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MIDDLE EAST

Number of Syrian Refugees Climbs to More Than 4 Million

By NICK CUMMING-BRUCE JULY 9, 2015

GENEVA — The number of Syrians who have fled into neighboring countries to escape the civil war has reached more than four million, the United Nations said Thursday, and with the fighting dragging into its fifth year the number is still rising.

More than 24,000 people crossed into Turkey to escape fighting in northern Syria in June, pushing the number now sheltering in neighboring countries past four million, increasing the Syrian refugee population by one million in just 10 months, the United Nations refugee agency reported.

International aid agencies say the fighting has driven at least 7.6 million people who remain in the country from their homes.

“This is the biggest refugee population from a single conflict in a generation,” Antonio Guterres, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, said in a statement. Mr. Guterres, once again, warned that international aid was not keeping pace with the scale of the crisis, and that many refugees were “sinking deeper into poverty.”

“Worsening conditions are driving growing numbers toward Europe and further afield,” Mr. Guterres said, “but the overwhelming majority remain in the region.”

The latest influx into Turkey raised the number of Syrian refugees there

to 1.8 million, giving it the biggest refugee population in the world, the United Nations reported. As many as 1.2 million Syrians are now sheltering in Lebanon, more than 629,000 are in Jordan and close to quarter of a million have fled to Iraq.

The United Nations has appealed for \$5.5 billion in aid in 2015 to deal with the humanitarian fallout of the Syria crisis. But by the end of June it had received less than a quarter of that amount, the refugee agency said.

“Part of the difficulty is that people have heard this before,” said Adrian Edwards, a spokesman for the agency. “I don’t think there’s an awareness of the degree of difficulty we are facing. It really is something of a crunch.”

As Syria’s war drags on, families are forced by deepening poverty and hardship to resort to more desperate survival strategies, including marrying off their young children or forcing them to work, the United Nations said.

Close to half the Syrian refugee children in Jordan had become the sole or joint family breadwinners, the charity Save the Children and Unicef, the United Nations Children’s Fund, said in a report last week. Children were “working primarily for their survival,” Roger Hearn, Save the Children’s regional director for the Middle East and Eurasia, said in a statement accompanying the report. “Whether in Syria or neighboring countries, they are becoming main economic players.”

Donor fatigue and strain on aid budgets after more than four years of conflict in Syria have taken a toll on fund-raising for the international response to emergencies in Yemen, South Sudan and other areas of conflict where humanitarian agencies report they are acutely underfunded.

A version of this article appears in print on July 9, 2015, on page A8 of the New York edition with the headline: World Briefing | Middle East; More Than 4 Million Have Fled Syria, U.N. Says.

ISIS hackers take control of UK-based Syrian Observatory For Human Rights website

9 LUGLIO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Islamic State group hackers took down the website of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights on Wednesday. The group, also known as ISIS, threatened the director of the U.K.-based group as well.

Rami Abdel Rahman, the director of the Observatory, said the front page of the website had been replaced with his image. He said there was a threatening text with the doctored image.

Rahman, who is based in the U.K., said the ISIS hackers had managed to gain access to the servers and corrupt some information. "We have a copy of all the information that has been published and until the site is back up, we will publish on our Facebook and Twitter accounts," Press TV [quoted](#) Rahman.

Rahman's face was Photoshopped onto the body of an ISIS prisoner wearing an orange jumpsuit. The prisoner is apparently waiting to be executed by an ISIS terrorist. "Cyber Army of the Khilafah broke into the computer systems of SOHR ... seized control of its website, destroying it, and wiping out the data," the text accompanying the image read.

Meanwhile, FBI Director James Comey said ISIS sympathizers would find it easier to launch attacks on the United States if law enforcement authorities were denied access to encrypted communications. He said the tools available to the FBI were "increasingly ineffective" to stop ISIS terrorists, Reuters [reported](#).

Comey said the FBI had been able to stop ISIS sympathizers so far. However, it is not going to be possible to stop them indefinitely, he said. Comey also told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that more than 200 U.S. citizens had traveled to Syria to join ISIS forces.

Lebanese Christian party rallies against Sunni prime minister

9 LUGLIO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Hundreds of supporters of a Lebanese Christian politician protested in Beirut on Thursday against the Sunni prime minister they claim is marginalising Christian influence, stirring tensions in a country in crisis over war in neighbouring Syria.

