

ICRC PRESIDENT LEAVES YEMEN, ISSUES URGENT PLEA FOR HELP

I am leaving Yemen profoundly concerned for the plight of its people. The cholera outbreak remains alarming. With the rainy season approaching, we expect more than 600,000 cases by the end of the year. This is unprecedented. This outbreak is manmade. It is a direct consequence of more than two years of warfare. The health care system has collapsed, with people dying from easily-treatable chronic diseases. Key services like garbage disposal have ceased to function, as I saw all too clearly in Taiz.

Unless the warring parties improve their respect of the laws of war, I am afraid we must expect more epidemics

in the future. Yemenis are resilient people, but how much more must they resist? We have seen, in Syria and elsewhere, how two years of conflict turns into six, ten. Yemen's fate can be different, but I see few signs of hope. The suffering of its people only grows in intensity. I've met families forced to make impossible choices about whether to buy bread, water or medicine for their children.

Thousands of people have been detained by parties to the conflict, languishing in prison unable to contact their loved ones. Yesterday, some of their families protested outside our offices in Sana'a,

demanding answers. Their wellbeing is our priority, but to help them we must be allowed to visit detainees. I've seen for myself this week how war is destroying cities, communities and families.

This, then, is an urgent plea for behaviours to change. It is imperative that parties to the conflict stop the attacks on hospitals, and electricity and water plants. Otherwise, more tragedy will ensue. The warring parties, including coalition states, should take concrete steps, now, to alleviate the situation. They must Stop holding humanitarian action hostage to political ends. Instead, facilitate the flow of aid - and

essential supplies like medicine - into and across Yemen.

Guarantee access for humanitarian agencies to the most vulnerable populations. Give the ICRC regular access to all conflict-related detainees. We received encouraging commitments from both sides this week, and hope these will materialize in the weeks to come. Ease import restrictions so economic activity can resume. Moreover, others providing support to the warring parties in Yemen have the responsibility for making sure the laws of war are respected.

Humanitarian funding is more needed than ever. But the international com-

munity must go a step further. It must actively seek out solutions to this enormous crisis, and wield influence over the behavior of warring parties as a matter of urgency. The ICRC has doubled its Yemen budget this year to over USD100 million. We will continue to fight cholera and do all we can to help the most vulnerable people in Yemen. I call on others to step up their efforts and do likewise. The people I met this week in Yemen are counting on us to come to their aid. Let us prove to them that we care about their plight. —Statement by Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross

THOUSANDS TO BE EVACUATED FROM LEBANON-SYRIA BORDER

OFFENSIVES LEAVE AL-QAEDA FIGHTERS BESIEGED

BEIRUT: Scores of buses and ambulances arrived at the Lebanon-Syria border yesterday for the second phase of an exchange between Lebanon's militant Hezbollah group and Syria's Al-Qaeda affiliate that would lead to the resettlement of thousands of refugees in Syria. It was not immediately clear if the evacuation will go

northwest Idlib province and the central Qalamoun region.

As part of the deal, the two groups on Sunday exchanged the bodies of their dead fighters. Hezbollah handed over the bodies of nine al-Qaeda fighters in exchange for the bodies of five of its own. Under the second phase, about 9,000



This photo released yesterday by the government-controlled Syrian Central Military Media, shows ambulances of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent gathering in the Syrian border village of Fleeta. —AP

ahead as scheduled, or will be delayed, because the registration of thousands of Syrians who want to return home is taking longer than expected.

The evacuation deal followed a military offensive by Hezbollah fighters and Syrian troops during which they captured border areas between the two countries and left hundreds of Al-Qaeda fighters besieged in a small rugged mountainous area. The fighting ended with a cease-fire Thursday for negotiations to allow refugees, fighters, and family members to leave to Syria's

Syrians, including hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters, are to return to Syria. In exchange, eight Hezbollah fighters held by Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate, Fatah Al-Sham Front, will be returned home.

Also to be evacuated are members of the Levant People's Brigades rebel group whose members did not take part in last week's battles. Those fighters will head to the government-held town of Ruhaiba, about 50 kilometers northeast of the Syrian capital Damascus where they will benefit from an amnesty by the state and return to normal life, according to Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV.

