

International

School restarts in South Sudan, in theory; 30% of teachers quit

Classrooms filled with hungry displaced families

JUBA: Some of South Sudan's 6,000 schools opened for a new academic year this month—but the government does not know how many. Teachers have not been paid. Many of them, and their pupils, are on the run after four years of fighting. In the capital, classrooms are filled with hungry displaced families. The United Nations Children's Fund estimated in December that three-quarters of children are out of school, threatening to create a second "lost generation" of uneducated adults in a country in danger of becoming a failed state. Some are the children of the original "lost boys" — the nickname for the generation that survived South Sudan's 22-year liberation war from Sudan only to be caught up in a new conflict two years after it won independence in 2011.

Men like Lawrence Samuel had hoped for food, peace and education for his own children. But the civil war shattered those dreams. He could not pay for any of his children to finish school. Most of his neighbors cannot even pay for food. "If you ask a child in primary school questions," he said, "He will not answer you because his mind is very far away, thinking of food." Last year, only half of schools opened, said Education Minister Deng Deng Hoc, whose officials are still trying to gauge how many are open now, three weeks into the new term.

Tens of thousands of people have died and 4.5 million people have fled their homes since clashes between troops loyal to President Salva Kiir and former vice president Riek Machar broke out in the oil-rich new country in 2013. Almost three-quarters of the adult population is illiterate, one of the highest rates in the world, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The latest attempt to end the conflict, a ceasefire signed in December, was violated within hours. Many

schools are deserted in abandoned towns and villages around the country. Nearly 19,000 children have been recruited by armed groups, the UN said, although several hundred were released this month. But militias easily lure children by offering them food and protection.

On Monday, the UN said more than 7 million people — nearly two-thirds of the population — would have problems finding food this year. Parts of the country are experiencing shortages close to last year's famine. If they are lucky, mothers might be able to choose between feeding their children and sending them to school. Two of Salaw Adam's five children were in school last year. She won't be sending any this year, she said, after school fees doubled from 1,000 to 2,000 South Sudanese pounds per term, equivalent to \$9 on the black market this week. "Of course, missing school will affect them," she said quietly, wringing her hands. "But what can I do?"

Teachers deserting

Fighting forced oil companies to shut down most of the country's production, slashing government revenues. Education ministry director general Daniel Swaka Ngwanki said salaries for the last three months of the previous academic term, which ended in December, have not been paid. The government allocated 3 percent of its 2017/18 budget to education. More than 50 percent went to security and administration, including President Kiir's office. Neighboring Kenya spent 7.3 percent of its national budget on education this year.

Ateny Wek Ateny, Kiir's spokesman, said the presidency needed a large budget because cash-strapped ministers were constantly asking for bailouts. "When other departments are supposed to spend and they couldn't find any

(money) ... they will come to the office of the president to ask for intervention," he said. Even if teachers' salaries had been paid, Ngwanki said, rampant inflation means a teachers' monthly salary of 1,500 South Sudanese pounds won't even buy a bag of cooking charcoal. "Many teachers have deserted the profession," he said. The UN estimates

around a third of teachers have left their posts. Former teacher Garang Mabior Deng is among those. He quit in February. He left to work at a private company offering him twice his teaching salary: "I decided to teach because I loved helping my country, but after two years, it was impossible to take care of my family." —Reuters



GANYIEL, South Sudan: Two women hold their acute malnourished children in a stabilization centre in Ganyiel, Panyijiar county, in South Sudan. Nearly half of the population in war-torn South Sudan is experiencing extreme hunger, with many more set to run out of food as famine looms, government and UN agencies said. —AFP



UN fears 'lost generation'

Terror victims shun Indonesia reconciliation meeting

JAKARTA: A group of terror attack survivors and traumatized relatives of those killed boycotted Indonesia's first-ever meeting between former militants and their victims yesterday, marring an event hailed as a key step towards reconciliation. The government-hosted talks brought together 124 people convicted of terror-related crimes and some 51 survivors or family members of those killed in attacks. But it drew fewer than expected survivors as two victim's rights groups shunned the event, saying the face-to-face meeting in the ballroom of a Jakarta hotel was poorly planned.

