

International

UK defends treatment of asylum seekers, migrants before UN

Britain striving to better protect people in 'genuine need of asylum'

GENEVA: Britain Thursday pushed back against criticism at the United Nations of its treatment of migrants and asylum seekers, insisting it was striving to better protect people in "genuine need of asylum".

During a review of Britain's human rights record at the United Nations in Geneva, a number of countries raised concerns about recent changes to the country's migration system, including its agreement to transfer asylum seekers to Rwanda.

"The United Kingdom has a long, proud tradition of providing a home for people fleeing persecution and oppression," junior British justice minister Mike Freer told the assembly. "However, our immigration and asylum systems and processes have been subject to significant strain over the last decade and continue to face enormous challenges," he said.

Freer insisted that recent "landmark reforms" were aimed to "make the system fairer and more effective, so that we can better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum." The British government is grappling with how to deal with a record number of migrants crossing the Channel from its European neighbours in small boats.

Since the beginning of the year, an unprecedented 38,000 people have crossed the Channel into Britain. Interior Minister Suella Braverman last week caused fury by describing the situation as an "invasion".

In a bid to deal with the large numbers arriving, former prime minister Boris Johnson's government introduced a scheme to deport asylum seekers thousands of miles away to Rwanda, provoking a storm of outrage.

During Thursday's so-called Universal Periodic Review (UPR) — which all 193 UN countries must undergo every four years—several countries decried the plan. In a question submitted in advance, the United States pointed out that the UN refugee agency had "expressed concerns about the United Kingdom's plan to send asylum seekers to third countries".

And New Zealand's ambassador Lucy Duncan called on London to "ensure that its treatment of asylum seekers is consistent with its commitments under international human rights law and international refugee law," highlighting in particular "the UK's offshore processing arrangement with Rwanda".

Freer insisted that Britain would "only ever work with countries that we know are safe and will treat asylum seekers in accordance with relevant international human rights law," stressing that Rwanda was "a fundamentally safe and secure country".

'Selective approach'

Britain's diplomatic adversaries also jumped on the issue, with Russian representative Nikita Zhukov slamming "London's highly selective approach to the reception of migrants from other mainly African countries".

China's representative Qi Lin meanwhile urged Britain to "put an end to the violation of rights migrants and refugees". During the review, countries also raised concerns about Britain's ongoing push to enact a new bill of rights, replacing a 1998 human rights act, potentially allowing Britain to ignore rulings from European Court of Human



LONDON: Britain's Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (L), Britain's Home Secretary Suella Braverman (C) and Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer Jeremy Hunt laughing during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) in the House of Commons in London. — AFP

Rights, including stalling the Rwanda deal.

Canada's representative Patricia Lyn McCullagh called on London to "ensure that the current level of human rights protections provided by the Human Rights Act of 1998, including the rights of asylum seekers, are maintained

under any legislative reform."

Freer defended the strategy, saying the new bill "will protect fundamental rights whilst safeguarding the broader public interest and respecting the will of our elected representatives in parliament." — AFP

Lebanese MPs fail again to elect new president

BEIRUT: Lebanon's divided parliament failed Thursday to elect a new president for the fifth time, with the post vacant since the mandate of Michel Aoun expired last month. Michel Moawad, whose father Rene Moawad served as president, was the frontrunner in the 128-seat parliament with 44 votes on Thursday, still far short of the two-thirds majority—or 86 ballots—needed to win.

Parliament is split between supporters of the powerful Shiite Hezbollah movement and its opponents, neither having a clear majority. Hezbollah rejects the candidacy of Moawad, who is seen as close to the United States, and calls for a "compromise candidate" to be found.

In the meantime, most lawmakers from its bloc spoil their ballots. "Neither camp can impose a candidate. A compromise must be found and an understanding reached on a candidate acceptable to everyone," deputy speaker Elias Bou Saab told AFP in an interview on Tuesday.

