

Turmoil leaves many vulnerable to abuse

African migrants face torture, blackmail amid Yemeni chaos

ADEN, Yemen, Jan 29, (AP): After reaching Yemen's shores in a packed migrant boat, the young Ethiopian coffee farmer was plunged into a living hell. The smugglers wanted thousands of dollars in ransom from the migrants, and they used him as an example of what would happen if they didn't pay.

Each day for a month, they inflicted new tortures on him, Omar Farrag told The Associated Press. They put him in a tank of water and lit a fire underneath it. They wrapped his limbs with tight barbed wire. At times, they heated the barbed wire.

Finally, his younger brother came from Ethiopia with \$2,000 in ransom money. The smugglers decided they could squeeze more money out of him too, so they tortured his brother and ended up killing him, Farrag said.

Now in the southern Yemeni city of Aden, the 26-year-old is overcome with guilt over his brother's death. "I

got my brother killed; I am a disgrace. But it's impossible to imagine what I went through," Farrag said. "I don't even know where they buried him."

Migrants from the Horn of Africa are flowing into Yemen at ever growing rates despite the nearly 2-year-old civil war that has thrown the country into its own humanitarian crisis of hunger and displacement. The migrants — many, like Farrag, fleeing drought or poverty back home — are hoping to cross Yemen and reach neighboring oil-rich Saudi Arabia.

More than 111,500 migrants landed on Yemen's shores last year, up from around 100,000 the year before, according to the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, a grouping of international agencies that monitors migration in the area.

The chaos caused by the civil war has raised migrants' hopes that they can slip through to Saudi Arabia, with

no central authority keeping watch. However, the turmoil has also left migrants vulnerable to abuse and cruelty at the hands of the armed trafficking rings, many believed connected to and acting with protection from the multiple militias involved in the war.

After taking migrants' money as payment to transport them, the traffickers often demand more, sometimes even phoning their families in Ethiopia so they can hear the torment their loved ones are subjected to. Rape is so widespread that women carry contraception for fear of becoming pregnant.

"Migrants don't know they will have to pay twice: Once when they take the boat to cross the sea and a second time upon arrival," said Laurent De Boeck, head of Yemeni operations of the International Organization for Migration, or IOM. "So when they don't pay, this is when the phase of abuses begins. They face torture, burns

and rape."

The fate of migrants in Yemen remains a black hole. It is not known how many become trapped and abused, but officials from the IOM and other UN agencies believe it is widespread. It is not even known how many eventually make it to Saudi Arabia, as the kingdom does not release figures.

Authorities in southern Yemen have carried out forced deportations of migrants at least seven times, IOM officials said. In December, at least 25 drowned when they were forced onto boats to leave Aden.

The migrants were rounded up, packed onto small boats — as many as 150 to a vessel — and forced out to sea, according to Yemeni security officials in Aden. "They were led like animals with nothing with them but water," said one senior officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

Over 90 percent of the migrants belong to the Oromo community, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, whose members often complain of discrimination at the hands of the Ethiopian government. Most are aged 25 and younger — some as young as 11, said Esam al-Makhzumi an IOM official in Aden. According to IOM figures, around 20 percent of the migrants are unaccompanied minors.

"There was an impression that the numbers are going down but in fact ... the numbers are huge and they continue to grow," he said.

He described trafficking as "an organized criminal ring. ... Nothing is random here." He said torture is rampant, aiming at scaring migrants and forcing them to pay more money. He said some local security and government officials provide cover for the traffickers.

"There is torture, rape, and we have

seen severe cases of abuse where the migrants lose their lives," al-Makhzumi said.

Nearly 30 percent of the migrants who have sought IOM help to return home said they had been approached by one of the warring parties in Yemen — or by militant groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group — trying to recruit them as fighters, de Boeck said. An estimated 9,000 migrants are being held in prisons, whether by the rebels or by opposing factions.

From Ethiopia, migrants take one of two routes, through Djibouti or the Puntland region of Somalia — often walking for days to reach the ports there.

Those leaving from Somalia cross the Gulf of Aden to land in Shabwa province on Yemen's southern coast, an area controlled by factions backing the internationally recognized government, but where factions linked to al-Qaeda also are active.

MPs slam

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people who leave their country and live away from their family to earn a living. We must be careful because by imposing such taxes, we might be opening a window for money smuggling," the daily quoted Al-Hayef as saying.

On the other hand, MP Safa Al-Hashem had earlier called for increasing taxes on expatriate workers.

The Parliament will discuss the growing expatriate population in a special session slated for Thursday. This session is expected to be stormy due to lawmakers' disagreements over the issue, especially since a lawmaker previously referred to expatriates as 'settlers' — a term reserved in Kuwait for Israelis residing in Palestinian territories.

