

## International

# Hunger, cold stalks Syrians displaced by IS prison attack

## Syria Kurds hunt down jihadists after prison attack

**HASAKEH:** In a mosque-turned-shelter, Syrian mothers desperately tried to console hungry children crying in the cold, days after they escaped clashes near a prison attacked by jihadists. They included Maya, a mother of nine, who was among the hundreds of displaced women and children huddled together on Wednesday inside the mosque in the northeastern city of Hasakeh. "We want to go back home," the 38-year-old said, while trying to pacify one of her infants. "There is no bread, water, or sugar here." Maya and her children are among the 45,000 people the United Nations says have fled flashpoint areas near the prison targeted by the Islamic State group.

Most took refuge in the homes of relatives and friends within Hasakeh, while others had no choice but to move into the mosque or a wedding hall, said an AFP correspondent. Maya fled her home in Al-Zuhour neighborhood a day after the January 20 start of the attack which is considered the most sophisticated by IS since its territorial defeat in 2019. "The children were so scared, they started to cry, but we could not venture out because of the cold," Maya said, recalling the night IS launched the attack.

The assault triggered days of clashes in and around the facility as IS militants hunkered down in civilian homes, terrorizing residents. The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said they fully recaptured the facility on Wednesday after all holdout jihadists surrendered. At least 181 people, including 124 IS jihadists, 50 Kurdish fighters and seven civilians, were killed in six days of violence, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

**'We want to be safe'**

Although Maya is safe now, she fears she may

not have a home to return to now that the fighting has largely stopped. "How could I not fear for my house? There is no other safe place for us to go," she said. She had already lost her house once before when it was destroyed in an air strike years ago, before her family rebuilt it. Mattresses were strewn across the floor in the mosque, where women and children sat in circles trying to keep the biting cold at bay. Most of them had no time to carry basic necessities and rely on scarce hand-outs of bread, canned food and vegetables. A rancid odor emanated from the crowded halls of the mosque where persistent coughs mixed with the wailing of children.

Fahima, 25, was displaced with her husband and four children. "We barely managed to escape," she said. "We left our homes against our will after IS militants barged in and the fighting began." They had spent a night sleeping in the open-air in freezing temperatures before they managed to find refuge in the mosque. Next to her, an exhausted mother of seven said all she wanted was to go back home. "We are dying from the cold here," she told AFP. "We want to be safe, and return to our homes."

### Kurds hunt jihadists

Meanwhile, Kurdish-led forces in northeastern Syria combed the area in and around a large prison compound yesterday, a day after wresting it back from Islamic State group fighters. The brazen IS jailbreak attempt and ensuing clashes around the prison in the city of Hasakeh left more than 200 people dead in the jihadists' most high-profile military operation since the loss of their "caliphate" nearly three years ago.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces said they retaken full control of Ghwayran prison on Wednesday, ending six days of battles that turned



**HASAKEH:** Members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) deploy outside Ghwayran prison in Syria's northeastern city of Hasakeh. — AFP

the largest city in northeastern Syria into a war zone. Yesterday, SDF fighters backed by the US-led coalition battling IS, "combed cell blocks and districts around the jail for hideout jihadists," said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

"Coalition aircraft overnight targeted IS fighters hunkered down in areas around the prison overnight, killing at least seven," according to the monitor, which relies on a network of sources inside Syria. Around 151 IS jihadists, 53 Kurdish fighters and seven civilians have been killed in violence in Hasakeh since the January 20 start of the prison

assault, according to the Observatory.

Ghwayran held an estimated 3,500 IS inmates, including around 700 minors, when the initial IS attack began with explosives-laden vehicles driven by suicide bombers. The Kurdish authorities have insisted no inmates escaped from the compound but the Observatory has said significant numbers got away. "The Kurdish-led forces' recapture of the prison ends this immediate deadly ordeal, but the broader crisis involving these prisoners is far from over," Human Rights Watch warned on Wednesday. — AFP

## Six sue Fukushima nuke plant operator over thyroid cancer

**TOKYO:** Six young people sued the operator of Japan's stricken Fukushima nuclear plant yesterday over claims they developed thyroid cancer due to exposure to radiation after the facility's meltdown. The plaintiffs, now aged between 17 and 27, were living in the Fukushima region when a huge earthquake on March 11, 2011 triggered a tsunami that caused the nuclear disaster.

