

## UN GAZA EMPLOYEE ACCUSED OF 'AIDING HAMAS'

**JERUSALEM:** Israel said yesterday it had arrested and charged a United Nations employee for allegedly aiding Islamist movement Hamas, in the second such case involving a humanitarian worker in a week. Engineer Waheed Borsh, who has worked for the UN Development Program (UNDP) since 2003, was arrested on July 16 and indicted in a civilian court in Israel yesterday, a government statement said.

Hamas, which has run the Gaza Strip since 2007, denied the allegations. The statement said 38-year-old Borsh, from Jabaliya in northern Gaza, had been recruited by "a senior member of the Hamas terrorist organization to redirect his work for UNDP to serve Hamas' military interests". It said he had confessed to a number of charges, including helping to build a jetty in the northern Gaza Strip, with UNDP funding, that was later used by Hamas' naval forces.

In 2015 he allegedly persuaded managers to focus on rebuilding houses in areas where Hamas members lived, after the group put pressure on him. No figures

were provided on how much aid money he is alleged to have diverted. Hamas said in a statement that the allegations were "incorrect and baseless". It said they were part of a wider Israeli effort "to tighten the siege of the Gaza Strip by prosecuting international relief organizations." The Israeli government said that Borsh admitted during the investigation that "other Palestinians who work for aid organizations are also working for Hamas".

### 'Systematic exploitation'

"This is not an isolated case, but rather a troubling trend of the systematic exploitation by Hamas terrorists of UN organizations," the Israeli ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, said in a separate statement. The formal charge sheet was not publicly available. UNDP said that it would respond to the allegations soon. It comes days after the Gaza head of US-based NGO World Vision was charged with passing millions of dollars of international aid money to Hamas.

According to the Shin Bet internal security agency, Mohammed Al-Halabi diverted



**GAZA:** Khalil El-Halabi, 63, the father of Mohammed, Gaza director of the international charity World Vision, who is detained and accused by Israeli security of diverting funds to Hamas that exceed its total budget, poses while sitting at his family house in Gaza City. — AP

\$7.2 million (6.5 million euros) each year since 2010 to Hamas and its military wing, though his charge sheet does not specify an amount. Halabi is also accused of recruiting an individual from another international NGO, Save the Children, to Hamas. World Vision International yesterday questioned the allegations, suggesting the numbers may have been exaggerated.

Its president Kevin Jenkins said in a statement the organization was conducting an investigation into the allegations but "have not seen any of the evidence". "World Vision's cumulative operating budget in Gaza for the past ten years was approximately \$22.5 million, which makes the alleged amount of up to \$50 million being diverted hard to reconcile," the statement read. Since 2008, Israel has fought three wars in Gaza with Hamas, which is branded a terrorist organization by Israel, the United States and the European Union. More than three quarters of the population of the Strip, which Israel has blockaded for a decade, are reliant on some form of aid, according to the United Nations. — AFP

## RUSSIA-TURKEY FEUD: FROM JET DOWNING TO MAKING UP

**MOSCOW:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin yesterday hold their first meeting since the two leaders began healing a bitter feud over Ankara's downing of a Russian warplane. Here is a timeline of the crisis that slammed the brakes on burgeoning ties between the two strategically important nations and set Erdogan and Putin against each other:

### Russian jet downed

A Turkish military jet blasts a Russian warplane out of the sky over the Turkey-Syria border on November 24, 2015. One pilot is killed, reportedly shot dead by rebel fighters as he parachutes to earth inside Syria. A Russian soldier dies in a successful rescue operation to rescue the second pilot. NATO-member Turkey insists the Russian plane-part of Moscow's bombing campaign to back up Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad was one of two jets that had strayed into Turkish airspace for some 17 seconds despite repeated warnings. Moscow is adamant that its aircraft did not cross the Syrian border and a furious Putin labels the incident a "stab in the back" by "the accomplices of terrorists".

