

IRAQ AWARDS ITALY'S TREVI CONTRACT TO FIX IMPERILED DAM

BAGHDAD: Iraq announced yesterday that it has awarded Italian firm Trevi a contract to repair and maintain the country's largest dam, which is in danger of catastrophic collapse. The Mosul Dam was built on an unstable foundation of soils that erode when exposed to water, and a lapse in maintenance after the Islamic State group seized it in 2014 weakened the already flawed structure.

The dam has long been in danger of collapse, which US officials have warned could send a huge wave crashing into IS-held Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, about 40 kilometers (25 miles) away. The Iraqi cabinet, with the agreement of the Ministry of Water Resources, awarded Trevi the contract "to carry out the project of rehabilitating and maintaining the Mosul Dam," a government statement said. The deal has yet to be signed, according to the statement, which did not specify how much Trevi would be paid for the work.

Italy's prime minister announced in December that it would deploy 450 troops to defend the dam, a decision linked to Trevi's interest in the project. Italian forces are already in Iraq training police as part of international efforts to counter

IS. Italy also deployed forces to Iraq as part of the US-led coalition that overthrew president Saddam Hussein, and a truck bomb killed 19 Italians south of Baghdad in 2003. Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, the commander of the military operation against IS, said last week that the US had put measuring devices on the dam to monitor how much it is "moving or deteriorating over time".

Since the dam's completion in 1984, the Iraqi government has sought to shore up the foundation by injecting mortar-like grout into the subsoil and cavities and controlling seepage. But that essential maintenance stopped in 2014 when IS briefly seized the dam. In 2007, the US ambassador to Iraq and the top American military commander in the country wrote a letter warning that the dam could fail with devastating results. "A catastrophic failure of the Mosul Dam would result in flooding along the Tigris River all the way to Baghdad," the letter said. "Assuming a worst case scenario, an instantaneous failure of Mosul Dam filled to its maximum operating level could result in a flood wave 20 meters (66 feet) deep at the city of Mosul," it said. — AFP



Photo shows a general view of the Mosul dam on the Tigris River around 50 kilometers north of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul. Iraq announced yesterday that it has awarded Italian firm Trevi a contract for the repair and maintenance of the country's largest dam, which is in danger of catastrophic collapse. — AFP



RAMADI: Iraqi forces keep position during clashes with jihadists from the Islamic State group in the eastern suburbs of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's Anbar province. — AP

IRAQIS RUNNING OUT OF FOOD, MEDICINE IN BESIEGED FALLUJA

ISLAMIC STATE MINED ENTRANCES, KEEPING RESIDENTS FROM LEAVING

BAGHDAD: A senior Iraqi official has appealed to the US-led coalition to air-drop food and medicine to tens of thousands of civilians trapped in Falluja, the Islamic State stronghold under siege by security forces. The city's population is suffering from a shortage of food, medicine and fuel, according to residents reached by phone, and local media said several people had died due to starvation and insufficient medical care. Insecurity and poor communications inside the city make those reports difficult to verify. Sohaib Al-Rawi, the governor of western Anbar province where Falluja is located, said an air-drop was the only way to deliver humanitarian supplies to residents after Islamic State mined the entrances to the city and prevented civilians from leaving.

"No force can enter and secure (the delivery) ... There is no option but for airplanes to transport aid," he said in an interview to Al-Hadath TV late on Monday, adding the situation was deteri-

orating by the day. Falluja, a long-time bastion of Sunni Muslim jihadists located 50 km west of Baghdad, was the first Iraqi city to fall to Islamic State in January 2014, six months before the group that emerged from al Qaeda swept through large parts of northern and western Iraq and neighboring Syria. The Iraqi army, police and Iranian-backed Shiite militias have together imposed a near total siege on Falluja since late last year.

After recapturing the city of Ramadi - a further 50 km to the west - from Islamic State a month ago, Iraqi authorities have not made clear whether they will attempt to take Falluja next or leave it contained while the bulk of their forces head north towards Mosul, the largest city under the militants' control. The US-led coalition estimates there are around 400 Islamic State fighters in Falluja, though some military analysts put the figure closer to 1,000. The coalition, which

includes European and Arab powers, has not previously committed significant resources to humanitarian operations. Rawi said the militants were using civilians as human shields like they did in Ramadi - a tactic that slowed the advance of Iraqi forces.

