

Kuwait Times **55**

# International

MONDAY, APRIL 17, 2017



**Pope urges an end to Syria 'horror' in Easter address**

## FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL HOPEFULS BATTLE IT OUT WITH A WEEK TO GO

Page 10

Page 9



JIDDAH: In this Tuesday, Dec. 26, 2007 file photo, a Saudi veiled woman enjoys a swing in a park during holiday. — AP

## SAUDI WOMAN'S PLEA EXPOSES RISKS RUNAWAYS FACE

**DUBAI:** A young Saudi woman's plea for help after she was stopped in an airport in the Philippines en route to Australia where she planned to seek asylum has triggered a firestorm on social media and drawn attention to the plight of female runaways. For runaway Saudi women, fleeing can be a matter of life and death, and they are almost always doing so to escape male relatives.

Under Saudi Arabia's conservative interpretation of Islamic law, a male guardianship system bars women from traveling abroad, obtaining a passport, marrying or even leaving prison without the consent of a male relative. Most Muslim-majority countries do not have similarly restrictive guardianship laws. The mystery around what triggered Dina Ali Lasloom's cry for help has only added to concerns for her safety.

In a video that appears to be shot with a mobile phone, the 24-year-old says her passport was taken from her at Manila's international airport in the Philippines on Monday on her way to Australia. She alleges that Philippine airport officials confiscated her passport at the request of Saudi diplomats until her relatives could arrive to take her to Saudi Arabia.

### 'Please help me'

"If my family come, they will kill me. If I go back to Saudi Arabia, I will be dead. Please help me," she pleads in the video. Lasloom says she is recording the video at the airport so the public "know that I'm real and here." Wearing a beige coat, the woman does not show her face in the video. Most women in Saudi Arabia cover their face with a veil known as a niqab. Many do so believing it is a religious obligation, in addition to covering their hair and body. Some also cover their faces due

to social pressure.

"I am kept here as a criminal. I can't do anything," Lasloom says in the video. The Associated Press could not independently verify the video's authenticity. Women's rights advocates in Saudi Arabia say Lasloom was ultimately forced to board a plane to the kingdom with two of her uncles, who flew from Riyadh. They said authorities then took her to a women's shelter because of the attention around her case. She cannot leave, however, without a male guardian's permission. Activists say only officials and relatives can contact her there.

Although there are no official statistics, anecdotal evidence from cases reported in Saudi media and from human rights advocates suggest dozens of Saudi women - some with their children - have attempted to flee abroad in recent years. These publicized cases have brought increased attention to what activists say has become a "trend". This is despite gains made in recent years for Saudi women, including the right to run in, and vote in, local elections in 2015, and a government effort to increase women's participation in the workforce.

Women who have managed to flee abroad say they were barred from marrying or forced into marriages. Others have told rights groups that male relatives were abusive and confiscated their salaries. "Many of them, they just want to be free," said Moudi Aljohani, who says she spoke with Lasloom when she was at Manila airport. Aljohani herself fled the kingdom last year and is seeking asylum in the US.

Aljohani, 26, says her family felt she'd become "too Americanized" after a year of study in Miami. What was supposed to be a weeklong visit home turned into months of confinement, she says. "The eight months of being locked in

Saudi Arabia has created an angry, rebellious person inside of me that I don't want to be silent anymore," she said. "What happened to me in Saudi Arabia created a person who just wants to speak out."

For the past 15 years, four of the late King Abdullah's daughters, Princesses Jawaher, Sahar, Hala and Maha - all in their 40s - have allegedly been held in a royal compound in Saudi Arabia. Their mother, who lives in London, has spoken out in the British press to try and bring attention to their plight. Two of the princesses managed to release videos in recent years pleading for help. Saudi courts have heard numerous cases of women asking for a transfer of their guardianship to more sympathetic male relatives - in some cases to their own sons.

A Saudi women's rights activist reached by phone in Riyadh said Lasloom was apparently trying to flee relatives in Kuwait who threatened to send her to live in Saudi Arabia. "There have been a lot of Saudi girls who sought asylum abroad, but now it's a trend. A lot of younger girls in their 20s are seeking asylum," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. "When they say honor killings do not exist, it's not true. It's just invisible," she said, referring to the killing of daughters in the name of family honor.