Major difficulties

The government-controlled Syrian Central Military Media released video and photos of the buses and ambulances near the Lebanese border town of Arsal and the Syrian village of Fleeta preparing for the evacuations. SCMM said the convoy heading to Idlib will drive through the central province of Homs then to the northern province of Aleppo before reaching Idlib.

In the northern city of Raqqa, at least two people were killed when a mine planted by members of the Islamic State group exploded, Syrian opposition activists said. The explosion in Nazlet Shehadeh struck some people who were trying to flee violence in the city, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the activist-run group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently.

The US-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces have been on the offensive in the de facto capital of IS since June 6, capturing almost half of the city. Nearly two months of fighting have left hundreds of people dead and wounded. The international medical organization Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders, said in a statement yesterday that sick and injured civilians within and outside Raqqa are facing major difficulties obtaining urgent life-saving medical due to the fighting.

"Patients tell us large numbers of sick and wounded people are trapped inside Raqqa city with little or no access to medical care and scant chance of escaping the city," said Vanessa Crumond, MSF medical coordinator for Turkey and north Syria.

The MSF statement said that since the SDF offensive began, its medical teams in northeast Syria have treated 415 patients from Raqqa and surrounding villages. Most patients are civilians with conflict-related injuries caused by bombs, land mines, unexploded ordnance, shrapnel and gunshot wounds, the statement said. The limited number of patients treated by MSF who managed to flee Raqqa city say that the only way to leave is by being smuggled out, causing dangerous delays in accessing urgent medical treatment. —AP



BERATZHAUSEN: In this July 29, 2017 photo transgender US army captain Jennifer Sims poses prior to an interview with The Associated Press. — AP

TRANSGENDER SOLDIER FEARS LIFE SETBACK AFTER TRUMP'S TWEET

BERATZHAUSEN, Germany: The US Army soldier took a deep breath before hitting the button that sent the email to more than 200 fellow troops. "All considered, I am, and have been, traversing what is essentially a personal matter, but is something I must address publicly," the email stated. "I am transgender."

The April 13 email officially ended the secret that burned inside Capt. Jennifer Sims, who was known as Jonathan Sims. But the feeling of relief swiftly turned to unease last week after President Donald Trump tweeted that transgender people were no longer welcome in the US military. "I read the tweets while I was at work and you know it was devastating because I still have work to do and here I am reading basically what sounds like the president of the United States - who is the commander in chief, he is the ultimate boss of the military - telling me and anybody else that is transgender that we are fired," Sims said.

Pentagon officials say the policy will remain unchanged without official White House guidance. But for Sims, the uncertainty has been upsetting. "So in the initial moments after the tweet, I saw myself forced into the state that I was in before I started transitioning - a state of depression, exhaustion and inability to enjoy things," said Sims, 28, who spoke to The Associated Press on her own behalf and not on that of the Army.

Expensive transitions

The reversal of the Obama administration policy that allows transgender people to serve openly and receive military medical coverage for transitioning from one gender to another also could affect her physically. Sims has been on hormone therapy by her military doctor since November. If she interrupts the treatment, her body will revert to being male.

"It would be very difficult to have to go through that," said Sims, who is based at Hohenfels, a US Army garrison in the German state of Bavaria. Growing up in Minnesota and Florida, Sims, a high school football player, never felt comfortable being male. The son and grandson of military veterans quietly came to terms with identifying as a woman a year after joining the Army R.O.T.C., but outwardly kept it a secret "because I wanted to continue serving," Sims said. Sims stopped socializing, feeling drained over worries about being masculine enough, and instead focused on work, serving in Afghanistan, Indonesia and Germany. Her sister, Natasha Sims, 24, said she saw "emptiness" in her eyes.

After the Defense Department announced in 2015 that it was considering allowing transgender troops to serve openly, Sims told Natasha and their parents. When the policy became official in June

2016, Sims said she felt the meaning of the word freedom personally after spending years fighting for it for her country. "It was the best day of my life really," Sims said.