In other news, MP Faisal Al-Kandari has called on Health Minister Dr Jamal Al-Kandari to quickly address the expatriates' health insurance problem after terminating the contract with the previous insurance company, indicating employers are suffering due to the large crowd in insurance centers.

He urged the concerned ministry officials to visit the insurance centers to personally see the magnitude of the problem and find ways to finalize pending transactions which have been piling up before signing a contract with an alternative company.

He pointed out that procedures have been delayed because of the absence of an insurance company in charge of processing transactions. He then stressed the need for the Ministry of Health to take the necessary action like signing a contract with an alternative insurance company.

Meanwhile, the parliamentary Financial and Economic Affairs Committee on Sunday discussed a bill prohibiting charging interest on loans obtained from the Public Authority for Social Security (PASS).

Committee Rapporteur MP Safa Al-Hashem said the authority continues to charge interest on loans although its purpose is to ensure social solidarity and stability for retirees. She argued PASS is not an investment bank, accusing the authority of engaging in ambiguous and questionable "business" with retirees considering a retiree who receives a loan amounting to KD 19,000 is required to pay KD 31,000. She stressed there is no justification for PASS to charge exorbitant interest on loans, especially since there has been a legal advisory forbidding it from charging interest. She added that when they reviewed the authority's regulations, they did not find any stipulation on charging interest. She disclosed the committee has asked PASS officials to present the second technical report showing re-computation of loan payments.

Furthermore, the Legislative and Legal Affairs Committee discussed several bills on Sunday. Committee Chairman MP Mohammed Al-Dallal said the committee approved the following proposals:

■ Disconnection of water or electricity lines in private houses should not be done unless a court verdict in this regard is issued.

■ Amend the Citizenship Law in order to allow Kuwaiti women to pass on their citizenship to their children, just like their male counterparts.

Al-Dallal added the committee approved the request of the Public Prosecution to lift the immunity of MP Ahmed Al-Fadel after hearing the latter's opinion on the request.

However, the committee postponed talks on the request to lift the immunity of MPs Waleed Al-Tabtabaei and Jaman Al-Harbash in relation to the Parliament building storming case.

Al-Dallal also unveiled the committee's plan to hold two meetings to discuss draft laws on the Electoral Commission, handicapped affairs, pre-trial detention and appointment of public officials.

Ban Americans,

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and Iranians from entering US territories. He said Kuwait will execute the instructions soon as they are received and will apply them on travelers from the banned countries who intend to travel to the United States of America through Kuwait's airport, reports Al-Rai daily.

He indicated that no consular instructions have been issued yet from the US State Department to its missions around the world regarding how to deal with entry visa holders and green card holders.

The official said the US Embassy in Kuwait is also waiting for instructions from Washington with regards to the decision, stressing that the embassy will announce the procedures to be

Syrian troops retake 'key' rebel area near Damascus

Air raids kill 10 civilians: monitor

DAMASCUS, Jan 29, (AFP): The Syrian army said on Sunday that it had recaptured a flashpoint area from rebels near Damascus that supplies water to the capital.

Wadi Barada had been the scene of fierce fighting in recent weeks between regime and rebel forces that tested a fragile nationwide truce and left millions in Damascus facing water shortages.

"Our armed forces... have accomplished their mission by restoring security and stability in the region of Wadi Barada", the army said in a statement carried by state television.

The announcement came a day after the army entered the water pumping station in Wadi Barada for the first time in four years.

Under a deal with the authorities, rebels can choose to stay in the area but hand over their weapons, or leave to the northern province of Idlib, last major bastion of the armed opposition.

Hundreds of rebels began to leave Wadi Barada on Sunday for Idlib, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group.

Around 5.5 million people in Damascus and its suburbs have been without water since fighting intensified in the Wadi Barada area in late December.

Government forces have battled to regain control of Wadi Barada and the water installation at Ain al-Fijeh since rebels overran the area before Christmas.

Meanwhile, air strikes killed 10 civilians including seven children in areas near a town held by the Islamic State group in north Syria on Saturday, a monitor said.

The strikes came as regime forces had advanced to within seven kilometers (four miles) of the jihadist group's bastion of Al-Bab, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The Observatory said regime airstrikes killed a child in Tadir on Saturday, while Turkish air raids left nine civilians dead including six children in Al-Uraima and Bezaa.

President Bashar al-Assad's fighters have advanced towards Al-Bab from the southwest, seizing three villages since late Friday, the Observatory said.

Turkish forces, meanwhile, have gathered to the north of the town, the Britain-based monitor said.

Al-Bab has come under heavy assault in recent weeks, with Turkish, Russian and Syrian warplanes carrying out strikes in or around the town.

Turkish forces regularly carry out air strikes in support of a ground operation they launched in Syria last August targeting both IS and Kurdish fighters.