Aoun's own election in 2016 followed a more than two-year vacancy at the presidential palace as lawmakers made 45 failed attempts to reach consensus on a candidate. But this year's vacancy comes as Lebanon is gripped by an unprecedented financial crisis that has pushed much of the population into poverty since 2019.

During a vacancy, the powers of the president fall to the cabinet. But since May Lebanon has had only a caretaker government that lacks the authority to push through the sweeping reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund as a condition for releasing billions of dollars in emergency loans. — AFP

Egypt prison puts hunger-striker 'under medical intervention'

CAIRO: The family of Egypt's jailed dissident Alaa Abdel Fattah said Thursday prison authorities had told them he is "under medical intervention", as fear mounts that means force-feeding. The family have repeatedly demanded information on the health of the British-Egyptian activist in recent days after he escalated his months-long hunger strike to include water too.

His mother Laila Soueif, at the Wadi al-Natroun prison north of Cairo, was informed that "medical intervention was taken" with Abdel Fattah "with the knowledge of judicial entities", his sister Mona Seif wrote on Twitter.

"They should allow our mother to see him immediately and see for herself how he is," Seif added. Abdel Fattah, a veteran pro-democracy and rights campaigner, is serving a five-year prison sentence for "spreading false news" by sharing a Facebook post about police brutality.

International concern has mounted since Abdel Fattah, 40, also began declining liquids since Sunday, the start of the UN climate summit COP27 hosted by Egypt. Since then, his mother had visited the Wadi al-Natroun prison about 100 kilometres

(60 miles) from Cairo, pleading for news.

On Thursday, an officer told her that her son was "under medical intervention", but gave no other details. Hossam Bahgat, founder of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), the country's largest rights group, said the prison officer statement "means he is being force-fed".

A key figure of the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak, Abdel Fattah gained British citizenship this year. "Surely our mother should see him, or someone from @UKinEgypt (British embassy in Cairo) so we understand his real health status!!" Seif added on Twitter.

The dissident's aunt, novelist Ahdaf Soueif, earlier this week said the family was concerned about "rumours of force-feeding and of sleep-inducing drugs". She demanded that the British-Egyptian activist be moved to the Qasr al-Aini University Hospital, Cairo's largest state medical facility, and given access to lawyers and British embassy officials. She said she feared "the prison hospital is probably not equipped" to care for a patient who has been living for months "on 100 calories a day". British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz have all voiced concern and called for his release. United Nations rights chief Volker Turk has warned Abdel Fattah's "life is in great danger".

Activists at COP27 summit in Egypt's Red Sea



BEIRUT: Protesters gather near the British embassy in the Lebanese capital Beirut to demand the release of jailed British-Egyptian political dissident Alaa Abdel Fattah. — AFP

resort of Sharm el-Sheikh have posted widely on Twitter under the hashtag #FreeAlaa, and several speakers have ended with the words "you have not yet been defeated"—the title of the jailed activist's book. On Thursday, hundreds of COP27 participants, dressed in white like Egyptian prisoners, chanted "Free him!" and "no climate justice without human rights!". — AFP

World Bank expects Kuwait's growth...

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They expected, according to the report, that GCC countries would show a strong performance this year amid relatively low inflation rates compared to other high-income countries. They stated that the challenge of diversifying the economy remains for Gulf countries in light of limited progress in the non-oil economy. They stressed the importance of con-

tinuing structural reforms to help nurture the private sector to become competitive at a time when there is an excellent opportunity to further diversify the economy using the green growth strategy.

This will occur by using additional gains from high oil prices to start new high-growth green industries that will help grow by additional ranges between 3-6 percent. They pointed out that Gulf countries will record a strong double surplus in 2022, and in the medium term, driven by the rise in oil and gas prices, expecting that the public finance balance of GCC countries will record a surplus of 5.3 percent in GDP in 2022 - the first recorded since 2014. The World Bank GCC economic report is published twice a year. — KUNA

Govt to enhance health apparatus...

