

International

UN fears for Eritrean refugees caught in Ethiopia conflict

First foreign aid convoy reaches Tigray capital

ADDIS ABABA: The United Nations and rights groups have expressed growing alarm over the plight of Eritrean refugees caught in the conflict in Ethiopia, warning their safety and survival are at great risk. The UN refugee agency UNHCR said late Friday it had received "an overwhelming number of disturbing reports" of refugees being killed or kidnapped and forcibly returned to Eritrea, which borders Ethiopia's battle-scarred Tigray region.

"If confirmed, these actions would constitute a major violation of international law," said Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Ethiopia has restricted access to Tigray, where aid groups fear a humanitarian disaster is unfolding, and the UN has not been able to reach four refugee camps housing nearly 100,000 Eritreans since fighting began between federal and regional forces on November 4.

"I am strongly urging the government of Ethiopia to continue to uphold their responsibility towards refugees under international law, and to ensure the protection and safety of all refugees in the country," Grandi said. The International Rescue Committee said Friday that one of its staff members was killed last month at a refugee camp for Eritreans in Tigray. The Danish Refugee Council, which also assists the Eritreans, said three of its guards were killed, but did not specify where.

'Harm and hunger'

Humanitarian agencies have warned of drastic supply shortages and appealed for urgent access to assist the Eritreans and an estimated 600,000 others in Tigray who were dependent on food rations before the conflict even began. A government communica-

tions blackout combined with tight restrictions on access to Tigray has made it very difficult for aid agencies to confirm the whereabouts and safety of their staff, as well as the refugees and civilians they support.

Ethiopia said Friday it was returning "misinformed" Eritrean refugees making their way south to Addis Ababa back to the camps in Tigray to receive aid and live "lawfully and peacefully".

"Forcibly sending Eritrean refugees back to camps in Tigray places them at unnecessary risk of harm and hunger," Laetitia Bader, Horn of Africa director for Human Rights Watch, said yesterday.

"Eritrean refugees shouldn't be forced to be in a conflict zone where humanitarian assistance is still restricted and international access to the refugee camps still cut off." The UN migration agency IOM on Friday denied that its buses were used to transport refugees "to an unknown destination" and rejected allegations that Eritreans were being held at one of its transit centers in Addis Ababa and processed for forcible return. The International Organization for Migration said it was "extremely concerned" by reports of Eritreans being relocated against their will and "does not under any circumstances conduct the forced return of migrants and refugees".

Meanwhile, the first international aid convoy arrived yesterday in the capital of Ethiopia's Tigray region since fighting broke out more than a month ago, triggering a refugee crisis and humanitarian disaster. The International Committee of the Red Cross said seven trucks brought medicines and medical equipment for 400 wounded as well as relief supplies to Mekele, a city of half a million which had been all-but cut off to foreign aid since



Trhas Gabrihals, 28, an Ethiopian refugee who fled Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, weeps next to her two children as she could not find her younger brothers after a month of searching, at the entrance of Um Raquba refugee camp in Sudan's eastern Gedaref state, Friday. — AFP

the conflict began on November 4.

"It is the first international aid to arrive in Mekele since fighting erupted in Tigray more than one month ago," the Geneva-based ICRC said, describing health care facilities in the city as "paralyzed".

Patrick Youssef, ICRC regional director for Africa, said the supplies would "reduce those impossible life-or-death triage decisions" for doctors and nurses in

Mekele who had endured for weeks without running water and electricity, let alone essential medicines.

The convoy arrived as the United Nations expressed growing alarm over the plight of nearly 100,000 Eritrean refugees in Tigray and appealed for urgent access to assist them and 600,000 others who were dependent on food rations before the conflict even began. — AFP

Hunger and trauma: Lives of Mozambicans who fled insurgency

METUGE, Mozambique: Sinamangue Tamu is still just a teenager, but now has the responsibility of parenting her three little brothers after they fled a brutal Islamist insurgency in which their northern Mozambican town was seized. They were separated from their father while escaping the port town of Mocimboa da Praia—his whereabouts are still unknown.

"I don't know if he's alive or dead," Tamu said, avoiding eye contact. Their mother had died of an illness. Tamu is sitting on a mat in a camp for internally displaced people on the outskirts of Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado province, where the insurgency was launched three years ago.

