

Over 300 Muslims Urge Probe Into Islamophobia in UK



Muslim leaders have called for an investigation into Islamophobia to go beyond Boris Johnson.

LONDON (Dispatches) — More than 300 high-profile Muslims Thursday called for an investigation into Islamophobia in Britain's ruling Conservative Party after former foreign secretary Boris Johnson likened Muslim women who cover their faces to letter boxes and robbers.

Imams, scholars and teachers signed the open letter to the Conservative Party, accusing other MPs in the party of "supporting this xenophobic and discriminatory language".

"Islamophobia has become mainstream in the United Kingdom and is on the increase. If the Conservative party fails to take action it will signal that Islamophobia is acceptable

in the Conservative party," the letter said.

They called on the party to investigate remarks by Johnson and other members of the party, noting that London mayoral candidate Zac Goldsmith was also accused of making Islamophobic comments as a feature of his campaign.

The London Evening Standard, citing unnamed Conservative Party sources, reported that a formal decision to refer Johnson to an investigatory panel headed by a lawyer was expected later on Thursday.

The investigation was welcomed by the Muslim Council of Britain, but said its calls for a wider investigation into Islamophobia in the party have been given "short shrift".

"Enough is enough. We need action from the Conservative Party. Nothing less will do," said the group's secretary general Harun Khan in a statement.

Johnson, who resigned from the government last month, made the comments in a column for the Daily Telegraph newspaper in which he criticized the Danish government over its new law that bans the wearing of the full face veil in public.

"It is absolutely ridiculous that people should choose to go around looking like letter boxes," Johnson wrote.

Any female student who turned up at school or university "looking like a bank robber" should be asked to remove her veil, he said, describing the burqa as "oppressive".

Johnson's comments have been condemned by members of the opposition Labour Party.

Sahar al-Faifi, a regional manager for the UK-based anti-Islamophobia NGO Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), told Middle East Eye that Johnson's comments had dehumanized and criminalized Muslim women who choose to wear burqas.

"We've had enough," she said. "Muslim women are facing triple discrimination around faith, color and gender. Now we have someone with a high profile normalizing alienation and demonization even further. Boris Johnson needs to apologize for his comments because now he is responsible for every hate crime committed against veiled women."

Russia, China Block U.S. Bid for North Korea Sanctions



File photo of United Nations Security Council.

UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) — Russia and China on Thursday blocked a U.S. request to add a Russian bank to a UN sanctions blacklist along with a North Korean official and two entities, diplomats said.

The United States last week asked a UN sanctions committee to slap an assets freeze on Agrosyuz Commercial Bank for allegedly helping North Korea evade UN-imposed restrictions on financial transactions.

The request also targeted Ri Jong Won, the deputy representative of North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank and two North Korean front companies.

In a response to the council, Russia raised doubts about the allegations while China told the council that it

objected to the proposed sanctions designations put forward by the United States.

"We would like to underline that designation requests submitted to the committee should be adequately substantiated by sufficient information," said the Russian mission to the United Nations in a message to the council seen by AFP.

The request followed a U.S. Treasury Department decision to impose unilateral sanctions on the Russian bank, the North Korean official and the two entities.

Russia and China have called on the Security Council to consider easing sanctions to reward North Korea for opening up dialogue with the United States and halting missile tests.

But the United States has called for

maintaining "maximum pressure" from sanctions until North Korea has fully dismantled its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Earlier Thursday, the North Korean foreign ministry issued an angry statement, denouncing the United States for responding to its overtures by "inciting international sanctions and pressure."

The statement said that "some high-level officials within the U.S. administration" were making "desperate attempts at intensifying the international sanctions and pressure."

"We hoped that these goodwill measures would contribute to breaking down the high barrier of mistrust" between Pyongyang and Washington, the North's Foreign Ministry spokesperson said. "However, the U.S. responded to our expectation by inciting international sanctions and pressure."

The council last year adopted three rafts of sanctions targeting North Korea's economy through export and import bans, as well as restrictions on banking.

It was the second time in three weeks that Russia and China have objected to a U.S. request to tighten sanctions on North Korea.

On July 19, the two countries put a six-month hold on a U.S. request to halt all deliveries of refined oil products to North Korea.

UN sanctions resolutions place a ceiling for North Korea of 500,000 barrels of refined oil products per year and four million barrels of crude.

Japan Probes University's Exclusion of Women

TOKYO (AFP) — Japan Friday launched an unprecedented probe into gender discrimination at all the nation's medical universities after a Tokyo medical school admitted altering the entrance test results of female applicants to exclude them.

The education ministry has asked all 81 private and public medical schools to check their admission procedures for possible discrimination against female applicants.

Authorities said they would also check the gender ratio of successful applicants for the past six months, confirming it was the first ever such nationwide investigation.

"If their answers are judged as not reasonable, we will ask additional questions or visit them directly," a ministry official said, adding that the results of the probe would be published as early as next month. The probe came after a Tokyo

medical school admitted it routinely altered entrance test scores for female applicants to keep women out, in a scandal that has sparked outrage in Japan.

