

International

Thousands of Iraqis too scared to go home because of IS stigma

'ISIS family' daubed on some homes

LONDON: Hundreds of Iraqi families forced to flee last year's fighting in Mosul are being prevented from returning home by their communities because they had a relative who joined Islamic State, an aid worker said yesterday. Communities are also barring some families from accessing aid for the same reason, said Omar Ali, Iraq country director of British charity Human Appeal.

Others have had "ISIS family" daubed on their old homes, jeopardizing their safety, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on the sidelines of the Bond international development conference in London. "There's a real social cohesion challenge for the future," said the British aid worker who set up Human Appeal's operations in Iraq 14 months ago as fighting raged in Mosul. Hundreds of thousands of people are still living in camps around Mosul after fleeing Iraq's second largest city at the bloody end of the militants' rule. Islamic State, also known as ISIS, seized nearly a third of the country in 2014. Iraq declared victory in December.

Ali said thousands of people had been ostracized by their communities even though they never supported the militants. "You have a family of 50, with just one man who joined ISIS, but the whole family, despite reporting that individual, is now stigmatized - and they are scared to return," he said. Ali warned that there was also potential for land and property disputes as families return home because so few people have papers to prove ownership. He said ISIS had confiscated people's identity papers, creating a "massive problem".

"There are huge issues with civilian ID - many people have no birth certificates, marriage certificates or property ownership certificates," Ali said. "This means people can't access assistance from the government and they can't go back to their houses because they can't prove ownership." Ali said the war had left many women as head of their household, but many were illiterate and did not know how to obtain identity documents to access government help or food aid. Human Appeal and the United Nations refugee agency have opened centers staffed by lawyers to address such problems.

Thousands ostracized by communities

guardianship," Ali said. He said the challenges in Iraq were enormous but aid agencies were "working their socks off" and the government was supportive. "Western Mosul is complete and utter devastation, everything is destroyed, everything is rubble," he added.

"Hospitals are decimated and lack medicines, and many children have been out of school for three years." Although the government has promised people compensation to rebuild homes, Ali said it was "not coming any time soon". Despite the militants' defeat, he said violence continued in the northern city due to ISIS sleeper cells. Iraq's allies promised Baghdad \$30 billion this month to recover from the war ahead of elections in May. Baghdad has said it

Children in charge

The war has also left many households headed by children. "You get eight or nine children being looked after by a 14- or 15-year-old boy or girl who is at the complete mercy of whoever has taken control of their



ARBIL: Picture shows a road sign to Arbil's international airport in the capital of Iraq's autonomous northern Kurdish region. Iraq has extended by three months a ban on international flights to the autonomous Kurdish region, a senior official at Arbil airport in the capital of Iraq Kurdistan said. The federal government in Baghdad first imposed the air blockade in September after Iraq Kurdistan voted overwhelmingly for independence in a non-binding referendum rejected as illegal by the central government. - AFP

needs \$88 billion. A report by three major aid groups yesterday said that the majority of displaced Iraqis in the western province of Anbar also feared returning home. It found that 84 percent of Iraqis in the Amriyah Al-Fallujah and Bezabize camps reported feeling safer in the camps

than in their area of origin. "People are afraid of retribution, unexploded bombs, or simply have nowhere to return to," said Petr Kostohryz, Iraq country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council, one of the aid groups behind the report.—Reuters

Syrian ground forces seek to gain territory

BEIRUT: Syrian government forces launched a ground assault on the edge of the rebel-held eastern Ghouta enclave yesterday, seeking to gain territory despite a Russian plan for five-hour daily ceasefires, a war monitor and sources on both sides said. Hundreds of people have died in 11 days of bombing of the eastern Ghouta, a swathe of towns and farms outside Damascus that is the last major rebel-held area near the capital.

The onslaught has been one of the fiercest of the civil war, now entering its eighth year. The UN Security Council, including President Bashar Al-Assad's strongest ally Russia, passed a resolution on Saturday calling for a 30-day countrywide ceasefire, but it has not come into effect, with Moscow and Damascus saying they are battling members of banned terrorist groups excluded from the truce.