Her youngest brother is under two years old and always clings to her, whether sitting in her lap or strapped to her back with a capulana—a colorful Mozambique sarong.

Pausing between sentences, Sinamanga told AFP she was worried about her toddler brother.

"He is refusing to eat the food we have here. At the hospital they say he has anaemia. He doesn't eat," she said. The diet of chickpeas and corn flour is monotonous for the around 600 families at this dilapidated former agriculture training college in Metuge, 45

kilometers (28 miles) from Pemba.

They are just a few of the half million people forced from their homes by the vicious jihadist campaign in northern Mozambique, which is estimated to have killed more than 2,400 people.

'We are hungry'

For women and adolescent girls at the camp, life is a daily grind of chores—washing, cooking, caring for children. Men meanwhile gather idly under trees worrying about their future, having left everything behind.

The Islamist insurgency has intensified in recent months, with torched villages and atrocities including beheadings increasing. The painful memories of such atrocities can be seen etched on the faces of many at the camp. Isa Ali, 53, fled when the Islamist militants set fire to his village near Mocimboa da Praia. He hid in the bush until they left, returning to discover that he had lost everything.

He walked until he ended up at the camp. He has no news of his wife and 10 children. Now he says sleeping on the concrete floor is making him sick.

"We are not animals, animals sleep in the sand," he said. "Here we don't eat properly; they give us a bag of 50 kilos (110 pounds) of peas for 30



A fisherman balances a crate of fishes on his head outside on the coast of the Paquitequete district of Pemba where internal displaced people are fleeing from unrest in the northern part of the Cabo Delgado area in Mozambique. — AFP

days... without oil. It's just water and salt and peas."

He is not the only one struggling. "Mr journalist, in this centre we are hungry," said a man who only gave a first name, Ramadan. He warned that it would not be a surprise if people start dying from hunger "because the food is not enough—and the government knows that."

Unacceptable conditions

Bartolomeu Muibo, the former administrator of Quissanga district, is among those displaced and living in the camp after fleeing his home in April. He acknowledged the govern-

ment is struggling to meet everyone's needs. "We have just the basics to survive. But it's not enough. The diet is an important component to ensure health and food security, especially for children," he said.

Charities offering humanitarian aid say they are working hard to ensure supplies reach those in need, but insecurity hampers access to some areas.

"The humanitarian situation here in Cabo Delgado as well as the neighboring provinces of Niassa and Nampula is really challenging at the moment," Sascha Nlabu, the International Organization for Migration's operations chief in Mozambique, said. — AFP

Biden 'attuned to science': Fauci

WASHINGTON: The United States' top infectious disease official Anthony Fauci has said he has always known President-elect Joe Biden as someone "attuned to following science" and expects the incoming administration will be guided by evidence.

The widely respected physician and scientist, who has been named as Biden's chief medical advisor on COVID-19, also praised the work of the Trump administration in delivering on its vaccine promises. Asked by AFP how things might change when Biden takes office on January 20, he said: "I know that they are very closely wedded to following the science."

"That has been something that President-elect Biden has done from when I knew him during the Obama administration, when he was the vice president of the United States. "He is very much attuned to following science and scientific data and scientific evidence. So I would imagine that the plan, as it proceeds with the new administration, would be very much steeped in science."

Praise for vaccine program

President Donald Trump has been panned by the scientific community for his inconsistent messaging on public health measures such as masking and social distancing, and has led several super-spreader events himself. The outgoing leader has also frequently criticized Fauci and publicly toyed with the idea he might fire him.

Fauci, for his part, has remained non-partisan and diplomatic, a skill he has honed serving under six presidents while leading the country's response to every disease outbreak since 1984. The 79-year-old praised "Operation Warp Speed," the more than \$11 billion US program for expedited COVID vaccine and treatment development. "Operation Warp Speed has been very successful," he said, "and I'm



In this file photo, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony Fauci, speaks during an unscheduled briefing after a Coronavirus Task Force meeting at the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

certain that we will continue the pathway of Operation Warp Speed.

"I think, in credit to what has gone on in the current administration, I think that is a quite successful endeavor. "I mean, to come up with a vaccine that is ready for distribution in less than a year, from the time the virus was identified is really an unprecedented speed."

The Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which has already been green lighted in Britain and several other countries, is expected to receive emergency approval in the United States imminently after an expert committee voted in its favor. A second vaccine, developed by Moderna and the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases, which Fauci heads, could be approved next week, and the US hopes to use both to immunize 20 million people this month.

Vaccines by other makers could soon follow, including some based on technologies that do not require the extreme cold storage that the two frontrunner messenger RNA vaccines need.

This would make them more suitable for developing countries. — AFP

US Congress passes defense bill despite Trump veto threat

WASHINGTON: The US Senate overwhelmingly passed a sweeping defense budget bill Friday with a veto-proof majority, defying President Donald Trump who has threatened to block the legislation six weeks from leaving office. With both chambers having now passed the measure by sizable majorities, lawmakers from both parties have collectively thrown down the gauntlet before the Republican leader and signaled he would face an override if he moves to veto the bill.

The must-pass \$740.5 billion measure has earned Trump's ire in part because it does not abolish a law granting social media firms liability protection for third-party content on their platforms.

Trump has railed repeatedly against the law, known as Section 230, and says giants like Facebook and Google are biased against him. He has also voiced disapproval of the bill's language calling for renaming US military bases that honor Confederate commanders from the pro-slavery South in the Civil War.

Both chambers cleared the legislation with well beyond the two-thirds "super majority" needed to override a presidential veto: 84 to 13 in the Senate, and a 335-78 vote Tuesday in the House. "This is great news for our troops and the security of our nation," Senate Armed Services Committee chairman James Inhofe said in a statement on the bill's passage.

"I look forward to it becoming law before the end of the year." The measure, formally known as the National Defense Authorization Act, puts Trump in an awkward position on multiple fronts.

It mandates that the US president slap sanctions on Turkey within 30 days for its acquisition of the Russian-made S-400 missile defense system, even as Trump has resisted such punishments against Turkey and its president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. — AFP

News in brief

French hits €200m jackpot

PARIS: A record jackpot of 200 million euros (\$242 million) was won Friday in France by a ticket holder who has 120 days to claim the prize, the EuroMillions lottery said. The win is the biggest ever scooped by a player of the EuroMillions lottery with the previous record standing at 190 million euros, won a number of times, most recently in October 2019. Friday's staggering prize went up for grabs after the jackpot rolled over twice last week. Players in France have picked up 110 out of 499 EuroMillions jackpots—nearly a quarter—since it began in 2004, followed by Britain which has had 108 winners and Spain with 105. —AFP

NZ reopens border with Cook

WELLINGTON: New Zealand took tentative steps yesterday towards reopening its borders for the first time in the COVID era, but only with the tiny Cook Islands in the South Pacific. The government announcement made no mention of any plans for a broader expansion to take in Australia, which introduced a one-way travel bubble in October allowing quarantine-free travel from New Zealand to Australia but not vice-versa. New Zealand has been widely praised for its strict handling of the coronavirus which has caused just 25 deaths in a population of five million. —AFP

Mexico OKs Pfizer vaccine

MEXICO CITY: Mexico's health regulator on Friday granted emergency authorization to the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, deputy health minister Hugo Lopez-Gatell said. "Mexico is the fourth country whose health regulatory agency, Cofepris, has granted emergency use authorization to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine," he told a news conference. In fact, Britain, Canada, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have already given the vaccine emergency approval, making Mexico the fifth country to do so. The Mexican government announced this week that it would begin vaccinations against the coronavirus at the end of December, with a first batch of 250,000 doses to immunize 125,000 people, since the vaccine requires two shots. —AFP

Canada to beat 2030 target

OTTAWA: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Friday an annual hike of his country's carbon tax by Can\$15 (US\$12) per ton after 2022, and billions in new investments to try to beat its climate target. The price on carbon pollution introduced last year is already set to rise incrementally to Can\$50 per ton in 2022. After 2022, Trudeau said, annual increases in the tax under the revised climate plan would jump from Can\$10 to Can\$15. By 2030, the price is to reach Can\$170 per ton—from the current Can\$30 per ton—enough, according to officials, to increase the price of gasoline by nearly 28 cents a liter. —AFP