

## International

# France repatriates more women, children from Syrian jihadist camp

## Rights groups denounced harrowing conditions at Al-Hol camp

PARIS: France Tuesday repatriated 15 women and 32 children held in a prison camp for suspected jihadists in Syria, the foreign ministry said, in the third major return of French citizens from the country.

Rights groups have been pressing for years for France to take back the wives and children of alleged Islamic State group fighters held in the camps, since the jihadist movement was ousted from its self-declared "caliphate" in 2019. But the government refused a blanket repatriation, saying the return of potentially radicalized IS family members would pose security risks in France, which has seen a wave of jihadist attacks since 2015.

Instead, it said individual cases would be examined, leading to the first group repatriation of 16 mothers and 35 children from Syria in July 2022, and a further 55 in October. The women and children returned to France on Tuesday were at the Roj camp in northeast Syria under Kurdish administration, near the Turkish and Iraqi borders.

They were placed with social services and the mothers will be brought before judicial authorities, the foreign ministry said, thanking "the local administration in northeastern Syria for its cooperation, which made this operation possible".

Lawyer Marie Dose, who represents relatives of those held in several camps in Syria, has said 150 French women and children were living in these camps before Tuesday's transfer. Contacted by AFP, the French foreign ministry declined to say how many more women or children might be returned.

### 'Must be repatriated'

Tuesday's operation came after the United Nations Committee Against Torture last week said that in

refusing to repatriate women and minors in Syria, France was violating the UN Convention against torture and cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment.

In a version of a ruling dated November 16, 2022, shared by Dose, the committee said that "not taking all reasonable measures in its power to repatriate the plaintiffs' relatives would constitute a violation by a member state of articles two and 16 of the convention". French families have been held in the Roj and Al-Hol camps in Kurdish-held territory. Rights groups have denounced harrowing sanitary conditions, malnutrition and overcrowding at the Al-Hol camp in particular.

Dose said the latest arrivals showed that "France is, and always has been, able to repatriate children and their mothers". "There are still some orphans and several mothers who are asking to be repatriated with their children, including a woman with a disability," she said, without providing a number.

Martin Pradel, another lawyer representing the relatives of French children in the camps, said "too many children" had still not been returned, "despite their country being condemned" for abandoning them. "It's snowing in Syria. Some children are sleeping in tents," he said. "They must urgently all be repatriated."

### 'Share this burden'

In the past decade, thousands of extremists in Europe travelled to Syria to become IS fighters, often taking their families to live in the "caliphate" the group set up in territory seized in Iraq and Syria. Since the insurgents were defeated by US-backed Kurdish-led forces in 2019, the return of family members of suspected fighters who were captured or



AL-HOL CAMP: In this file photo taken on August 26, 2022 a picture shows the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp, which holds relatives of suspected Islamic State (IS) group fighters in the northeastern Hasakeh governorate, during a security operation by the Kurdish Asayish security forces and the special forces of the Syrian Democratic Forces. — AFP

killed has been a thorny issue for Western nations.

Several European countries, such as Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, have recovered many of their citizens from the Syria camps. In September last year, the head of the US armed forces' Central Command urged nations to repatriate citizens from Al-Hol, which holds around 55,000 people — mostly women and children.

But France has been much more reticent, despite a condemnation by the European Court of Human Rights in September over its refusal to repatriate two women detained in Syria, citing the safety and healthcare threats at the Kurdish-run camps that put their lives in danger. Many of the women returned to France have been charged with terrorism crimes and imprisoned. — AFP

## UN Palestinian refugee agency seeks \$1.6 billion

GENEVA: The UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, appealed Tuesday for \$1.6 billion for its work in 2023, as it struggles to overcome chronic budget shortfalls. UNRWA — which provides services to nearly six million Palestinians registered in the Palestinian territories, including Zionist-annexed east Jerusalem, as well as in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria — warned that "compounding challenges" had placed it under "immense strain".