Several this month have been joint operations with Russia.

taken to deal with nationals from the concerned countries among the residents in Kuwait, irrespective of whether they are entry visa holders or green card holders or those wishing to obtain one from the embassy.

In Mosul, where Iraqi forces are at the forefront of the war against jihadists, soldiers are unhappy that security concerns could keep them from visiting relatives in the United States.

"It's not fair, it's not right. I should have the right to visit my family," said Assem Ayad, a 23-year-old soldier deployed in Mosul who has three cousins living in Texas.

"This decision was made because there are terrorist groups in Iraq. But there are also innocent people" including those who are fighting against jihadists, said Ayad, who carried an American-made assault rifle.

Haider Hassan, 45, another soldier in Mosul, said his cousin lives in the United States and that he had wanted to visit.

Referring to US military personnel deployed in Iraq, Hassan asked: "Why would they ban us from coming to America when they are in my country and have bases here?"

The Islamic State group overran large areas north and west of Baghdad in 2014, sweeping aside military and



The Sawan family from Moadamiyeh, outside Damascus talk in front of a gas heater in their home in Amman, Jordan on Jan 28, the day the family learned they won't be headed to the US after American President Donald Trump's executive order to indefinitely halt all Syrian refugee immigrations. (AP)

police units that were ill-prepared to combat the offensive.

But Iraqi forces backed by US-led air support, training and other assistance have since regained much of the territory they lost, and are now three months into a massive operation to retake Mosul, the country's last city in which IS still holds significant ground.

Hamza Kadhim, 34, noted that he and other Iraqi soldiers are part of the battle against jihadists, and also emphasized that the actions of extremists do not reflect Islam as a whole.

"On the day of his inauguration, Trump said he would fight Islamic terrorists. As Iraqi soldiers here to defend our country and fight terrorists, we tell him: Islam is not terrorism. Islam is a religion of love and brotherhood."

"We don't send terrorists to foreign countries ... but we have had people coming to Iraq from foreign countries to kill, rape and rob. And we will keep fighting them until the last drop of our blood," he said, referring to IS militants.

The travel restrictions follow repeated statements by Trump that the US should have "kept the oil" in Iraq, remarks that have drawn criticism from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Iraq plans to lobby against the new restrictions on travel to the United States by Iraqis, arguing the two countries need to preserve their alliance against Islamic State (IS), two members of the Iraqi parliament close to the government said on Sunday.

Dependent on US military aid against IS, the Iraqi government has so far declined comment on an executive order signed by Trump on Friday that suspends the entry of travelers from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen for at least 90 days.

The order stirred angry reactions in Iraq, where more than 5,000 US troops are deployed to help Iraqi and regional Kurdish forces in the war against IS insurgents.

Some members of parliament said Iraq should retaliate with similar measures against the United States.

"Iraq is in the front line of the war on terrorism (...) and it is unfair that the Iraqis are treated in this way," parliament's foreign affairs committee said in a statement.

"We call on the Iraqi government to retaliate for the decision taken by the US administration," it added after a session on Sunday in Baghdad.

Baghdad plans to lobby Washington to review the decision, according to two lawmakers who declined to be identified.

One of them told Reuters that the government will "explain that Iraq as a sovereign country will be forced to apply similar treatment, and that would affect negatively cooperation, including military cooperation", in the conflict with IS.

Popular Mobilization, a coalition

of mainly Shi'ite Muslim paramilitary groups armed and trained by Iran to fight Islamic State, urged Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's government to expel US nationals.

Iran's foreign ministry summoned the Swiss ambassador to Tehran on Sunday to protest against US President Donald Trump's travel ban against people from Iran and six other Muslim nations, state news agency IRNA reported.

A note handed to the envoy, who represents US interests in Iran because Washington and Tehran have no diplomatic ties, said Trump's executive order "was based on false and discriminatory pretexts and (went) against human rights conventions", IRNA said.

Manila plans

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by the Minister of Labor Silvestre Bello stated that the ministry will coordinate with the relevant authorities in order to enforce such a ban.

It indicated that the minister, who was in Rome at the time of the execution, flew to Kuwait to follow up a similar case of a Filipino expatriate who has been sentenced to death over allegations of killing a Kuwaiti citizen.

The report affirmed that a decision will soon be taken, stressing that this temporary ban is not a retaliatory step.

The minister concluded his release by stating that Filipino laborers leave their country in search of a better life but they instead face the worst kind of nightmares in those countries.

First Trump

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against Muslims" and said US warplanes were first seen in the sky above the area at 9:00 pm Saturday and that the raid began at 2:00 am on Sunday, with 16 missiles hitting three houses near Yakla village in Radaa district.