Michel Aoun accuses Prime Minister Tammam Salam of taking decisions without cross-party consensus and usurping powers reserved for the president – a post set aside for a Christian but vacant since last year due to the wider political crisis.

Aoun's critics, including other Christian leaders, say his motivation is personal. A presidential hopeful, he wants his son-in-law, Brigadier-General Shamel Roukoz, appointed as army chief when the job needs filling in September.

Aoun, 80, is an ally of Hezbollah, a powerful Lebanese Shi'ite group backed by Iran that is fighting alongside President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Hezbollah has said it backs Aoun's political position, but is not taking part in the rally.

Balance and consensus has kept Lebanon stable since the 1975-1990 civil war but has also frequently led to paralysis. Under the system, the president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni and the Parliament speaker a Shi'ite.

Supporters of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) waved its orange flag as groups on foot and in cars honking horns made their way towards the Grand Serail government headquarters in central Beirut, where Salam was holding a cabinet meeting.

The army had blocked roads using armoured vehicles and metal barriers as the protesters chanted and took

pictures on their smartphones. Soldiers watched in the shade.

“All parties should agree on laws,” said 21-year-old student Charbel Khoury. “They are taking everything from us. As Christians we should act, we should not stay at home. We are only a small number in the region.”

All of the main political parties, including the Saudi-backed Future Movement of Sunni politician Saad al-Hariri, are represented in the Salam cabinet, which was formed last year after the country spent 10 months without a government.

The government’s existence has spared Lebanon a complete vacuum in the executive arm, helping shield it from further fall-out from the four-year-long Syrian war that has driven more than one million refugees over the border into Lebanon.

Political sources in parties allied to Aoun said his ministers would not resign, even as one of them threatened further escalation. “We will stay in the street until the government is toppled if it continues in this way,” Walid Khoury, an FPM lawmaker, was quoted by local media as saying.

While rivalry between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi’ite Iran has helped to fuel conflict in the region, their allies in Lebanon have sought to contain tensions. Hezbollah and Future are holding regular talks to help do that.

Islamic State in Sinai: an international issue

9 LUGLIO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



As his term in office winds down, U.S. President Barack Obama is facing one of the most significant challenges of his career. The Islamic State group, which thus far has operated in conflict zones like Iraq and Syria, has for the first time initiated activity in a sovereign country with a strong army — Egypt.

The comprehensive and meticulously planned terrorist attack carried out last week against the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula killed dozens of soldiers. Along with the loss of human life and the damage done to the Egyptian army's reputation, the incident could lead to overall change in a volatile Middle East: the expansion of Islamic State activities to other sovereign states in the region with the goal of causing their collapse.

However, a comprehensive and decisive move by the international community with the United States at the helm could reshuffle the deck and curb the terrorist organization's spread. This strategy would serve the Egyptian interest of returning calm and reinforcing sovereignty in Sinai, as well as the American interest of stopping and rooting out Islamic State in the region.

An exhaustive strategy should use the incidents in Egypt as a case study and operate on three fronts. The first would be declaring full backing and support for the Egyptian struggle against Islamic State and lending legitimacy to Egyptian army activity in the Sinai — statements by international leaders, led by the U.S. president, about Islamic State's illegitimacy along with declarations of support for Cairo's right to operate against the terrorist group would serve this purpose. With this backing, the Egyptian president will be able to turn to his public and to other Arab countries for support for his actions. This kind of support may also lead Egypt back to the West after its recent back-and-forth between Washington and Moscow.

The second would be providing logistical and military support for the Egyptian army. The U.S. must lift the restrictions it previously placed on selling and transferring advanced weapons systems to the Egyptian army under the claim of human rights violations. The situation calls for jumping that hurdle temporarily and reinforcing the military capability of the Egyptian army so that it can deal with the great challenge that Islamic State poses to the integrity of its republic. The U.S. military should also provide the Egyptian army with quality intelligence, air targeting assistance and the use of other specialized military equipment that could help in the struggle.

With American encouragement and backing, Israel can expand its intelligence assistance to the Egyptian military, and it will be possible to bring in more troops and equipment to Sinai, bypassing the peace agreement between the two countries. This cooperation would, of course, need to be done secretly, to prevent making the Egyptian president and his regime appear as if they are collaborating with “the Zionists and the Americans.”