"There are so many of them (former convicts) in the room. We're not ready psychologically," said Ni Luh Erniati, an adviser to the Indonesian Survivors Foundation, which did not attend. "We have forgiven them but we cannot predict what would happen if our emotions were ignited." Indonesia, which has the world's biggest Muslim population, has suffered a string of extremist attacks this century, including the 2002 Bali bombings that killed more than 200 people.

Most of the dead were foreign tourists but 38 Indonesians were among those killed. Erniati lost her husband in the Bali attack and later founded the Isana Dewata Foundation to represent families of those killed. Both the Isana Dewata and Indonesian Survivors foundations stayed away from yesterday's event. "We've tried similar smaller-scale events in the past but it was hard even then," said Erniati. "Some survivors were so emotional and they became furious at the former militants."

But some victims were able to dispel their anger and attend the talks. "If I succumb to my resentment, I would not be any different from them," said Febby Firmansyah—badly injured in Jakarta's 2003 JW Marriott hotel bombing that killed twelve. He refused to hold a grudge despite a mangled hand and permanent burn scars all over his body. "I cannot force other survivors to forgive them as quickly as I did... so I



JAKARTA: Government officials, former militants and terror attack survivors attend a 'terrorist-victim' meeting in Jakarta yesterday. — AFP

warned them: don't come if you are not ready," he said at the meeting.

'I am sorry'

Sumarno, who served four years in jail for delivering and helping pack explosives used in the Bali bombing, said terror attacks must stop. "It's hard and saddens me to see survivors who are now suffering from permanent disabilities," said the former militant, who like many Indonesians goes by one name. "I had not imagined the impact would be like that. I am sorry and have apologized to them." He added that the meeting might help soften "discrimination" toward convicted militants who can have trouble finding work and fitting back into society.

Yesterday's meeting was the last of a three-day event which included remarks from government ministers along with education, social affairs and religious officials. Only the

convicted militants took part in classes about tolerance and diversity held earlier in the week. Some cast doubt on the meeting when it was first announced last month, while there was also suspicion that its chief purpose was to boost the power of Indonesia's counter-terrorism agency by bringing the oversight of terror victims under its authority.

Chief Security Minister Wiranto rejected those claims yesterday. "This event is unprecedented. It's never happened before," he said. "This event goes beyond just being ceremonial." Jakarta has been running a deradicalisation program for a number of years while a crackdown has weakened the most dangerous terror networks. But fears have grown of a resurgence in militancy after hundreds of Indonesians flocked to the Middle East and the Philippines in recent years to join the Islamic State group or its allies.—AFP

Afghan president offers talks with Taliban 'without preconditions'

KABUL: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani offered recognition of the Taliban as a legitimate political group yesterday as part of a proposed political process that he said could lead to talks aimed at ending more than 16 years of war. The offer, made at the start of an international conference aimed at creating a platform for peace talks, adds to a series of signals from both the Western-backed government and the Taliban suggesting a greater willingness to consider dialogue. Ghani proposed a ceasefire and a release of prisoners as part of a range of options including new elections, involving the militants, and a constitutional review as part of a pact with the Taliban.

"We are making this offer without preconditions in order to lead to a peace agreement," Ghani said in opening remarks to the conference attended by officials from around 25 countries involved in the so-called Kabul Process. "The Taliban are expected to give input to the peace-making process, the goal of which is to draw the Taliban, as an organization, to peace talks," he said, adding that he would not "pre-judge" any group seeking

peace. The comments represented a significant shift for Ghani, who in the past has regularly called the Taliban "terrorists" and "rebels" although he has also offered to talk with parts of the movement that accepted peace.

The Taliban, fighting to restore Islamic rule after their 2001 ouster by US-led troops, have offered to begin talks with the United States but have so far refused direct talks with Kabul. It was unclear whether they would be prepared to shift their stance, despite growing international pressure. However Ghani, who recently helped launch the latest stage in a major regional gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, said the momentum for peace was building from neighboring countries that increasingly saw the necessity of a stable Afghanistan. "The Taliban show awareness of these contextual shifts and seem to be engaged in a debate on the implications of acts of violence for their future," he said.