### 'Honor Violence'

Sara Leah Whitson, the Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, says Saudi women fleeing their family can face so-called "honor" violence if returned against their will. She called on Saudi authorities to protect Lasloom from her family. According to the Philippines' Inquirer news website,

Lasloom was barred from her Australian-bound flight by Saudi Embassy officials in Manila who asked airport officials to stop her. The Saudi Embassy in the Philippines wrote on Twitter that what occurred was "a family matter in which a girl was returned with her family to the homeland." When asked by The Associated Press whether Saudi diplomats in the Philippines had requested that authorities in Manila stop Lasloom from boarding a flight to Australia, Foreign Ministry official Osama Nugali said: "Saudi embassies abroad respect the institutions and laws of host countries and do not interfere in their affairs."

Manila Airport General Manager Eddie Monreal told the AP he had no knowledge about the case. An immigration official reached by the AP said the airport's immigration officers neither detained nor held any passenger under that name. In Saudi Arabia, activists tracking her plea for help attempted to meet Lasloom at Riyadh airport overnight Wednesday. They say instead, another activist, Alaa al-Anazi was detained by security officials at the airport and transferred to a girl's detention center in the capital. The Interior Ministry did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

A Human Rights Watch report released last year on guardianship laws in Saudi Arabia found that even with greater opportunities for women in the kingdom, a woman's life rests largely on "the good will" of her male guardian. Powerful clerics in the kingdom support male guardianship based on a verse in the Quran that says men are the protectors and maintainers of women. Other Islamic scholars argue this misinterprets fundamental Quranic concepts like equality and respect between the sexes. — AP

## MASS EVACUATION TO PROCEED AFTER BLAST KILL 68 KIDS IN SYRIA

**BEIRUT:** More than 3,000 Syrians were expected to be evacuated yesterday from four areas as part of a population transfer that was briefly stalled a day earlier by a deadly blast that killed more than 120 people, many of them government supporters.

As the evacuations were expected to begin yesterday, shells fired by the Islamic State group on government-held parts of the eastern city of Deir el-Zour wounded two members of a Russian media delegation visiting the area, according to state-run Syrian news agency SANA. Russia is a main backer of Syrian President Bashar Assad and Russian journalists enjoy wide access in government-held parts of the country.

The United Nations is not overseeing the transfer deal, which involves residents of the pro-government villages of Foua and Kfarya and the opposition-held towns of Madaya and Zabadani. All four have been under siege for years, their fate linked through a series of reciprocal agreements that the U.N. says have hindered aid deliveries.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV said 3,000 people will be evacuated from Foua and Kfarya, while 200, the vast majority of them fighters, will be evacuated from Zabadani and

Madaya. Abdurrahman said Saturday's blast - which hit an area where thousands of pro-government evacuees had been waiting for hours - killed 126. He said the dead included 109 people from Foua and Kfarya, among them 80 children and 13 women.

No one has claimed the attack, but both the Islamic State group and the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Fatah al-Sham Front have targeted civilians in government areas in the past. A wounded girl, who said she lost her siblings in the blast, told Al-Manar TV from her hospital bed that children who had been deprived of food for years in the two villages were approached by a man in the car who told them to come and eat potato chips. She said once many had gathered, there was an explosion that tore some of the children to pieces.

After the blast, some 60 buses carrying 2,200 people, including 400 opposition fighters, entered areas held by rebels in the northern province of Aleppo, Abdurrahman said. More than 50 buses and 20 ambulances carrying some 5,000 Foua and Kfarya residents entered the government-held city of Aleppo, Syrian state TV said, with some of them later reaching a shelter in the village of Jibreen to the south.

UN relief coordinator Stephen O'Brien said he was

"horrified" by the deadly bombing, and that while the UN was not involved in the transfer it was ready to "scale up our support to evacuees." He called on all parties to uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, and to "facilitate safe and unimpeded access for the UN and its partners to bring life-saving help to those in need."

Residents of Madaya and Zabadani, formerly summer resorts, joined the 2011 uprising against President Bashar Assad. Both came under government siege in the ensuing civil war. Residents of Foua and Kfarya, besieged by the rebels, have lived under a steady hail of rockets and mortars for years, but were supplied with food and medicine through military air-drops. Critics say the string of evacuations, which could see some 30,000 people moved across battle lines over the next 60 days, amounts to forced displacement along political and sectarian lines.

In eastern Syria, an airstrike by the US-led coalition on the village of Sukkariah near the border with Iraq killed eight civilians who had earlier fled violence in the northern province of Aleppo, according to Deir Ezzor 24, an activist collective, and Sound and Picture Organization, which documents IS violations. — AP



Syrians, evacuated from the besieged government-held towns of Foua and Kfarya, cry upon their arrival in Jibreen on the eastern outskirts of Aleppo. — AFP