Third, the international community, led by the U.S. must look at the incident in Sinai as a case study that demonstrates the need for the provision of a comprehensive defense umbrella for stable countries in the region against Islamic State. If the Americans hesitate, Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states will face a similar challenge, which could ultimately lead to their collapse. Therefore, Washington must work with the leaders of these countries to deal with the future danger their regimes will face at Islamic State’s hands.

Failed American policy in the Middle East — from Libya, to Egypt, Syria and Iraq — has bred turmoil in the region. The United States must not repeat its past mistakes of avoiding involvement in conflict situations and allowing local forces to deal with the hegemonies in various countries. Repeated American failure will cost Egypt, Israel and the entire international community far too much.

This proposed strategy is in line with the current American strategy against Islamic State, which is designed to stop the group’s spread and to diminish its presence until it is completely annihilated. Failure would certainly lead to the organization’s proliferation. Therefore the U.S. and the international community must not allow Cairo to deal with this issue alone. If Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi’s regime collapses, it will come at a very high price to Egypt and to the entire region.

ISIS blows up historic Mosul church, four children killed

9 LUGLIO 2015 BY ANDREA SPADA



Four children were killed when Islamic State blew up an historic church in Mosul, Iraq's second city. The blast destroyed the Mother of Aid church, according to the Kurdish [news site Rudaw](#).

Saeed Mamuzini, of the Mosul branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, said the children happened to be near the church, which was more than 1,000 years old and was in central Mosul.

A woman journalist, Suha Ahmed Radi, was also executed this week after being accused of being a spy by Islamic State in Mosul, bringing to 14 the number of journalists who have died in the city since it fell to the Sunni jihad terror group in June last year.

Dozens of churches and Shia mosques in Mosul have been blown up since then, including the popular 19th century Hamo mosque and the 1800-year-old Assyrian church, because they were deemed heretical and sacrilegious.

Islamic State has also posted videos showing terror thugs using sledgehammers to destroy the tomb of the biblical prophet Jonah. St Ephrem's Cathedral, once the mother church of the Syrian Orthodox archdiocese, is currently serving as an ammunition depot.

Russia vetoes UN genocide resolution on Srebrenica

Russia refuses to describe Srebrenica massacre of 8,000 Muslim men and boys during Bosnia war in 1995 as "genocide".

09 Jul 2015 08:08 GMT | [Politics](#), [War & Conflict](#), [Humanitarian crises](#), [Russia](#), [Srebrenica](#)

Russia has vetoed a UN resolution that would have condemned the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica during the Bosnian war as a "crime of genocide".

Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin on Wednesday called the UK-drafted text "not constructive, confrontational and politically-motivated," arguing that it unfairly singled out Bosnian Serbs for war crimes.

"The draft that we have in front of us will not help peace in the Balkans but rather doom this region to tension," Churkin told the council meeting that began with a minute of silence to remember the victims.

[Related: Women Who Refuse to Die](#)

The Security Council put the resolution to a vote on Wednesday, despite appeals from Russia and China not to because of divisions in the UN's most powerful body.

The vote condemning the mass killing 20 years ago as an act of genocide was 10-1, with four abstentions - Angola, China, Nigeria and Venezuela.

'Legal fact'

The UK had put forward the draft text, hoping the Security Council would formally recognise Europe's worst atrocity since World War II as an act of genocide for the first time, and condemning genocide denial.

British Deputy Ambassador Peter Wilson accused Russia of siding "with those who are unwilling to accept the facts today".

"Genocide occurred at Srebrenica. This is a legal fact, not a political judgment. On this there is no compromise," he said.

Russia, Britain and the US had been locked in intense negotiations over the past 24 hours to try to avoid a veto and agree on a text.

But Moscow refused to drop its insistence that references to the Srebrenica killings as an act of genocide be scrapped, diplomats said.

In Sarajevo, Munira Subasic, the head of the Mothers of Srebrenica, told the AFP news

agency that Russia's veto "would make trust and reconciliation impossible".

"We are not surprised by such a decision... Russia is actually supporting criminals, those who killed our children," Subasic said.

"By deciding [to veto] Russia has left the door open for a new war," she added.

Bosnian Serb leaders had called on Russia to use its veto power to block the resolution, arguing that it was "anti-Serb" because it highlighted the killings in the town in the final months of the war.

Bosnian Serb forces commanded by General Ratko Mladic overran the UN safe haven of Srebrenica on July 11, 1995 in what was to become one of the darkest chapters of the 1992-95 Bosnian war.