Political office

Ghani said a framework for peace negotiations should be created with the Taliban recognised as a legitimate group, with their own political office to handle negotiations in Kabul or another agreed location. Taliban officials have acknowledged that they have faced pressure from friendly countries to accept talks and said their recent offers to talk to the United States reflected concern that they could be seen to be standing in the way of peace. Ghani said the process would be accompanied by coordinated diplomatic support including a global effort to persuade neighboring Pakistan, which Kabul has regularly accused of aiding the Taliban, of the advantages of a stable Afghanistan. He renewed an offer of talks with Pakistan,



KABUL: Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Afghan First Lady Rula Ghani pray at the second Kabul Process conference at the Presidential Palace yesterday. —AFP

which rejects the accusations and points to the thousands of its citizens who have been killed by militant groups over the years. In return for Ghani's offer, the Taliban would have to recognize the Afghan government and respect the rule of law, he said. In addition, Taliban prisoners could be released and their names removed from international blacklists, while security arrangements could be made for Taliban agreeing to join a process of reconciliation. Former fighters and refugees could be reintegrated and provided with jobs. The United States last year stepped up its military assistance to Afghanistan, notably through a sharp increase in air strikes, with the aim of breaking a stalemate with the insurgents and forcing them to the negotiating table.—Reuters

News in brief

Buhari for second term?

ABUJA: The national executive committee of Nigeria's ruling party has endorsed President Muhammadu Buhari to seek a second term in an election next year, two senior party sources said yesterday. Buhari, who took office in May 2015, has not yet said whether he intends to seek re-election. The 75-year-old leader spent five months on medical leave in Britain last year for an unspecified ailment, raising questions about his ability to run Africa's most populous nation. The national executive committee of the president's All Progressives Congress (APC) party, which takes decisions on the party's direction, held a one-day meeting which concluded late on Tuesday. "The party made it clear that this endorsement is not an automatic ticket for the president," one of the sources said, adding that the party would still conduct a presidential primary to be fair to other potential candidates.—Reuters

14 missing as boats sink

KINSHASA: At least 14 people are feared drowned after two overcrowded, rickety boats sank in the River Congo, the interior minister of DR Congo said yesterday, though local sources fear the toll could be much higher. "Fourteen missing, 108 survived," the Democratic Republic of Congo's interior minister, Henri Mova, said in an email, after the two vessels sank in the river in the southwestern province of Mai-Ndombe. Local official Didace Pembe said many more people may have died. "The crowded vessels were sailing at night, and they were suddenly hit by strong winds. Many more went missing in this accident than those who survived," Pembe said. Local fisherman Leon Bateko told AFP by phone that weather conditions on the powerful river "were extremely bad", hampering the rescue efforts.—AFP

10 killed in Nigeria

YOLA: At least 10 people were killed in an attack in a region of northeastern Nigeria that has been a flash-point for communal clashes between farmers and herders, a military commander and a local politician said. Such clashes have plagued Nigeria's hinterland despite pledges by President Muhammadu Buhari since he took power in 2015 to improve security, especially in the northeast, which also faces an insurgency by the militant Islamist group Boko Haram. Brigadier general Bello Mohammed said yesterday soldiers under his command killed 10 herdsmen and arrested seven others after attackers struck a village in the Gwamba region of Adamawa state on Tuesday. The region is a hotspot for violence between Muslim herders and Christian farmers over rights to grazing land and agriculture.—Reuters

23 dead in DR Congo

GOMA: Twenty-three people have been killed in renewed clashes between ethnic groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo's troubled east, according to an official toll yesterday. The violence, in Rutshuru territory in the conflict-scarred province of North Kivu, has pitted the Hutu community on one side against the Nande and Hunde groups on the other. "We have recorded the death of 16 civilians and seven militiamen since Sunday," Francois Bakundakabo, an aide to the provincial governor said. Fighting occurred in the villages of Bwalanda, Mutanda and Kikuku, where the groups have regularly clashed over control of land. Several dozen people were killed in 2017. The Nande and Hunde consider Congolese Hutu to be foreigners and in league with Rwandan Hutu rebels, gathered in a notoriously violent militia called the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR).—AFP