### Russia strikes back

Moscow fires back by announcing a raft of economic sanctions against Ankara on November 28, including banning a range of Turkish food imports and halting the sale of package holidays and charter flights to the country. The retaliatory measures target Turkey's key tourism, agricultural and construction sectors and send growing trade between the two nations plummeting. Talks on the major TurkStream gas pipeline project are also suspended and work on a Russian-built nuclear plant in Turkey thrown into doubt.

### War of words

Meanwhile the war of words between Putin and Erdogan-two strongmen whose macho leadership styles have helped bring

them together-rages on as Moscow demands Ankara apologize. Russia accuses Erdogan of profiting from the illegal oil trade with Islamic State jihadists, claims the Turkish leader slams as "slander". Putin snubs an offer from Erdogan to meet during climate talks in Paris after refusing to take his calls, and cancels a summit in December.

### Erdogan writes to Putin

After seven months of feuding Erdogan sends Putin a letter on June 27 in which he expresses his condolences over the jet downing and calls for a return to friendlier ties. The Kremlin says the message constitutes an apology and the two leaders two days later hold their first phone conversation since the start of the crisis. Turkish newspaper Hurriyet has reported that the letter was published after both sides secretly agreed to restore ties and hammered out the wording following mediation by figures including Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev and a prominent Turkish businessman.

### Putin starts to lift sanctions

After talking to Erdogan, Putin-whose country's own economy is mired in recession due to Western sanctions over Ukraine and low oil prices-immediately announces an end to the package tour ban and orders his ministers to begin lifting the charter flight freeze and normalizing trade ties with Ankara. The move brings relief to Turkey's hard-hit tourism industry that has seen the number of Russian visitors nosedive dramatically.

### Coup call

In a sign that ties are warming, Putin is one of the first international leaders to call Erdogan and offer his support after the failed coup against the Turkish president on July 15. Ankara welcomes the Kremlin leader's backing as the fallout from the coup attempt sees Erdogan launch a purge of opponents that strains ties with the West. — AFP



**ISTANBUL:** A man jumps into the Bosphorus waterway in front of the Kuleli military high school, on the shores of the Bosphorus strait in Istanbul. With its twin pointed towers and brilliant white facade stretching along the Bosphorus, the Kuleli Military High School is one of the most striking late Ottoman sights in Istanbul, a symbol of power and continuity. After several officers working at the school were implicated in the July 15 coup attempt, the school will not continue in its current form as the authorities seek to flush out all influence of the Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen who is blamed for the putsch. — AFP

## TURKEY SAYS RISING ANTI-AMERICANISM CAN BE CALMED BY GULEN EXTRADITION

### 16,000 PEOPLE FORMALLY ARRESTED OVER COUP ATTEMPT

**ISTANBUL:** Anti-American sentiment among Turks is on the rise and can only be calmed by the United States extraditing the Muslim cleric Ankara accuses of orchestrating last month's failed coup, Turkey's justice minister said yesterday. Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan blames Fethullah Gulen, who has lived in self-imposed exile in rural Pennsylvania since 1999, and his followers for the July 15 coup, in which more than 240 people were killed and nearly 2,200 wounded.

Turkey has launched a series of mass purges of suspected Gulen supporters in its armed forces, other state institutions, universities, schools and the media since the abortive coup, prompting Western concerns for the stability of a key NATO ally. Erdogan, who was visiting Russia yesterday, has criticized the United States and the European Union for showing what he says is a lack of solidarity with Turkey over the coup and of caring more for the rights of people he views as traitors.

"There is a serious anti-American feeling in Turkey, and this is turning into hatred," Justice Minister Bekir Bozdogan said in an interview with state-run Anadolu Agency, broadcast live on Turkish television channels. "It is in the hands of the United States to stop this anti-American feeling leading to hatred." Responding to Turkey's demand for Gulen's extradition, US President Barack Obama has said Ankara must first provide clear evidence of wrongdoing.