Sims made an appointment with the behavioral health office, was given a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and started hormone therapy in November. Five months later, she decided to tell fellow troops. She first told her two closest colleagues, Capt. Brandon Shorter and another infantry officer. They were at a loss for words. After Shorter got home, allowing it to sink in, he texted Sims about how that was brave.

"Infantry officers are best described as brutish. So Capt. Sims pulled me and another brute aside face to face. That took a lot of courage and that's the first thing that went through my mind, mixed in with surprise," Shorter said. Sims then announced the "personal change" to more than 200 other troops. It was not an emotional email. The seasoned military officer wrote how a lifetime of discomfort had peaked three years ago. Sims meticulously explained gender dysphoria, announced she was Capt Jennifer Sims, not Jonathan, and outlined the steps she would take to fully transition to a woman.

"Officially in DEERS, my gender will remain male until my medical transition is complete, which means I will still comport to male standards and use male facilities," she wrote, referring to the acronym for the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, a kind of HR database for US military personnel. "While it is my preference for people to refer to me with female pronouns, if you are uncomfortable with this, there is no requirement to do so, I only respectfully request you refer to me by my proper name, Captain Sims," the email stated.

Two personas

Sims assured her unit the change "if anything, will only make me more productive and capable, as I no longer have to live two personas." Five soldiers sent emails back with words of encouragement. Most didn't respond. For a few days, there were murmurs of "hey did you see the email?" The force had just undergone training explaining what was expected in regards to transgender soldiers.

Sims is the first transgender person Shorter has known. The unit is basically full of "young men wanting to chew on nails and prove how tough they are and rightly so since they are infantry men," Shorter said. There are only about eight women among the 500 soldiers in the battalion. He had a lot of questions "being naturally curious and wanting to be a good friend because we didn't really have a personal relationship. He's, excuse me, she's - see I still slip up sometimes - a single captain, I'm married with two daughters. — AP

CANADA PROBES SAUDI USE OF ITS EQUIPMENT

MONTREAL: Canada warned Saturday it was reviewing reports that Saudi Arabia is using Canadian armored vehicles in a crackdown in the Sunni-ruled kingdom's Shiite-majority east. "We are looking at these claims very seriously... and have immediately launched a review," Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, speaking in French, said in during a visit in central Canada.

The Globe and Mail reported earlier that light armored vehicles sold by Canada to Saudi Arabia had been used against Shia civilians in a major operation that left several people in the town of Awamiya in Eastern Province. Experts told the newspaper that vehicles appearing in photos and videos of the Saudi operations were Gurkha RPVs produced by Terradyne Armored Vehicles near Toronto.

Earlier, a spokesman indicated that Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland was "deeply concerned about this situation and has asked officials to review it immediately." "If it is found that Canadian exports have been used to commit serious violations of human rights, the minister will take action," added spokesman John Babcock.

"The government is actively seeking more information about Saudi Arabia's current efforts to deal with its security challenges, the reports of civilian casualties, and the reports that Canadian-made vehicles have been used by Saudi Arabia in its current security operations," he said in a statement. "Canada will review all available information as it determines an appropriate course of action." Babcock said Ottawa had shared its concerns with Saudi Arabia, demanding that "its internal security operations be conducted in a manner consistent with international human rights law."

Controversial deal

The controversial \$13 billion US contract to supply Riyadh with light armored vehicles was struck by the previous Conservative government. Trudeau's Liberal government has had to defend this contract against criticism that it may have violated Canada's export control rules that bar arms exports to countries with a poor human rights record and the prohibit using these weapons against civilians.

