

## International

# 'Drink it anyway': Syria water woes peak in cholera outbreak

## Al-Kasrah hospital uses contaminated water from Euphrates River

**AL-KASRAH, Syria:** In a Syria hospital crowded with women and wailing children, Ahmad Al-Mohammad writhed in pain beside his wife after they contracted cholera, which is resurging for the first time in years. During his six days in treatment, Mohammad has watched patients stream into the Al-Kasrah hospital in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor, where the highly-polluted Euphrates River is a major source of contaminated water used for both drinking and irrigation.

"We have suffered from diarrhea, vomiting and pain... because we drink directly from the Euphrates River," the 45-year-old told AFP from the hospital, barely able to speak. "The waters of the Euphrates are polluted but we have no other choice." Cholera is generally contracted from contaminated food or water and spreads in residential areas that lack proper sewerage networks or mains drinking water.

The disease is making its first major comeback since 2009 in Syria, where nearly two-thirds of water treatment plants, half of pumping stations and one-third of water towers have been damaged by more than a decade of war, according to the United Nations.

The Syrian government has announced 23 deaths and more than 250 cholera cases across six of the country's 14 provinces since the start of the outbreak in September, with most cases concentrated in the northern province of Aleppo. The semi-autonomous Kurdish administration that runs north-eastern Syria and parts of Deir Ezzor has recorded 16 deaths and 78 cases in areas under its control, including 43 cases in western Deir Ezzor, health official Juan Mustafa told reporters Wednesday.

He said water testing of the Euphrates proved the presence of bacteria responsible for cholera - a spread he said was caused by reduced water flow.

## Iran demonstrations hit home for diaspora women

**PARIS:** As Iranian women bare their heads and burn Islamic veils in demonstrations that have met nationwide repression, hopes and emotions are also running high among those living abroad.

Several people have died in protests that broke out after Iranian authorities announced the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini on September 16. Amini, who was from the northeastern province of Kurdistan, was arrested by the Islamic republic's feared morality police, enforcers of the strict dress code for women.

Activists say she died after a fatal blow to the head, an account denied by authorities, who have promised an investigation. "(She) went to Tehran to visit her family. I told my mum that could easily have been me, or my sister, or my cousins," said Sara, a 48-year-old teacher living in France, who like several others interviewed asked for her last name not to be published. "That girl wasn't even an activist, just a normal girl like me... That's what's different about this time. It's what's affected and shocked people," she added.

Sara nervously recalls how she herself was arrested by the morality police on a trip to Iran when she was in her 30s. She was held in the same Iran detention centre where Amini was kept and was "very afraid".

## 313 remain in poll race; MoI busts...

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The law, passed by the 2013 Assembly and amended by the 2016 parliament, bars for life from running for public office all those convicted of insulting the Almighty, prophets and HH the Amir. The law also applies to older offenses. At the same time, the court of cassation was due to con-

## Erdogan arises a key mediator...

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"It has evaluated its interests, found a balance between the warring parties and used firmness when necessary while taking advantage of the circumstance."

Erdogan can now take credit for playing a direct role in orchestrating the only two tangible agreements between Moscow and Kyiv in the seven-month war. A UN-backed deal signed in Istanbul in July resumed Ukrainian grain deliveries across the Black Sea for the first time since Russia's Feb 24 invasion. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the shipments "a beacon of hope" for famine-ravaged parts of the world.

The prisoner swap features an arrangement to keep five Ukrainian commanders - including those defending the Azovstal steel plant from a Russian onslaught against Mariupol - stowed away in a secret location in Istanbul. Erdogan is also offering to help mediate in the ominous military standoff around Ukraine's Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant. And he still hopes to bring Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky together for truce talks that neither side particularly

### River pollution

Said to have once flowed through the biblical Garden of Eden, the Euphrates runs for almost 2,800 kilometers (1,700 miles) across Turkey, Syria and Iraq. In times of rain, it has offered abundant supplies, gushing into northern Syria through the Turkish border and flowing diagonally across the war-torn country towards Iraq.

But drought and rising temperatures linked to climate change have severely diminished water levels, with the Euphrates experiencing historic lows. Syria's Kurds have also accused Turkey of holding back more water than necessary in its dams. The reduced water flow has compounded the problem of river pollution, largely from sewage, but also from oil in hydrocarbon-rich regions, including Deir Ezzor.

Despite the contamination, over five million of Syria's about 18 million people rely on the Euphrates for their drinking water, according to the UN.