Last week a State Department spokesman said Washington was evaluating new documents it had received. The 75-year-old Gulen, who built up a network of schools, charities and businesses in Turkey and abroad over decades, denies any involvement in the coup and has condemned it. He has also accused Erdogan of using the coup to amass greater powers.

### 'Political decision'

"Whether the US extradites Gulen or not this will be a political decision," Bozdogan said. "If he is not extradited, Turkey will have been sacrificed for a terrorist." A recent opinion poll showed two thirds of Turks agree with their president that Gulen was behind the coup plot. Turkey has been holding almost daily mass rallies since July 15 in support of democracy and the government and against the plotters. Authorities have suspended, detained or put under investigation tens of thousands of people in the armed forces, the judiciary, civil service and elsewhere since the coup, in which a faction of the military commandeered warplanes, helicopters and tanks in an attempt to topple the government.

Yesterday Bozdogan put the number of people now formally arrested awaiting trial at 16,000, adding that a further 6,000 detainees were still being processed. Another 7,668 people are under investigation but have not been detained, he said. Since the abortive putsch, pro-government papers have been awash with conspiracy theories accusing the United States and the CIA of being

the masterminds. Turkish officials privately said such reports do not reflect Ankara's formal stance.

One paper said the attempted power grab was financed by the CIA and directed by a retired US army general using a cell in Afghanistan while another claims CIA agents used an island hotel off Istanbul as a nerve center for the plot. Echoing Erdogan's criticism of the West, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim on Tuesday repeated a pledge to bring Gulen back to Turkey. "That terrorist leader will come to Turkey and pay for what he did. We will hold him accountable for the blood of our martyrs and veterans," Yildirim told a meeting of his ruling Islamist-rooted AK Party in parliament. "That religious, impudent, lying, bloody murdering nothing will be surely held accountable."

NATO member Turkey hosts American troops and warplanes at its Incirlik Air Base, an important staging area for the US-led fight against Islamic State militants in neighboring Iraq and Syria. The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford tried to soothe strained ties with Turkey during a visit to Incirlik and Ankara just over a week ago. In Ankara he inspected the damage inflicted by the plotters' fighter jets on

the Turkish parliament building.

US Secretary of State John Kerry is expected to visit Turkey on Aug 24. Turkish authorities have said the country's intelligence service has cracked into several smartphone messaging apps that Gulen's followers used to communicate with each other in the years ahead of the coup attempt and was able to trace tens of thousands of people from the group. A senior Turkish official said Turkey's intelligence agency has identified at least 56,000 operatives of Gulen's network after cracked a little-known smartphone messaging app called ByLock, which he said the group began using in 2014. By this year, Turkish intelligence were able to map their network.

"Our assessment is that 150,000 unique operatives used ByLock to communicate with others," the official said. The group had also used another app called Eagle which could be disguised as other popular instant messaging apps such as Whatsapp and Tango, he added. "We assess that Eagle was used by operatives to share various operational details as well as during the planning stage of the July 15 coup attempt," the official said, adding that the Gulen network continued to use Eagle. — Reuters



**BANGKOK:** Gamers play Pokemon Go on their mobile phones outside a shopping mall in Bangkok yesterday. Pokemon Go's debut in Thailand has alarmed the country's generals, prompting the kingdom's junta chief to warn youngsters against playing too much and the army to ban the game from barracks. — AFP

## THAILAND'S JUNTA UNEASY ABOUT POKEMON GO CRAZE

**BANGKOK:** Pokemon Go's debut in Thailand has alarmed the country's generals, prompting the kingdom's junta chief to warn youngsters against playing too much and the army to ban the game from barracks. The mobile app was made available in Thailand on Saturday, delighting many in a country where Japanese subcultures have a significant following.