Two international courts have called the slaughter by Bosnian Serbs of about 8,000 people, mainly Muslim men and boys, who had sought refuge at what was supposed to be a UN-protected site, genocide.

But Russia, Serbia and the Bosnian Serbs denounced the resolution as divisive.

Source: Agencies

Ukraine crisis needs a political solution to reinforce EU aid efforts

Though the EU has doubled its aid budget for Ukraine, where 1.5 million people have received vital humanitarian assistance, the conflict is blighting their future

Christos Stylianides

Thursday 9 July 2015 08.00 BST

There is a humanitarian crisis right on the doorstep of the EU. More than 2.2 million people have been forced to leave their homes because of the fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. As many as 900,000 have sought refuge in neighbouring countries.

Last week, I visited eastern Ukraine for the second time this year to see for myself the impact of our humanitarian aid programmes on the lives of those affected, and to discuss the challenges ahead.

One example of how the EU is helping vulnerable people in the crisis is through a cash-and-vouchers programme. While these schemes may be less visible than aid convoys, they can be far more efficient in responding to individual needs. In Kramatorsk, I met Julia, whose third child was born just a few months ago. Julia was forced to leave her home due to the conflict, and her husband has lost his job.

The cash-and-vouchers scheme helps Julia to support her family, enabling her to buy food and to access clean water. Yet because of the ongoing fighting and road blockades, she cannot visit other relatives such as her grandmother, who lives in her hometown and also needs assistance.

Hers was just one of the stories of personal struggle from the 5 million people estimated to be in need of assistance, according to the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency. Nearly two-thirds of them are particularly vulnerable, including children, the elderly and the disabled.

So far, EU humanitarian aid has reached 1.5 million people thanks to great teamwork with our international partners. Most of those who have been helped are among the most vulnerable. But their ordeal is not over. Their lives are still blighted by uncertainty. On 1 July, the commission therefore decided to double its 2015 humanitarian budget for Ukraine by committing a further €15m (£10m).

We will also launch a project under our EU children of peace programme to address the trauma of thousands of children in eastern Ukraine. All in all, the EU has provided more than €223m in immediate assistance to civilians affected by the conflict on both sides since early 2014.

But more needs to be done. A UN appeal at the beginning of this year is so far only 35% funded. The international community needs to step up its assistance, and aid must be strictly needs-based, without any political agendas attached. That is how we can ensure that we reach the most vulnerable, regardless of the area they reside in. We are particularly concerned about the humanitarian situation in non-government controlled areas.

The EU is providing assistance on both sides of the conflict line, and to refugees in neighbouring countries, including Belarus and Russia. Despite the ceasefire agreed in Minsk in February, fighting continues.

The staff of EU-funded humanitarian organisations have come under fire while distributing assistance. This is unacceptable: our aid is always provided on the basis of humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

The access to the non-government controlled areas in Ukraine's Donbas is now more restricted, cutting people off from desperately needed assistance. This is why I reiterate my call on both sides to refrain from further fighting and to ensure unfettered and speedy access for internationally recognised humanitarian organisations. During consultations with the government, I received assurances that they will address our concerns about access across the frontlines.

More than 1.3 million people have been displaced from the conflict areas in Donbass and Crimea. During my visit, I spoke to some of them and heard of their hopes. Many were receiving humanitarian aid but they needed support beyond emergency assistance to find houses, jobs, schools for their children and to access healthcare. We must look at how we can best support them together with the Ukrainian government.

Solidarity is one of the cornerstones of the EU. Our humanitarian assistance demonstrates that we stand by the most vulnerable people affected by the conflict in Ukraine. Yet, as we know too well, humanitarian problems cannot have solely humanitarian solutions.

This is why the EU is also deeply engaged in supporting the implementation of the Minsk agreements with a view to bringing about a sustainable solution that respects Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence as well as international law. We need a political solution and it must come urgently.

Christos Stylianides is the European commissioner for humanitarian aid and crisis management

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POLITICS**Draghi voices doubts about Greek solution**

By **Reuters** 7/9/15 at 12:36 PM

European Central Bank President Mario Draghi has voiced unprecedented doubts about the chances of rescuing Greece from bankruptcy as Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was due to put forward last-ditch reform proposals on Thursday.

Italian daily Il Sole 24 Ore quoted the ECB chief, under growing fire in Germany for keeping Greek banks afloat, as saying he was not sure a solution would be found for Greece and he did not believe Russia would come to Athens' rescue.