He said media reports of up to 10 deaths due to starvation and insufficient medical care were accurate, but Iraqi officials could not provide details. Lise Grande, UN humanitarian coordinator in Iraq, described conditions in Falluja as "terrible". "We're incredibly worried about the unconfirmed reports of people dying because of lack of medicine and widespread hunger," she said. The United Nations appealed on Sunday for \$861 million to help Iraq meet a big funding gap in its 2016 emergency response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the war against Islamic State which has left 10 million people in need of urgent aid. — Reuters

SYRIAN REFUGEE TEACHERS HELP FILL EDUCATION GAP

QAB ELIAS: In the refugee camp in eastern Lebanon where Fatima Khaled lives with her two daughters, only three children found a spot in the local school. So when parents found out that Khaled was an educator, they begged her to teach their children. An unemployed teacher who fled Damascus three years ago, Khaled could not find work in Lebanon. "I came here and tried to find a job, but no one would hire me," she said. "Parents here suggested the idea. They told me I could teach and help the children."

Khaled, 30, has been teaching literacy and basic arithmetic for over a year, first out of her living room, and now out of a shed built by her husband. While humanitarian actors meet in London on Thursday to fund the education of Syrian refugees, Khaled's is one of a multitude of anonymous shoestring initiatives filling the gap on the ground. With local schools overwhelmed and aid money so far falling short, only 59 percent of Lebanon's 338,000 school-age Syrian refugees receive an education, according to the UNHCR.

Some 238 public schools offer a second shift to accommodate more refugees, yet the United Nations estimates that twice as many second shifts are needed to accommodate them all. Such teaching initiatives help fill more than an educational void for refugees. Ahmed Shareef's teaching career nearly came to an end when a Tunisian fighter from the Islamic State group summoned him, in his village of West Atchan outside the Syrian city of Aleppo. As principal of the local school, Shareef had ordered a teenage

student to trim his beard and the militant wanted to know why.

"I didn't ask him to shave it, just trim it," Shareef told him. The fighter told him to scrap philosophy and history from the curriculum because those courses were "blasphemy" and demanded that girls leave school after the 6th grade. When Shareef asked why, he says the man replied: "When you grow a beard I will tell you why."

Not long afterward, 38-year-old Shareef packed his bags and fled to Lebanon with his wife and children. Two years later, Shareef teaches Syrian children how to read and write out of a plywood and tarp-covered tent in Qab Elias, a village in the Bekaa valley of Lebanon where most of his fellow villagers had resettled to flee the fighting.

Since none of the camp's approximately 100 children found a spot at the local school and Shareef couldn't find a teaching job, he gives free lessons to children aged 5 to 12 who have had their education disrupted by the conflict. On a normal day, over 30 rowdy students sit on the floor. The class schedule is determined by the weather; when rain floods the tent, class is dismissed. Like Khaled, Shareef does not earn a salary. He lives on the \$100 a month the UNHCR allocates his family. But Khaled admits that money is hardly a motivation for her. The work, even if unpaid, is as much a lifeline for herself as it is for her students. "I cannot not teach," she says smiling. "I've been teaching since I was 18 and when I arrived here I couldn't stand doing nothing." — AP

CIVILIANS STARVING TO DEATH IN SOUTH SUDAN WAR ZONES

JUBA: South Sudanese civilians are dying of starvation as warring forces flout a peace deal, the chief ceasefire monitor said yesterday, adding he was "staggered" at conditions after two years of war. The United Nations say thousands have fled recent fighting in the previously peaceful southern farming region around Mundri in Western Equatoria, close to the border with Uganda.

"I am staggered that things have been allowed to get this bad, and I continue to urge you, the leaders of South Sudan, to do whatever you can to ensure the humanitarian effort is successful," said Festus Mogae, a former Botswana president, who is pushing efforts to form a unity government. Mogae heads the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC), set up as part of a stalled August peace deal by the regional bloc IGAD. Fighting continues, and the conflict now involves multiple militia forces who pay little heed to paper peace deals, driven by local agendas or revenge attacks.

East Africa's IGAD bloc last week called on rival forces to allow food into conflict zones on the brink of famine, where aid workers have warned tens of thousands may be

dying of starvation. "I was told this morning that one of the ceasefire monitoring teams, which recently visited Mundri, found people there are starving to death," Mogae said, in a speech read to government and rebel peace delegates in Juba. Both the government and rebel sides have been accused of perpetrating ethnic massacres, recruiting and killing children and carrying out widespread rape, torture and forced displacement of populations to "cleanse" areas of their opponents.