Yesterday their lawyers marched into the Tokyo District Court, where dozens of supporters were gathered, to file the first ever class-action lawsuit over health issues against plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). The group is seeking a total of 616 million yen (\$5.4 million) in compensation. No causal relationship between radiation exposure from the disaster and thyroid cancer has been recognized by an expert panel set up by the regional government, and whether such a link exists could become a focal point of the case.

A United Nations report published last year concluded that the Fukushima nuclear disaster had not directly harmed the health of local

residents a decade after the catastrophe. A higher rate of thyroid cancer detected among children exposed to the radiation was likely due to more stringent diagnostics, the UN's Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation concluded.

But the plaintiffs' lawyers say none of the cancers suffered by the group were hereditary, arguing it is highly likely the disease was caused by exposure to radiation. "When I was told I had cancer, I was told clearly there was no causal link. I remember how I felt at the time," one female plaintiff in her 20s, wearing a dark suit, said at a press conference after the lawsuit was filed. "Since I developed the disease, I have been forced to prioritize my health," she said, adding that she had quit her job to focus on recovery.

The plaintiffs were aged between six and 16 at the time of the disaster. They were diagnosed with thyroid cancer between 2012 and 2018. Two of them had one side of their thyroid removed, while the other four had their thyroid fully extracted and need to take hormonal drugs for the rest of their lives. "Some plaintiffs have had



**TOKYO:** Supporters and lawyers of the six young people who were living in the Fukushima region when the March 11, 2011 tsunami caused the nuclear disaster, arrive in front of the Tokyo district court in Tokyo yesterday to file a class-action lawsuit against plant operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) over claims they developed thyroid cancer due to exposure to radiation. — AFP

difficulties advancing to higher education and finding jobs, and have even given up on their dreams for their future," the group's lead lawyer Kenichi Ido told AFP this week.

### Screening tests

The meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant was the worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, after which larger numbers of thyroid cancers were detected. The 2011 disaster in northeast Japan left around 18,500 people dead or missing, with most killed by the

tsunami. Tens of thousands of residents around the Fukushima plant were ordered to evacuate their homes, or chose to do so. Several workers deployed to the plant contracted cancer after being exposed to radiation, and have received compensation from the government because the cases were recognized as occupational diseases. Since the disaster, Fukushima prefecture has been conducting screening tests on thyroid glands for roughly 380,000 people who were aged 18 or under at the time of the disaster. — AFP

## Fighting Taliban and mistrust, Pakistan marks polio-free year

**MARDAN:** Bathed in crisp morning light, Sidra Hussain grips a cooler stacked with glistening vials of polio vaccine in northwest Pakistan. Watching over Hussain and her partner, a policeman unslings his rifle and eyes the horizon. In concert they begin their task—going door-to-door on the outskirts of Mardan city, dripping bitter doses of rose-colored medicine into infants' mouths on the eve of a major milestone for the nation's anti-polio drive.

The last infection of the wild poliovirus was recorded on January 27, 2021, according to officials, and Friday marks the first time in Pakistan's history that a year has passed with no new cases. To formally eradicate the disease, a nation must be polio-free for three consecutive years—but even 12 months is a long time in a country where vaccination teams are in the crosshairs of a simmering insurgency.

Since the Taliban takeover of neighboring Afghanistan, the Pakistan version of the movement has become emboldened and its fighters frequently target polio teams. "Life or death is in God's hands," Hussain told AFP this week, amid a patchwork of high-walled compounds in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. "We have to come," she said defiantly. "We can't just turn back because it's difficult."

### Thriving in uncertainty

Nigeria officially eradicated wild polio in 2020, leaving Pakistan and Afghanistan as the only countries where the disease—which causes crippling paralysis—is still endemic. Spread through faeces and saliva, the virus has historically thrived in the blurred borders between the South Asian nations, where state infrastructure is weak and the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have carved out a home.

A separate group sharing common heritage with the Afghan Taliban, the TTP was founded in 2007 and once held sway over large swathes of the restive tribal tracts of Pakistan. In 2014 it was largely ousted by an army offensive, its fighters retreating across the porous border with Afghanistan. But last year overall militant attacks surged by 56 per cent according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, reversing a six-year downward trend.