Russia has instead proposed daily five-hour local ceasefires to establish what it calls a humanitarian corridor so aid can enter the enclave and civilians and wounded can be evacuated. The first such truce took place on Tuesday but quickly collapsed when bombing and shelling resumed after a short lull. Moscow and Damascus have accused rebels of shelling the corridor to prevent people leaving. Rebels deny this, and say people will not leave eastern Ghouta because they fear the government. A senior US general accused Moscow of acting as "both arsonist and firefighter" by failing to rein in Assad. Yesterday's ground assault targeted the Hawsh Al-Dawahra area at the eastern edge of the rebel-held area.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group, reported advances by the government forces in the area, describing it as the resumption of an assault that first began on Feb 25. It said rebels had inflicted heavy losses on government forces. An official with one of the rebel groups in eastern Ghouta said fighters were battling to repel an attempted incursion, and characterized the battle as "back and forth". A commander in the military alliance that backs Assad said an elite unit of the Syrian army, the Tiger Force, was taking part in the assault, but the advances so far were small.

With no sign of decisive international pressure to stop the attack, eastern Ghouta appears on course to eventually meet the same fate as other areas won back by the government in lengthy, punishing assaults, where rebels and



HAMOURIA: A Syrian man cycles past destroyed buildings in the rebel-held town of Hamouria, in the besieged Eastern Ghouta region on the outskirts of the capital Damascus. —AFP

civilians who oppose Assad were finally evacuated in negotiated withdrawals. Damascus appears to be applying tried and tested military means, combining air strikes and bombardment with ground assaults, as it did to win back eastern Aleppo in 2016.

US, Russia clash

Diplomatic sources have said the chemical weapons watchdog, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, opened an investigation into attacks in eastern Ghouta to determine whether banned munitions were used. US disarmament ambassador Robert Wood said yesterday that Russia has violated its duty to guarantee the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile and prevent the Assad government from using poison gas.

Syria agreed to give up its stockpile of poison gas and join the international chemical weapons ban in 2013 under a Russian-brokered deal that averted US retaliatory air strikes after a nerve gas attack killed hundreds of people. Washington accused Damascus last year of again using nerve gas and ordered air strikes. More recently, the United States says it has evidence Syrian forces have used

chlorine, which is permitted for civilian purposes but banned as a weapon, in attacks in eastern Ghouta and elsewhere.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, addressing a disarmament conference in Geneva, said Syria had eliminated its poison gas stockpiles, and called allegations it was still using chemical weapons "absurd". Lavrov said militants entrenched in eastern Ghouta were blocking aid and the evacuation of people who want to leave. Moscow would continue to support the Syrian army in totally defeating the "terrorist threat", Lavrov told the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

A Syrian army officer told journalists insurgents had shelled the corridor again yesterday to prevent people leaving. Rebels have intensified shelling of nearby government-held Damascus. A medical official in the capital said on Monday 36 people had been killed in four days. Damascus and Moscow say the campaign in eastern Ghouta is needed to halt such shelling. The United Nations said on Tuesday it was proving impossible to aid civilians or evacuate wounded, and said all sides must abide by the 30-day truce sought by the Security Council.—Reuters

Church of the Holy Sepulchre reopens after protest

JERUSALEM: Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre, revered as the site of Jesus's (PBUH) crucifixion and burial, reopened yesterday after Israel backtracked on Tuesday from a tax plan and draft property legislation that triggered a three-day protest. The rare decision on Sunday by church leaders to close the ancient holy site, a favourite among tourists and pilgrims, with the busy Easter holiday approaching put extra pressure on Israel to re-evaluate and suspend the moves.

After receiving a statement from the office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian clergy announced on Tuesday the church would reopen the next morning. Before dawn yesterday, Wajeeh Nusseibeh, who is in charge of locking and unlocking the church, climbed a stepladder and turned the key to open its

main wooden door. "It's one of the holiest sites for our religion and we prayed very hard these last three days that things would change and it would be open for us to be able to go in," said an American pilgrim, who gave her name only as Laurie.