A report by JMEC released on Sunday, the latest in a long list of atrocities, detailed how government forces suffocated some 50 people by stuffing them into a shipping container in baking heat. South Sudan is the world's youngest country, breaking away in 2011 from Sudan after decades of war. In 2012, the two nations battled in a six-month border conflict. In December 2013, civil war erupted in South Sudan. "Every day we spend here, I think of the children I met growing up without the chance of education, the chance of bettering their own lives denied through no fault of their own," Mogae told leaders. "When will independence make a difference for these people?" — AFP

JORDAN LOOKS TO DONORS TO EASE SYRIA REFUGEE BURDEN

AMMAN: On the doorstep of Syria's conflict, Jordan is pinning hopes on this week's donor conference in London to ease the burden on its debt-riddled economy of hosting hundreds of thousands of refugees. King Abdullah II, one of dozens of world leaders due to attend Thursday's meeting, has warned his country is at "boiling point". "Sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," he told the BBC, pointing to strains on employment, infrastructure, education and healthcare. Jordan hosts more than 630,000 of the roughly 4.6 million Syrian refugees overseas, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Jordanian government gives a much higher estimate of 1.4 million, because many of them are unregistered.

The influx has overwhelmed the resource-poor country of 9.5 million people including migrants and refugees-much of which is desert. "Jordan can no longer continue to provide aid to Syrian refugees without long-term international assistance," Planning Minister Imad Al-Fakhoury said Sunday at a meeting with representatives of donor countries. He warned the kingdom could be "forced to take painful measures that will lead to a greater influx of refugees to Europe if Jordan is left on its own to deal with the consequences of the Syria crisis". In 2016 alone, the refugees will

cost Jordan \$2.7 billion, according to Amman. "We're asking the international community to help us with this sum so that we can continue to fulfill our duties towards the refugees," Prime Minister Abdullah Nusur said during a weekend visit to a refugee camp. Jordan last year started to limit the inflow, insisting it must screen newcomers to ensure they are genuine refugees and not jihadists seeking to infiltrate the country. The kingdom is now only allowing in a few dozen refugees each day after the screening process. Jordan is dependent on international aid to deal with the consequences of the conflict in Syria as well as in Iraq, another neighbor. Jordanian authorities say the Syrian crisis has cost the country \$6.6 billion over the past five years.

Debt mountain

Ferid Belhaj, World Bank director for the Middle East, pointed out that the closure of frontier posts previously used for commercial traffic has heavily impacted Jordanian trade. The massive influx of refugees on the jobs market and reliance on utilities such as water and energy as well the health and education systems have also weighed down Jordan, he said. Belhaj noted that the World Bank together with the United Nations and Islamic Development Bank had been offering Jordan low-cost financing mechanisms.

SYRIA DONORS MEET IN LONDON IN BID TO STEM REFUGEE CRISIS

LONDON: World leaders gather in London tomorrow to try to raise \$9 billion (8.3 billion euros) for the millions of Syrians hit by the country's civil war and a refugee crisis spanning Europe and the Middle East. The donor conference, the fourth of its kind, hopes to meet the United Nations' demand for \$7.73 billion to help in Syria plus \$1.23 billion assistance for countries in the region affected by the crisis. British Prime Minister David Cameron will host more than 70 international leaders at the summit.

They will include German Chancellor Angela Merkel, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Jordan's King Abdullah II, Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. Jordan hosts more than 630,000 Syrian refugees and Abdullah on Tuesday warned his debt-riddled country needed help to ease the burden or Europe would face the consequences. "Sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst," he told the BBC. He said the kingdom could be "forced to take painful measures that

will lead to a greater influx of refugees to Europe if Jordan is left on its own to deal with the consequences of the Syria crisis".

The Syrian war, which began with protests against President Bashar Al-Assad in March 2011, has claimed more than 260,000 lives and caused a

major humanitarian crisis. The conflict has forced 4.6 million Syrians to seek refuge in countries in the region - Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt-while hundreds of thousands have attempted to reach Europe, sometimes paying with their lives while making the risky Mediterranean Sea crossing. From toddler Aylan Kurdi-found drowned on a Turkish beach-to the death by starvation of 16-year-old Ali in the besieged Syrian town of Madaya, the eyes of the world have recently been opened to the civilian impact of the ongoing violence.

In response, donors need to do more than just dig deep financially, Cameron urged. "We need to agree concrete action," he said, calling for the provision of jobs and education in countries neighboring Syria as the living conditions of refugees deteriorate by the day. "This is not just in the interests of Syria and her neighbors," he added. "It is in the interests of Europe too. The more we do to enable people to stay in the region, the less likely we are to see them coming to Europe." — AFP



GENEVA: High Negotiations Committee (HNC) (Syrian opposition body) spokesman Salem Al-Meslet kisses a banner showing pictures of children killed during the Syrian war at the Places des Nations outside of the United Nations Offices yesterday in Geneva. — AFP