Freeland's predecessor, Stephane Dion, had stated in April 2016 that the government would halt or revoke the export license for the military equipment if credible information showed it was being used inappropriately. "We have contracts in which people commit to respect Canadian laws, the terms of the contract and Canadian values, and we expect these contracts to be respected," Trudeau said. Earlier this week, Canada had already expressed concerns about the growing violence in Saudi Arabia, and urged Riyadh to "defuse tensions." "All such challenges must be addressed in a manner that abides by international human rights law," the statement added. —AFP



AL-NASHABIYAH, Syria: A picture taken on July 30, 2017 shows aid packages from the United Nations and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) being delivered to locals in the rebel-held town. —AFP

FOOD ACCESS IN SYRIA'S RAQA AT 'CRITICAL TURNING POINT': NGOS

BEIRUT: Food access in Syria's battle-torn Raqa is now at "a critical turning point," aid organizations said yesterday, with markets shuttered and residents depending fully on their dwindling stockpiles. Raqa has been gripped by fierce fighting for nearly two months and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have ousted the Islamic State group from half of the northern city.

An assessment released yesterday by REACH, a network of humanitarian organizations operating around Raqa, painted an increasingly dire picture. "While in previous weeks residents were able to purchase some food at markets, the majority of key informants reported that residents are now relying entirely on food stored from previous weeks," it said. "Food markets, which were functioning sporadically three weeks ago, are generally no longer in operation."

Bread was consistently found in 15 of Raqa's 24 neighborhoods several weeks ago. Now it is no longer regularly available anywhere in the city. Food prices have also skyrocketed, forcing residents to eat smaller meals or skip them entirely, the report said. Raqa is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS), an activist collective publishing news from inside the city, has also warned of food problems.

"The bakeries are closed because there's

no fuel or flour, and the shopowners have fled. Whatever flour is here is spoiled and full of worms," RBSS activist Husaam Eesa told AFP earlier this month. "People can't store things in the refrigerators because there's no electricity. They can't cook because there's no water." The United Nations estimates that between 20,000 and 50,000 people are still in Raqa, but REACH said the number could be as low as 10,000. It estimated that the most densely populated district was Al-Hurriya in the north, with at most 5,000 residents, and that 14 out of the 24 neighborhoods were abandoned or almost abandoned.

According to REACH, only one wing of Raqa's state hospital is still functioning but offers just basic first aid. Medical charity Doctors Without Borders (MSF) echoed those concerns yesterday, saying wounded civilians were often trapped in the city for days or weeks without medical care. "In Raqa city, if you don't die from airstrikes, you die by mortar fire; if not by mortars then by sniper shots; if not by snipers, then by an explosive device," a 41-year-old with shrapnel wounds to his chest told MSF after he fled Raqa. "And if you get to live, you are besieged by hunger and thirst, as there is no food, no water, no electricity." — AFP

EX-WARLORD, FOOTBALLER TO CONTEST IN LIBERIA PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

MONROVIA: Twenty candidates will contest presidential elections in Liberia in October, among them a former warlord, a footballer and a fashion model, as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf steps down after two terms, the electoral commission said yesterday. There is no obvious frontrunner to replace the Nobel Prize-winning Sirleaf as head of the fragile west African state she was elected to lead in 2005 following a long civil war, one that has left deep scars on its economy and social fabric.

Elections for the presidency and House of Representatives take place on October 10 — the first time since the end of the conflict in 2003 that Liberia will be holding a vote without the presence of UN peacekeepers. Ahead of the opening of campaigning yesterday, the UN appealed for the ballot to go ahead smoothly, urging all "to spare no effort in their pursuit of peaceful elections." Among the president/vice-

president tickets put forward by political parties, key figures from the civil conflict loom large. Senator Prince Johnson—a one-time rebel fighter filmed drinking beer during the notorious murder of former president Samuel Doe in 1990 — is standing for president for the Movement for Democracy and Reconstruction (MDR).

Football superstar and Senator George Weah will stand for the Coalition for Democratic Change (CDC) with Jewel Howard-Taylor, 54, the ex-wife of Charles Taylor, as his vice-president pick. Charles Taylor, once Liberia's most feared rebel fighter, is serving a 50-year sentence in a British jail for his role in fuelling neighboring Sierra Leone's own long civil conflict. Two prominent businessmen, Coca-Cola executive Alexander Cummings and telecoms tycoon Bononi Urey, are standing on pro-jobs and pro-growth platforms as they aim to bring corporate expertise to the presidency. — AFP