The cost of this reliance was visible in Al-Kasrah hospital, where a man softly cradled his infant, an intravenous tube piercing the child's tiny hand. Hospital director Tarek Alaeddine said the facility admits dozens of suspected cholera cases every day and has tallied hundreds of cases over the past three weeks. "The patients were all drinking water delivered by trucks that extract it directly from the Euphrates River, without filtering or sterilization," Alaeddine said.

"We appeal to all international organizations working on health and the environment to act quickly and urgently," he said.

### 'We must live'

The Britain-based war monitor Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said early this month that the disease had spread in western parts of Deir Ezzor after local authorities stopped distributing chlorine to



**NAJAF, Iraq:** A woman wears a necklace bearing pictures of slain Iranian and Iraqi commanders, respectively Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, as pilgrims march towards Iraq's holy city of Karbala. —AFP

### 'Women leading the charge'

Iranians, women among them, have staged highly visible demonstrations against the regime before, most memorably in 2009. But "what's unprecedented about these protests is that women are leading the charge", said Azadeh Kian, a sociology professor specializing in Iran at Paris Cite University.

"The economic crisis, unemployment and political immobility" have been the main focus of demonstrations over the past five years, Kian said. "But this time, we're hearing protests not just against the general situation in the country, but also for women's rights. That's an important change." — AFP

vene on Thursday evening to discuss petitions filed by the government against the 10 candidates, demanding that they should be barred from running in the election. The court's verdicts are final.

Meanwhile, the interior ministry announced on Thursday that it had stormed a house and arrested an unspecified number of people who were preparing to buy votes. This is the second alleged vote-buying case to be busted by the interior ministry. The first case, announced a few days ago, had been referred to the public prosecution for investigation. The ministry statement made no details about the case and did not provide the name of the candidate involved in the vote buying operation.

wants - but which Turkish officials insist are both essential and realistic. "Of all states, Turkey is best placed to broker a deal between the two sides," said London-based political risk consultant Anthony Skinner.

Erdogan has followed a deceptively simple approach to the war: he has supplied Ukraine with weapons while using Moscow's diplomatic isolation to his advantage by dramatically cranking up trade with Russia. Turkish combat drones have gained legendary status in Ukraine because they helped destroy the main Russian armored columns that tried to seize Kyiv in the first weeks of the war. And Russian trade and tourists have helped to keep Turkey's teetering economy from completely collapsing in the run-up to presidential and parliament polls in June.

"Putin and Erdogan have dealt with each other for a long time and have, on balance, been able to manage their differences on a range of issues," Skinner said. "Ukraine is no different. Kyiv has been frustrated by the Turkish government's failure to turn the screws on Moscow, but Ukraine also benefits immensely from Turkey's ongoing support in the conflict."

Turkey analyst Soner Cagaptay describes Erdogan's approach as "pro-Ukrainian neutrality". "Erdogan has tried to balance between being pro-Ukraine and avoiding an overtly anti-Russia stance," Cagaptay wrote in a report for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. But there are signs that Erdogan's policy has its limits. — AFP



**AL-KASRAH, Syria:** A child suffering from cholera receives treatment at the Al-Kasrah hospital in Syria's eastern province of Deir Ezzor, on September 17, 2022, affected by the usage of contaminated water from the Euphrates River, a major source for both drinking and irrigation. —AFP

water pumping stations. The Kurdish administration, which controls parts of Deir Ezzor including Al-Kasrah, said they have resumed distribution following the outbreak.

They also announced assistance to Al-Kasrah and other medical facilities in the region to help contain the number of cases. But the main source of the problem remains largely unresolved.

## Iran protests pose new test for clerical leadership

**TEHRAN:** Women setting their headscarves ablaze and chanting anti-regime slogans. Pictures of the leadership defaced and burned. Vehicles belonging to the security forces set on fire.

The images of the protests in Iran are indicative of the taboo-breaking nature of a movement that erupted after the death of Mahsa Amini, 22, following her arrest by the notorious morality police.

A country where street dissent is tightly controlled, Iran has seen bursts of protest in recent years, notably the 2009 "Green Movement" that followed disputed elections, protests in November 2019 over fuel price rises, and rallies this year over the cost of living. But analysts say that these protests present a new challenge to the Islamic system under supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, 83, as they are now taking place nationwide, have support across social classes and ethnic groups and were instigated by women.

Amini, also known by her Kurdish first name of Jhina, was visiting Tehran with her family last week when she was arrested for purportedly violating Iran's strict dress code rules for women, in place since shortly after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. She fell into a coma hours after her arrest and died in hospital on September 16.