The largest number of assaults came in August, coinciding with the Taliban takeover of Kabul. Pakistan's newspapers are regularly peppered with stories of police slain as they guard polio teams—and just this week a constable was gunned down in Kohat — 80 kilometers southwest of Mardan. Pakistani media has reported as many as 70 polio workers killed in militant attacks since 2012 — mostly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Still, a TTP spokesman told AFP it "never attacked any polio workers", and that security forces were their target. "They will be targeted wherever they perform their duties," he said Mardan deputy commissioner Habib Ullah Arif admits polio teams are "a very soft target", but says the fight to eradicate the disease is entwined with the security threat. "There is only one concept: we are going to defeat polio, we are going to defeat militancy," he pledged.

Pakistan anti-polio drives have been running since 1994, with up to 260,000 vaccinators staging regular waves of regional inoculation campaigns. But on the fringes of the country, the teams often face skepticism. "In certain areas of Pakistan, it was considered as a Western conspiracy," explained Shahzad Baig—head of the national polio eradication program. The theories ranged wildly: polio teams are spies, the vaccines cause infertility, or contain pig fat forbidden by Islam. — AFP

## Texas man tries to smuggle migrants in flag-draped coffin

**TEXAS:** A Texas man admitted to trying to smuggle two people into the United States in a coffin draped with an American flag — like those that carry soldiers killed in combat — the Justice Department said Wednesday. The suspect, 33-year-old Zachary Blood, was caught when in October he drove a van "modified to transport caskets" to a checkpoint near the US-Mexico border in Texas, federal prosecutor Jennifer Lowery's office said in a statement. When asked by agents what he was transporting, Blood responded "dead guy, Navy guy," according to the statement.

"However, the coffin was in poor condition and the American flag was taped to the top with packing tape," the Justice Department said. Upon further inspection, the agents discovered two living people, who the Department said were Mexican nationals "unlawfully present within the United States," in the coffin. The two men admitted to having crossed the Rio Grande river into the United States and paying a man to take them to the Texas city of San Antonio.

Blood faces up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000. The United States recorded nearly two million migrant apprehensions for illegal entry into the country along its southern border with Mexico in 2021, according to official statistics. Migrant arrivals to the United States declined markedly during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic but began to pick up later in 2020, before surging since President Joe Biden took office in January last year. — AFP

## Why is North Korea firing many missiles?

**SEOUL:** From hypersonic to cruise missiles, North Korea started 2022 with its most intensive spate of weapons testing in years, but analysts said the barrage is more domestic political ploy than a diplomatic gambit. After a decade in power, leader Kim Jong Un has little to celebrate, with a Covid-battered economy causing food shortages at home, diplomacy with the United States stalled and biting sanctions taking their toll.

That may explain why North Korea has carried out five weapons tests in the last three weeks, analysts said — and a dramatic demonstration of the nuclear-armed country's military prowess offers a quick win ahead of important domestic anniversaries. "Missiles and weapon developments are probably the only things Kim Jong Un can confidently display as achievements," said defector-turned-researcher Ahn Chan-il. "He's not got much to offer the North Korean people right now."

This is particularly important as the country prepares to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the birth of Kim's father, late leader Kim Jong Il, in February, as well as the 110th birthday of the country's founding leader Kim Il Sung in April. Under North Korea's dynastic system, marking his forefather's birthdays with appropriate "grandeur" is politically crucial for Kim. Cheong Seong-chang of the Center for North Korea Studies at the Sejong Institute told AFP.

"For such important anniversaries, North Korea likes to hold a military parade to show off their new weapons," he said. The country often test fires new weaponry before wheeling it out publicly, which both demonstrates their capability and adds to the general festivities, he added. Pyongyang has not



**SEOUL:** People watch a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul yesterday after North Korea fired an 'unidentified projectile' in the country's sixth apparent weapons test this year according to the South's military. — AFP

tested intercontinental ballistic missiles or nukes since 2017, putting launches on hold as Kim embarked on a blitz of high-level diplomacy through three meetings with then-US president Donald Trump and other top leaders.

But last week, the regime said it would examine restarting all temporarily-suspended activities, in response to what it called the "provocation" of new US sanctions imposed after this year's tests. The last time North Korea tested this many weapons in a month was in 2019, after high-profile negotiations collapsed between Kim and Trump. With reports of soaring food prices and worsening hunger, an economically-reeling Pyongyang earlier this month restarted cross-border trade with neighboring China. And Pyongyang's recent decision to accept Chinese aid — a first since the beginning of the pandemic — may have motivated the recent military show of force "to avoid looking weak," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Seoul's Ewha University. — AFP