An Israeli committee led by cabinet minister Tzachi Hanegbi will negotiate with church representatives to try to resolve the dispute over plans to tax commercial properties owned by the church in Jerusalem, Netanyahu's statement said. Church leaders, in a joint statement, welcomed the dialogue. "After the constructive intervention of the prime minister, the churches look forward to engage with Minister Hanegbi, and with all those who love Jerusalem to ensure that our holy city, where our Christian presence continues to face challenges, remains a place where the three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Islam and Christianity) may live and thrive together."

The Jerusalem Municipality, Netanyahu said, would suspend tax collection actions it had taken in recent weeks. Mayor Nir Barkat has said the churches owed the city more than \$180 million in property tax from their commercial holdings, adding that "houses of worship" would remain exempt. While the review of the tax plan is under way, work on legislation that would allow Israel to expropriate land in



JERUSALEM: Christian worshippers pray inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem after it reopened yesterday, following a three-day closure to protest against Israeli tax measures and a proposed law. —AFP

Jerusalem that churches have sold to private real estate firms in recent years will also be suspended, Netanyahu said.

The bill's declared aim is to protect homeowners against the possibility private companies will not extend their leases of

land on which their residences stand. Churches are major landowners in Jerusalem. They say such a law would make it harder for them to find buyers for their land-sales that help to cover operating costs of their religious institutions.—Reuters

News in brief

'Suspicious envelope'

WASHINGTON: An envelope containing an "unknown substance" was opened at a US base near Washington on Tuesday, leaving 11 people sick, including military personnel, the Marine Corps said. The envelope, which was received at Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall around 3:30 pm, led to an evacuation of the building, the US Marine Corps said in a statement. "Shortly after receiving the letter, 11 people started to feel ill," three of whom were "transported in stable condition for further medical evaluations," it said. "Joint Base Police Department officials are working with local HAZMAT teams, NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigation Service) and the FBI. The building was screened and cleared," it said. CNN reported that a corporal, gunnery sergeant and a colonel complained of a "burning sensation" on their hands and face.—AFP

Czech 'fake jihadist'

PRAGUE: A 70-year-old Czech man is facing terror charges after allegedly causing two train crashes and pretending he was a jihadist in a bid to provoke a backlash against Muslims, a news report said yesterday. The man felled trees by two different railways near the central city of Mlada Boleslav in early June and late July 2017, the lidovsky.cz news site said, quoting a prosecutor. Trains crashed into both trees but no one was injured. In both places, the man left leaflets with messages in Arabic transliterated into Roman characters. Police arrested the man last week. "The culprit is a Czech-born citizen whose motivation was to raise fears of the Muslim migrant wave and terror attacks," the website quoted Prague prosecutor Marek Bodlak as saying. If convicted, the alleged fake jihadist faces up to life in prison, said lidovsky.cz.—AFP

Sex abuse scandal

SEOUL: South Korea's Catholic hierarchy yesterday said it was "devastated" by allegations that a priest had tried to rape a woman, after she came forward to join the country's burgeoning #MeToo movement. The Catholic Church has been rocked around the globe by years of damaging clerical sex abuse cases as well as cover-ups by senior church officials who often ignored victims and protected predators. Until now the church in South Korea had largely avoided such scandals. But earlier this month a female congregant took the rare step of appearing on television to accuse a priest of sexually abusing her in 2011, sparking widespread fury. Announcing she was inspired by the global #MeToo movement to go public, Kim Min-kyung said the unnamed priest sexually abused and tried to rape her during a volunteer mission in South Sudan.—AFP

Tackling slavery online, web firms urged to do more

LONDON: Web companies must do more to stop victims of modern slavery being sold and exploited over the internet, Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May said yesterday, as the country aims to ramp up efforts to tackle traffickers who operate online. Britain's anti-slavery taskforce - which unites ministers, police leaders and intelligence chiefs - is using new technologies and data analytics to identify tactics used by traffickers and uncover slavery victims, the government said.

Sexual exploitation accounts for about half of all cases of modern slavery in Britain, with gangs advertising many victims on adult service websites, said a statement by May's office.—Reuters