## Deaths mount in Iran protests...

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The Oslo-based non-government group Iran Human Rights said at least 31 civilians had been killed in Iran's crackdown during six nights of violence against protesters in over 30 towns and cities.

Iranians have rallied "to achieve their fundamental rights and human dignity... and the government is responding to their peaceful protest with bullets," charged the group's director Mahmood Amiry-Moghaddam. Security forces have fired at crowds with birdshot and metal pellets, and also deployed tear gas and water cannon, said Amnesty International and other human rights groups.

Demonstrators have hurled stones at them, set fire to police cars and chanted anti-government slogans, the official IRNA news agency said. On Thursday, Iranian media said three militiamen "mobilized to deal with rioters" had been stabbed or shot dead, in northwestern Tabriz, central Qazvin and northeastern Mashhad. Unprecedented images have shown protesters defacing or burning images of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and late Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani.

There were fears violence could escalate further after Iran restricted Internet access and blocked messaging apps including WhatsApp and Instagram, as they have done during past crackdowns. The two apps were the most widely used in Iran after the blocking of other platforms in recent years, including Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, YouTube and TikTok. "People in Iran are being cut off from online apps and services," Instagram chief Adam Mosseri tweeted, adding that "we hope their right to be online will be reinstated quickly".

Activists have said that Amini, whose Kurdish first name is Jhina, suffered a fatal blow to the head

Farmer Ahmad Suleiman al-Rashid, 55, said he irrigated his fields of cotton, okra, spinach and sesame using water from the Euphrates, which caused contamination of crops.

"There are no water filtering stations... we drink unsterilized and unchlorinated water and rely on God for protection," he said "What else can we do? The authorities are to blame." —AFP

Activists contend she was ill-treated in detention and could have suffered a blow to the head. While this is not confirmed by the authorities, the anger fuelled the protests that started from her funeral last Saturday. "These are the biggest protests since November 2019," said Ali Fathollah-Nejad, Iran expert at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut.

"While the last two nationwide uprisings were led by the lower classes and were triggered by socio-economic degradation, this time the trigger was socio-cultural and political, comparable to the 2009 Green Movement," he told AFP.

The 2009 movement had been driven by demands by the middle class for fair elections and the 2019 protests by the anger of the lower classes, he said. "Current conditions in Iran suggest that there may be a tendency toward unifying both groups. The outrage over Amini's death is shared by both the middle and lower classes," said Fathollah-Nejad. The protests also come at a particularly sensitive time for the leadership, when the Iranian economy remains mired in a crisis largely caused by international sanctions over its nuclear program.

Despite repeated warnings from Europe that time is running out, there is also no indication that the sides are on the verge of agreeing a deal to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear accord (JCPOA) that would see sanctions eased. The protests have featured chants of "death to the dictator" as well as other anti-regime slogans and the emergence of a new rallying cry, "Zan, zendegi, azadi" ("Woman, life, freedom"). — AFP

after her arrest in Tehran - a claim denied by officials, who have announced an investigation. Iranian women on the streets of Tehran told AFP they were now more careful about their dress to avoid run-ins with the morality police. "I'm frightened," said Nazanin, a 23-year-old nurse who asked to be identified by her first name only for safety reasons, adding she believed the morality police "shouldn't confront people at all".

US President Joe Biden in an address to the UN General Assembly on Wednesday said that "we stand with the brave citizens and the brave women of Iran who right now are demonstrating to secure their basic rights". Iran's ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi, also speaking at the UN, complained of a "double standard" and pointed to Zionist actions in the Palestinian territories and the deaths of indigenous women in Canada. The protests are among the most serious in Iran since Nov 2019 unrest sparked by a sharp rise in petrol prices. The crackdown then killed hundreds, according to Amnesty. The unrest comes at a particularly sensitive time for the leadership, as the Iranian economy remains mired in a crisis largely caused by sanctions over its nuclear program.

Iran's powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps labelled the protests a "conspiracy of the enemy" and "a vain attempt doomed to failure", while praising the "efforts and sacrifices of the police". It also denounced what it called "the psychological operation and the excessive media war" during the protests which it said had been started "under the pretext of the death of one of the compatriots".

A rally in support of the hijab and a conservative dress code for women was announced for Friday by Iran's Islamic Development Coordination Council, IRNA reported. Demonstrations would be held across Iran, the news agency said, "to condemn the indecent actions" of those who had insulted Islam and the nation, destroyed public property, undermined public security and "desecrated the women's hijab". — AFP