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The minister listened to a detailed briefing on the nature of the services provided by the Authority to the armed forces' members and their families. He conveyed the greetings of His Highness the Amir, Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, His Highness the Crown Prince Sheikh Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah and His Highness the Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmad Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, to the members of the Medical Services Authority for their distinguished work and efforts.

He then toured some of the facilities and depart-



KUWAIT: Minister of Defense Sheikh Abdullah Ali Al-Sabah inspects the facilities at the Medical Services Authority. — KUNA

ments of Jaber Al-Ahmad Armed Forces Hospital of the Medical Services Authority, during which he was briefed on the nature of workflow there and the tasks performed by the medical and administrative staff and the procedures followed. — KUNA

attack appears to be pressuring Medibank by hunting for the most potentially damaging personal information within the records.

The first records posted to the dark web forum were separated into "naughty" and "nice" lists. Some on the "naughty" list had numeric codes that appeared to link them to drug addiction, alcohol abuse and HIV infection. For example, one record carried an entry that read: "p_diag: F122". F122 corresponds with "cannabis dependence" under the International Classification of Diseases, published by the World Health Organization. Names, addresses, passport numbers and birth dates were also included in the data. Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil has described the hackers as "scummy criminals". — AFP

Hackers demand \$10m for stolen...

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The Medibank hack is likely to include data on some of the country's most influential and wealthy individuals. Medibank chief executive David Koczkar condemned the "disgraceful" extortion tactics. "The weaponisation of people's private information in an effort to extort payment is malicious and it is an attack on the most vulnerable members of our community." The group behind the



DOHA: A man walks past a poster of the Qatar 2022 mascot La'eeb in Doha ahead of the Qatar 2022 FIFA World Cup football tournament. — AFP

Embassy calls on Kuwaitis to follow...

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(+97433341200), (+97451078337), (+97451080921), and Kuwait airways hotline (+97455513710).

Airport expansion

Meanwhile, Qatar on Thursday opened a huge expansion of its main international airport as the national carrier's chief hit back at "rumors" that it could not cope with World Cup passengers. After the multi-billion dollar overhaul, Hamad International Airport will take its capacity from 40 million passengers a year to 58 million, Qatar Airways chief executive Akbar Al Baker told a news conference. The expansion adds 39 airport gates to the existing 140 at the airport, which is a major hub for transit passengers.

The project was completed just 10 days from the start of the World Cup, which is expected to draw more than one million visitors to the Gulf state, the smallest ever host of the mega event. Qatar has reopened Doha International Airport to ease pressure. Qatar Airways has also eliminated 18 destinations from its schedule to increase flights from key World Cup markets and to

allow other airlines to run football charters.

Baker dismissed suggestions that Qatar's aviation authorities could not cope. "There have always been rumors," he said before insisting that "systems and innovations" introduced for the World Cup had been tested. "We have already made sure that all the capacity involved with extra flights and charter flights meet the maximum capacity per hour of each of the two airports," he said. "So we are very well positioned in order to cater for this very large influx of passengers."

Baker said completion of the expansion would annoy rival airports and those who doubted that Qatar could stage the World Cup. "We always rub salt into the wounds of our competitors and of course our adversaries," who Baker named as those behind "a negative media campaign against my beloved country Qatar because they cannot accept that a small country like the state of Qatar has won the world's largest sporting event." Qatar has faced intense scrutiny since it was awarded the World Cup in 2012.

At the centrepiece of the new terminal expansion is an indoor tropical garden featuring more than 300 different trees and 25,000 plants from around the world. A new phase of the expansion will start in January, aiming to take the capacity at Hamad Airport - which only opened in 2014 - to more than 70 million passengers a year. "What we have done in this very short period of time already has raised the bar that I doubt that any airport ever will be able to match," the airline chief declared. — Agencies