A two-hour gunbattle ensued after American service members landed on the ground, it said. About 30 men, women and children were killed in the raid, it added.

The killed and wounded included some Saudis present at the site, according to the Yemeni officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief journalists.

An al-Qaeda official sent to the AP Cairo photos purportedly showing the bloodied bodies of several children killed in the raid along with houses showing bullet holes. The official requested anonymity for fear of reprisals.

Extra screening

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sought to clarify the situation, saying green card holders who had left the United States and wanted to return would have to visit a US embassy or consulate to undergo additional screening.

"You will be allowed to re-enter the United States pending a routine re-screening," the official said.

US green card holders from Syria and six other Muslim-majority countries traveling outside the United States need to check with a US consulate to see whether they can return, senior US administration officials said on Saturday.

New restrictions on immigrants and refugees in an executive order signed by President Donald Trump will mean legal permanent residents who have passports from the seven countries have to be cleared back into the United States on a case-by-case basis, an official told reporters in a briefing.

"It's being cleared on a case-by-case basis and being moved expeditiously," the official said.

The official defended the scope and execution of the new rules, saying it moved with "astonishing rapidity" but worked as intended.

Confusion abounded at airports as immigration and customs officials struggled to interpret the new rules, with some legal residents who were in the air when the order was issued detained at airports upon arrival.

The ban affects travelers with passports from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

The official argued the pause on travel from the countries is a response to concerns that immigration and refugee programs are being abused. The Trump administration is developing stricter rules for vetting people who want to come to the United States.

Immigration lawyers, human rights groups and some US senators have sharply criticized the order, which already faces legal challenges.

The executive order also seeks to prioritize refugees fleeing religious persecution, a move Trump separately said was aimed at helping Christians in Syria, leading some legal experts to question whether the order was constitutional.

Asked about lawsuits, the official said foreigners do not have a right to enter the United States, and dismissed as "ludicrous" critics' claims that the order is directed at Muslims.

Afghanistan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Oman, Tunisia and Turkey were Muslim-majority countries not included in the order, a second official said.

Trump deadlines

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"real coordination" against the Islamic State group in Syria, according to the Kremlin.

Yet many in the US military are suspicious of Russia's role in Syria, with Moscow seen as seeking first and foremost to support and defend President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

"We have to get rid of ISIS. We have no choice," Trump told Fox News in an interview broadcast Thursday, using another acronym for the jihadist group.

"This is evil. This is a level of evil that we haven't seen."

Barack Obama took a longer-term view of the anti-IS fight, with a more cautious commitment of US forces and instead ramping up an air war against the violent extremists.

"President Trump might be looking for something with quicker results, that could put some more options on the table," retired lieutenant general David Barno, who led coalition forces in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2005, told National Public Radio on Friday.

NewsWatch

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KUWAIT CITY: The Kuwaiti Ministry of Interior Sunday dismissed as "baseless" reports on a decree authorizing the tapping of personal phone calls and monitoring of social media and relevant applications.

The ministry said in a statement that social media reports on the launching of the so-called "new communication system" is totally "divorced from reality and based on inaccurate and unreliable information". (KUNA)

DUBAI: An off-duty policeman was shot dead in Bahrain on Sunday in what the interior ministry called a "terrorist act", state news agency BNA reported.

The shooting follows increased unrest in the Sunni Muslim-ruled kingdom after the execution this month of three Shi'ites convicted of killing three policemen in a bomb attack in 2014. (RTSR)

WASHINGTON: US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a Republican, said the United States needs to "be careful" while implementing President Donald Trump's new executive order targeting immigration from seven predominantly Muslim countries.

McConnell said on ABC's "This Week" program it was a good idea to tighten the vetting of immigrants, but "I also think it's important to remember that some of our best sources in the war against radical Islamic terrorism, are Muslims, both in this country and overseas ... We need to be careful as we do this." (RTSR)

PHOENIX: To build his highly touted deportation force, President Donald Trump is reviving a program that deputizes local officers to enforce federal immigration law.

The program received scant attention as Trump announced on the same day his plans to build a border wall and hire thousands more federal agents as he looks to fulfill promises from his campaign. (AP)

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump tweeted his defense Sunday of his order temporarily banning immigration to the United States for refugees and some Muslim travelers — a controversial policy which has sparked international furor and two days of US protests.

"Our country needs strong borders and extreme vetting, NOW. Look what is happening all over Europe and, indeed, the world — a horrible mess!" Trump wrote. (AFP)

LONDON: Four-time Olympic champion Mo Farah says US President Donald Trump's immigration policy "seems to have made me an alien" and fears he may not be able to return to his US home.

Farah is a British citizen who was born in Somalia, one of seven predominantly Muslim nations subject to the executive order signed by Trump that temporarily bans entry to the United States. (AP)