The alterations reportedly stretched back as far as 2006 and apparently aimed to keep the ratio of women in the school at 30 percent or lower.

"The case was extremely regrettable," Education Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters, urging medical schools to cooperate with the probe.

The scandal was uncovered by investigators looking into claims the university padded the scores of an education ministry bureaucrat's son to help him gain admission.

According to local media, other instances had been discovered where individual entrance test scores were revised upwards, suggesting potential favoritism.

The scores for female applicants, however, were lowered across the board.

Sources told local media the discrimination was the result of a view that women would not be reliable doctors after graduation as they often quit to marry and start a family.

"No matter what the situation is, women should never be discriminated against unfairly," Jiji Press cited Justice Minister Yoko Kamikawa as saying.

Japan's notoriously long work hours and a male-dominated business culture force many women out of the workplace when they start families.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has made "womenomics" -- or boosting women's participation in the workplace and promoting women to senior positions -- a priority, but the pace of progress has been slow.

Puerto Rico Admits Hurricane Killed Over 1,400



Thousands of people across Puerto Rico are still living in damaged homes protected by blue plastic tarps like these, 11 months after Hurricane Maria devastated the island.

JAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Puerto Rico is now estimating that Hurricane Maria killed more than 1,400 people, far more than the official death toll of 64, in a report to Congress seeking billions to help the island recover from the devastating storm.

The government, relying on updated statistics it first reported in June, said there were 1,427 more deaths from September to December 2017 than the average for the same time period over the previous four years.

In a report to Congress detailing a \$139 billion reconstruction plan, the territory's government said that the additional deaths resulted from the effects of a storm that led to a "cascading failures" in infrastructure across the island of 3.3 million people.

Hurricane Maria, as well as Hurricane Irma two weeks later, knocked out power and water to the island and caused widespread flooding that left many sick and elderly people unable to get medical treatment.

"The hurricanes' devastating effects on people's health and safety cannot be overstated," the government said in the report seeking assistance from Congress to help rebuild an island that was already struggling from a deep economic crisis at the time of the storm.

In the weeks after the storm, Puerto Rican officials said the storm directly caused 64 deaths, many in landslides or flooding. But they have long publicly said that far more

people died due to indirect effects of the powerful storm.

The more exact number has been a matter of debate and the government itself released the 1,427 count in June. But it said it would wait to update its official tally until receiving a report it commissioned from George Washington University. That report is due in coming weeks.

The use of the higher death toll in the report to Congress was first reported Thursday by The New York Times.

Most of the deaths occurred not in the initial storm on Sept. 20, but in the ensuing days and weeks when the island-wide electricity outage and roads blocked by downed power lines and other debris made it difficult to move around and emergency services were stretched beyond their capabilities.

Government agencies have used various methods to count storm deaths over the years, with authorities generally trying to sort them into direct and indirect to include people whose deaths are tied to a natural disaster without necessarily being obviously caused by it.

New York Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez, who was born in Puerto Rico, has called for legislation that would establish federal standards for death counts after disaster. "It has been tragically clear for some time that the devastation from Irma and Maria was many magnitudes worse than the official death toll suggested," she said.

Estonia Halts NATO Drills After Missile Misfired



Advanced medium range air-to-air missiles, identical to the one accidentally fired in Estonia, are pictured in service with U.S. forces.

HELSINKI (AP) — Estonia's defense minister has ordered a halt to NATO air exercises in Estonia pending an investigation after a missile was accidentally fired over the Baltic country's airspace by a Spanish fighter jet on a military exercise this week.

Minister Juri Luik said Thursday at a news conference in Tallinn that the air-to-air missile that was erroneously launched Tuesday over southern Estonia has not been found but no people were reported injured or killed in the misfiring.

"The Spanish defense minister has apologized and expressed deep regret," Luik said, adding that the commander of the Spanish Armed Forces has apologized as well.

Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas spoke with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Wednesday, expressing Estonia's concern over the "serious incident."

The AMRAAM-type missile has a range of up to 100 kilometers (62 miles). It may have crashed into a remote nature reserve in the eastern Jogeve region not far from Estonia's border with Russia or triggered its built-in self-destruct mode and exploded in midair, Luik said.

The Eurofighter Typhoon of the Spanish Air Force was part of NATO's Baltic air-

policing mission based in Lithuania and was carrying air-to-air missiles containing up to 10 kilograms of explosives.

While Luik urged Spain to conduct a thorough investigation, he also launched a separate internal probe to review the safety regulations of arranging military air exercises in the tiny NATO nation of 1.3 million.

Until the completion of that review Luik said "I have suspended all NATO exercises in the Estonian airspace."

He still reiterated Estonia's trust in NATO's Baltic air mission, which started in 2004 as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the military alliance. The three small former Soviet republics don't possess fighter jets of their own.

The air policing is carried out from NATO's bases in Siauliai, Lithuania, and Amari, Estonia. French, Portuguese and Spanish fighter jets are currently in charge of the rotating four-month mission.