But the game-which encourages users to hit the pavements in search of digital monsters-has sparked safety concerns partly because Bangkok's streets are notoriously pedestrian-unfriendly. "That walking culture is not like Japan and there are limited pavements," government spokesman Sansern Kaewkumnerd told reporters yesterday. He said Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha, who seized power in 2014, "does not want to ban the game".

But the premier has urged players to know "their limits... and use their time wisely," Sansern added. "The game could harm players with things like loss of money, their job, their education as well as the relationships they have with the people around them," he said. He added that parents should advise their children to be "self-disciplined" and use their time well. His comments came as Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan

said the game was banned inside military barracks and government security agencies.

A barracks in the northern city of Khon Kaen hoisted a sign warning Pokemon Go players they faced up to three years in jail if they trespassed onto military property, Channel 3 television showed. Even when a pedestrian's eyes are firmly fixed ahead Bangkok's streets can be a veritable obstacle course. Pavements are patchy and those that exist are littered with hurdles from street vendors and fire hydrants to potholes and tangled wiring. Thailand's Public Health Ministry said the game should be welcomed for encouraging people to exercise but warned users to be careful near "roads, swimming pools, rivers and canals".

Local media has been filled in recent days with stories of hundreds of players glued to their phones outside parks and malls. Some have even taken to using motorbike taxis and cars to get a head start as they navigate the traffic-choked city in their search for Pokemon. Giorgio Taraschi, an Italian living in Bangkok, said he was lightly struck on Monday night by a man driving a car while playing the game. "Gotta catch 'em all... including the occasional Italian," he joked on Facebook, using the game's tagline. — AFP

## FEARS MOUNT FOR CIVILIANS; BATTLE FOR ALEPPO LOOMS

**BEIRUT:** The United Nations has called for urgent aid access to Syria's Aleppo as regime forces and rebel fighters prepare for an all-out battle for control of the devastated city. Fears are growing for trapped civilians ahead of what is expected to be a major battle for Aleppo, Syria's second city and a focal point of the country's five-year civil war. Rebel factions and President Bashar Al-Assad's regime have sent hundreds of reinforcements to Aleppo in anticipation of the fighting, after opposition forces broke a government siege at the weekend and vowed to capture the entire city. Hundreds of thousands of civilians remain inside the city, once Syria's main economic hub, and UN officials have sounded the alarm over trapped residents.

The UN's top humanitarian official in Syria, Yacoub El Hillo, and regional coordinator Kevin Kennedy said in a statement late on Monday that medical and food stocks "are running dangerously low" in Aleppo.

They appealed for a full-fledged ceasefire or weekly 48-hour "humanitarian pauses" to reach those in need. UNICEF said children and families in Aleppo were facing "a catastrophic situation", with up to two million people without running water for four days after fighting damaged electricity networks needed to pump supplies. "These cuts are coming amid a heatwave, putting children at a grave risk of waterborne dis-

eases," Hanaa Singer, UNICEF's representative in Syria, said in a statement.

### 'Children in serious danger'

"Getting clean water running again cannot wait for the fighting to stop. Children's lives are in serious danger." Aleppo has been divided between a rebel-held east and regime-controlled west since fighting erupted in the city in mid-2012. The UN says two million people in the city are at risk, including up to 275,000 people in east Aleppo. Other estimates put the total number of civilians in the city at about 1.5 million, with 250,000 in the eastern districts. The recent flare-up in fighting began in late June as government forces closed in on the Castello Road, the last route into rebel-held parts of the city. The road was severed in mid-July, beginning a roughly three-week siege of eastern districts until opposition fighters broke through regime territory on Saturday.

The push saw a coalition of rebels, Islamists, and jihadists cut off the regime's own main access road on the southern edges of the city. The offensives have left residents across the city reeling from skyrocketing prices and food shortages and afraid of further violence. Each side has used newly acquired territory to bring food and other supplies into neighborhoods they control, but the roads are still not safe for civilians to use. — AFP