The agency, which counts nearly 30,000 staff — most of them Palestinian refugees — runs more than 700 schools that offer education to half a million children, and provides health, sanitation and social services, including food and cash assistance. Out of the \$1.6 billion requested, UNRWA said \$848 million was needed for such core services. It said another \$781.6 million was needed for emergency operations.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said the agency played "an indispensable role" for millions of Palestinian refugees. "We work to maintain the delivery of basic serv-



RAFAH: Palestinians carry bags of flour received as aid to poor families, at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) distribution center, in the Rafah refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip, on January 22, 2023. — AFP

ices in an incredibly difficult financial and political context," he said in a statement.

The agency warned that most Palestinian refugees now live below the poverty line and a growing number are dependent on UNRWA for assistance, sometimes for their "sheer survival". Lazzarini said he had just returned from a trip to Syria where he had "witnessed firsthand indescribable suffering and despair".

That situation, he said, was "sadly mirrored in other places like Lebanon and

Gaza where Palestine refugees are hitting rock bottom. Many told me that all they asked for was a life of dignity; that's not much to ask for."

UNRWA has long faced chronic budget shortfalls, which worsened dramatically in 2018 when former US president Donald Trump cut support to the agency. His administration branded UNRWA "irredeemably flawed," siding with Zionist criticisms of the agency founded in 1949, a year after Zionist entity's creation. — AFP

## Climate change increases human trafficking risks

VIENNA: Evidence is emerging that climate-related disasters are becoming a cause of human trafficking as criminal gangs exploit a growing number of uprooted people, the UN said Tuesday. The continuing war in Ukraine is also another risk factor for increased human trafficking, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) said in a report.

"Climate change is increasing vulnerability to trafficking," the UNODC report said. "While a systematic global analysis of the impact of climate change in trafficking in persons is missing, community level studies in different parts of the world point at weather induced disasters as root causes for trafficking in persons," it said.

The report is based on data from 141 countries collected from 2017 to 2020, and the analysis of 800 court cases. The impact of climate change "disproportionally" affected poor farming, fishing and other communi-

ties mainly relying on the extraction of natural resources for their livelihoods, the report said.

Once "deprived of their means of subsistence and forced to flee their community," people were becoming easy prey for traffickers, Fabrizio Sarrica, the report's main author told a press briefing. In 2021 alone, climate-related disasters internally displaced more than 23.7 million people, while many others fled their countries altogether.

As entire regions of the world are at risk of becoming "increasingly uninhabitable," millions will face "high risk of exploitation along migration routes," the UN report said. The UN drugs agency noted that an increase in cases of human trafficking had been observed in Bangladesh and the Philippines after devastating cyclones and typhoons displaced millions. Droughts and floods in Ghana, and the Caribbean region — subject to hurricanes and rising sea levels — were also forcing many to migrate.

While most of the victims of trafficking resulting from conflicts originated from Africa and the Middle East, a potentially "dangerous" situation is simultaneously building up in Ukraine as millions flee the war-torn country. — AFP

## Crown Prince handed govt...

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The ministry, they said, has communicated with the finance ministry to secure the funds needed for the employees' severance packages, which will be paid in August.

## Grief grips Asian Americans after...

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The nonpartisan Violence Project says 79 percent of mass shooters from 1966-2020 were under the age of 45. It says a mere 6.4 percent of mass shooters in that time are Asian.

The Monday bloodshed occurred at two farms around Half Moon Bay, a coastal community south of San Francisco. San Mateo County Sheriff Christina Corpus said seven people were killed and one wounded in the shootings, and that 67-year-old Half Moon Bay resident named Chunli Zhao had been taken into custody. Reports said the dead were Chinese farmworkers, and that Zhao had worked at one of the farms.

Corpus said deputies had been dispatched to two nurseries around Half Moon Bay, a rural spot known for surfing contests and a pumpkin festival, around mid-afternoon on Monday. Four people were dead at one of them and one was critically wounded, while three more fatally wounded victims were found at a second location. Corpus said children were present at one of the sites. "It was in the afternoon when kids were out of school and for children to witness it is unspeakable," she said.