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Thursday the Estonian missile incident and NATO's air drills are security risks for the region.

"What happened is yet another vivid demonstration of the fact that NATO's actions, including in the Baltic states, pose extra risks to security rather than improving it," Zakharova told reporters.



LOS ANGELES (AP) — An intentionally set wildfire grew perilously close to homes in Southern California as evacuation orders expanded to more than 20,000 residents, though some homeowners stayed behind to fend off the flames themselves. Firefighters fought a desperate battle to stop the Holy Fire from reaching homes as the blaze surged through the Cleveland National Forest above the city of Lake Elsinore and its surrounding communities. They were trying to keep the flames from devouring neighborhoods and taking lives, as gigantic fires still burning in Northern California have done. "Our main focus this afternoon was getting everyone out safely," said Thanh Nguyen, a spokesman for the crews battling the Holy Fire. As flames raged closer, some residents ignoring evacuation orders stood in driveways or on top of roofs and used garden hoses to keep their homes wet and to fight the flames as smoke billowed around them.

KANO, Nigeria (AFP) — At least 17 Nigerian soldiers were killed in a fresh Boko Haram attack on a military base in the country's northeast, military sources told AFP Thursday, the third assault on three different bases in less than a month. On Wednesday evening, heavily armed extremists riding in trucks stormed and looted weapons and vehicles from a military base in Garunda village in Borno State, the epicenter of the Takfiri insurgency that has been raging for nine years. The attack is the latest of a series of bloody Boko Haram assaults on military bases in Nigeria, underscoring the continued threat the Takfiris pose to the region and putting the spotlight on the Nigerian government's claim that Boko Haram is "decimated." "Our troops came under attack from Boko Haram terrorists in Garunda last night," a military officer told AFP. "Unfortunately we lost 17 troops, 14 others were injured while an unspecified number is still unaccounted for," said the military source, who asked not to be identified because he was not authorized to speak on the incident. The source added that the militants looted weapons and vehicles before fleeing. In the past month, Boko Haram extremists have launched two other major assaults on military bases in the remote northeast region.

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Myanmar has sharply rejected an attempt by the International Criminal Court to consider the country's culpability for activities that caused about 700,000 minority Rohingya Muslims to flee to Bangladesh for safety. The office of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, the country's leader, said Thursday that the court in the Netherlands has no jurisdiction over Myanmar because it is not a member state. It also offered procedural reasons for why it would not respond to the court's request for its views on the exodus of the Rohingya. Critics including UN experts have accused Myanmar's military of atrocities against the Rohingya amounting to ethnic cleansing, or even genocide. Suu Kyi's government says it was carrying out justifiable counterinsurgency operations.

TORONTO (Reuters) — At least four people were killed in a shooting in the eastern Canadian city of Fredericton and one person was taken into custody, police said on Friday. Police in Fredericton, a city of about 56,000 that is the capital of the province of New Brunswick, said in a post on Twitter the incident was continuing and there were multiple fatalities. Another police tweet said one person was taken into custody but gave no immediate details on where the incident occurred. In 2014 in another mass shooting in Moncton, New Brunswick, three Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers were killed and two more were wounded. At the time, the incident was one of the worst of its kind in Canada, where gun laws are stricter than they are in the United States and deadly attacks on police are rare. But a proliferation of weapons has led to an increase in gun crimes in recent years. Last month, a gunman walked down a busy Toronto street, killing two people and wounding 13 others before turning his weapon on himself.

JAKARTA (AFP) — The death toll from a shallow 6.9-magnitude earthquake on the Indonesian island of Lombok has surged above 300, a senior minister said Thursday. "The latest update is that 319 people died," said Indonesia's chief security minister Wiranto, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.

BELJING (AP) — Reports say hundreds of members of China's Muslim Hui ethnic minority have staged rare protests over plans to demolish a newly built mosque in the country's northwest. Hong Kong's South China Morning post said a crowd gathered Thursday outside the towering Grand Mosque in the town of Weizhou in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region. Authorities had planned to begin the demolition Friday, although it wasn't immediately clear if they would proceed according to schedule. The move comes as China's officially atheist ruling Communist Party is cracking down on religious expression and attacking what it calls radical ideas among the country's more than 20 million Muslims.

NEW YORK (AFP) — The Slovenian-born parents of Melania Trump became U.S. citizens at a naturalization ceremony in New York on Thursday, reportedly taking advantage of a family reunification program President Donald Trump has vehemently denounced. Trump's in-laws Viktor and Amalija Knavs took the oath of citizenship, their immigration lawyer Michael Wildes confirmed to AFP. Asked by the New York Times if they had obtained citizenship under a program derisively branded "chain migration" by the president, Wildes replied: "I suppose." He said chain migration, which allows naturalized U.S. citizens to sponsor close relatives for permanent residency, was a "dirtier" way of characterizing what he called "a bedrock of our immigration process when it comes to family reunification." Trump has taken a hardline on immigration policy, criticizing so-called chain migration.