Asked if a deal to save Greece could be wrapped up, Draghi told the paper as he was boarding a plane in Brussels on Wednesday: "I don't know, this time it's really difficult."

The ECB is keeping shuttered Greek banks afloat with emergency liquidity capped until the weekend as leaders of the 19-nation euro zone race to find a last-minute third bailout for Athens.

Asked if he expected Russian President Vladimir Putin to help Greece, Draghi said: "I don't believe so, I don't see it as a real risk ... and then, they don't have money themselves."

The usually discreet central banker was speaking after an emergency euro zone summit on Tuesday gave Greece five days to come up with a credible plan to repair its public finances and reform its economy or face an economic meltdown and possible exit from Europe's common currency.

Under that timetable, the leftist Greek government, which formally applied on Wednesday for a three-year loan from the European Stability Mechanism bailout fund, has until midnight to present convincing, detailed reform proposals.

International Monetary Fund chief Christine Lagarde added a potential complication by insisting that any deal must include a restructuring to make Greece's massive debt pile sustainable.

Speaking in Washington on Wednesday, Lagarde said that to address Greece's acute crisis any deal needed to have two legs. One was structural reforms and fiscal consolidation.

"The other leg is debt restructuring, which we believe is needed in the case of Greece for it to have debt sustainability," she said.

Germany, Athens' biggest creditor, has said any debt write-off would be illegal under the EU treaty and has also taken a restrictive approach to reprofiling Athens' official borrowings to ease the short-term pressure of debt service.

Even France, Greece's strongest support in the euro zone, acknowledged on Thursday it was working on scenarios for a Greek exit from the currency area if weekend efforts to clinch a deal fail.

"We would be irresponsible if we did not consider this question. So we are thinking about it because it's our duty to be ready for any eventuality, but it's not what we want," French Finance Minister Michel Sapin told LCI television.

TSIPRAS SEEKS CONSENSUS

According to the Athens daily Kathimerini, Greece is planning a reform package worth 12 billion euros over two years, more than previously planned to offset a return to recession after months of difficult negotiations with creditors.

Instead of growing by 0.5% this year, months of uncertainty and almost two weeks of capital controls mean "there are estimates of a recession of about 3%", it said.

"It is estimated that the measures of €8 billion that Greece had presented for 2015 and 2016 will have to be increased by €2 billion per year, raising the total to €12 billion for the two years," Kathimerini reported.

There was no immediate official confirmation of the figures.

Greece last year emerged from a deep recession that shrank its gross domestic product by a quarter over six years.

A second newspaper, Naftemporiki, detailed what it said were proposed tax hikes to raise the money - an increase in corporate tax to 28% from 26% and in value added tax on luxury goods from 13 to 10%; on processed foods, restaurants, transport and some private health services to 23 from 13% and on hotels to 13% from 6.5%.

The report said Greek islands would continue to enjoy tax breaks that creditors had sought to scrap. Naftemporiki said the entire package would be worth €10 to €12 billion.

Such measures may face resistance from the hard-left wing of Tsipras' Syriza party and from his junior coalition partner, the Independent Greeks, after the government won a resounding 'No' to more austerity in a referendum on 5 July.

DRAGHI UNDER FIRE

Draghi's support for Greek banks came under attack from German Bundesbank chief Jens Weidmann, a senior ECB policymaker, who said it was up to governments, not the central bank, to provide any aid to Athens.

"Central banks need to show where their limits lie," he told an audience in Frankfurt. "It needs to be crystal clear that responsibility for further developments in Greece ... lies with the Greek government and the countries providing assistance – not the ECB Governing Council."

Weidmann also said capital controls should remain in force in Greece until there was any deal, and that the ECB should not increase its liquidity assistance for Greek banks, without which they may collapse next week.

European officials told Reuters on Wednesday that some large Greek banks may have to be shut and taken over by stronger rivals as part of a restructuring of the sector that would follow any bailout of the country.

One official said Greece's four big banks - National Bank of Greece, Eurobank, Piraeus and Alpha Bank - could be reduced to just two, a measure that would doubtless encounter fierce resistance in Athens.

A second person said that although mergers of banks were necessary, this could happen over the longer term.

"The Greek economy is in ruins. That means the banks need a restart," said the first person, adding that prompt action was necessary following any bailout between Athens