Corpus said Zhou then drove to a sheriff's

Kuwait Municipality will also put in place its second phase of expat layoffs before the end of June, with plans to proceed with the third and final phase before the end of this year, sources added. The Public Authority for Housing Welfare is also expected to announce the dismissal of all its expat employees soon. The health ministry informed its expatriate employees regarding the bonus clause to lay them off, sources added, indicating that the decision of the ministry does not include employees who are bedoons or children of Kuwaiti women.

substation in Half Moon Bay, where ABC7 crews captured dramatic footage of him being pulled to the ground by armed officers. "Zhao was taken into custody without incident and a semi-automatic handgun was located in his vehicle," Corpus said.

That tragedy unfolded as detectives in southern California were still probing what drove 72-year-old Huu Can Tran to shoot dead 11 people gathered for Lunar New Year at a suburban dance hall on Saturday night. He then drove to a second nearby dance hall, but was tackled and disarmed by an employee there in a move officials have credited with saving lives.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said Tran, who had been arrested in 1994 for unlawful possession of a firearm, fired 42 rounds in the attack in Monterey Park. "What drove a madman to do this?" he said. Luna confirmed officers had been told Tran may have been known to some of his victims. Information about Tran remained unclear. CNN reported that, according to his marriage license, he had immigrated from China; while the New York Times cited immigration documents saying he was a naturalized US citizen of Vietnamese origin.

The family of one of his victims, 65-year-old My Nhan said the tragedy was "still sinking in". "She spent so many years going to the dance studio in Monterey Park on weekends," a statement said. "It's what she loved to do. But unfairly, Saturday was her last dance." — AFP

## Beirut blast judge takes...

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Relatives of the dead have been holding monthly vigils, seeking justice and accountability over the disaster which they blame on the crisis-torn country's entrenched ruling class, which is widely deemed inept and corrupt. A US State Department spokesperson said Tuesday that "we support and urge Lebanese authorities to complete a swift and transparent investigation into the horrific explosion at the Port of Beirut".

Lebanese state institutions have been reluctant to cooperate with the probe, which began the same month as the explosion. The prosecution service rejected the resumption of the probe, according to a document seen by AFP Tuesday. "We were only informed of Bitar's decision through the media," Oueidat, the top prosecutor, told AFP. "Since he considers that the general prosecution doesn't exist, we will also act like he doesn't exist."

Bitar's probe has been met with strong opposition from government figures and the powerful Shiite Hezbollah movement, which has accused him of political bias. Iran-backed Hezbollah and its ally Amal called for demonstrations to demand his dis-

missal in Oct 2021, when a gun battle broke out at a Beirut rally and seven people were killed.

"Port investigation: Tarek Bitar was gone mad," ran the headline of the pro-Hezbollah daily Al-Akhbar, which also accused him of acting "on the basis of American orders and with European judicial support". Bitar last week met with two French magistrates, who came to Beirut as part of the country's own investigation into the explosion that killed and injured French nationals.

The judge was forced to suspend his probe for more than a year after a barrage of lawsuits, mainly from politicians he had summoned on charges of negligence. In total, Bitar now plans to question 14 suspects next month, including five officials whom he indicted earlier - among them ex-prime minister Hassan Diab and former ministers. According to the unnamed judicial official, Oueidat had in 2019 overseen a security services investigation into cracks in the warehouse where the ammonium nitrate was stored.

In Feb 2021, Bitar's predecessor as lead judge was removed from the case after he had charged several high-level politicians. The interior ministry has also failed to execute arrest warrants issued by Bitar, further undermining his quest for accountability. Rights group Amnesty International charged Monday that "Lebanese authorities have shamelessly and systematically obstructed the pursuit of justice" and called on them to "ensure that the domestic investigation can proceed without political interference". — AFP

vital tourism industry after years of political unrest, as well as after the COVID pandemic.

The government's plans - the crowning jewel of which is the long-delayed inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum at the foot of the pyramids in Giza - aim to draw in 30 million tourists a year by 2028, up from 13 million before the pandemic. The country of 104 million inhabitants is suffering from a severe economic crisis, and Egypt's tourism industry accounts for 10 percent of GDP and some two million jobs. — AFP

## Egypt finds 'complete'...

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Critics say the flurry of excavations has prioritized finds shown to grab media attention over hard academic research. But the discoveries have been a key component of Egypt's attempts to revive its