim who suffered rape, arbitrary detention and imprisonment during his rule, as well as to their relatives. —AFP



DARMSTADT, Germany: Chief Prosecutor Robert Hartmann speaks to media on a poisoning at the Technical University Darmstadt, yesterday. —AFP

who will receive full medical help," she said. Public prosecutor Robert Hartmann told the Bild newspaper: "We are taking this very seriously. We can't rule out that we are dealing with an attempted murder here." Angela Dorn, the higher education minister for the state of Hesse, where

Darmstadt is located, offered her "full support" to the victims. "Together with the university and investigators we now need to clarify the situation as quickly as possible," Dorn said. Germany has been shocked by several poisoning incidents in recent years. —AFP

Tunisian president extends suspension of parliament

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied has extended his suspension of parliament "until further notice", a month after sacking his prime minister and granting himself greater powers in a shock intervention that opponents decried as a coup. In a statement issued by the presidency late on Monday, Saied also extended an order freeing immunity for lawmakers

and said he would address the Tunisian people in the coming days, without providing further details.

Tunisia, hailed as a rare democratic success story in the Middle East and North Africa, has been mired in political crisis since Saied's intervention, which comes as the country struggles with dire economic woes and the COVID-19 pandemic. On July 25, Saied invoked the constitution to extend his authority, dismissing the head of government Hichem Mechichi and freezing parliament, in what activists have called a "purge" that has seen opponents, judges and businessmen arrested or banned from travel.

Saied issued "a presidential decree extending the exceptional measures... regarding the suspension of

Parliament and lifting of the parliamentary immunity of its MPs until further notice", the presidency said in the statement. Saied's intervention, which he said was necessary to prevent the country from collapse, sparked uncertainty for the North African nation.

He has yet to appoint a new government or reveal a "roadmap" for his decisions despite repeated demands by political parties. While the president enjoys widespread popularity in Tunisia, his move has sparked fears in the international community that the cradle of the 2011 Arab Spring is regressing towards authoritarianism. Analysts expect Saied will announce new measures to reassure the Tunisian public as well as the international community about his decisions. —AFP