

Red Cross Seeks News on Fate of Three Staff Missing in Syria Since 2013

GENEVA (Dispatches) – The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has appealed for information on the fate of three employees abducted in Syria more than five years ago and last known to have been held by Daesh.

Breaking its silence on the case, the independent aid agency identified the three as Louisa Akavi, a nurse from New Zealand, and Syrian drivers Alaa Rajab and Nabil Bakdounes.

“Our latest credible information indicates that Louisa was alive in late 2018,” it said.

SDF forces claimed the capture of Daesh’s last territory in Syria last month, eliminating its rule over a region it had proclaimed in Iraq and Syria in 2014.

ICRC officials said Akavi might have been swept up among some 70,000 women and children who fled to al-Hol camp after the fall of Daesh, many of them terrorist sympathizers.



Syrian children watch as packages of humanitarian relief, provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in a joint operation with the UN, are unloaded in the town of Douma in the terrorist-held Eastern Ghouta region, east of the capital Damascus, November 12, 2017.

ICRC President Peter Maurer raised her case during a visit to the camp, run by Kurdish-led so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in March, they added.

“We call on anyone with information to please come forward. If our

colleagues are still being held, we call for their immediate and unconditional release,” the ICRC said in a statement providing a Syrian contact number: +963 953 555 745.

It said it had not been able to learn more details about the two drivers,

and their fate was not known.

The three were traveling in a Red Cross convoy in October 2013, delivering supplies to medical facilities in Idlib, northwestern Syria, when it was stopped by armed men. Four other people abducted with them were released the next day.

The Swiss-run agency has a policy of never paying ransoms.

Akavi, now 62, joined the ICRC in 1988 and has worked in a number of hotspots.

She has been held longer than anyone in ICRC’s 156-year history, said Dominik Stillhart, ICRC director of operations worldwide.

New Zealand’s government said it was searching for Akavi. Foreign Minister Winston Peters said the government had deployed a non-combat team based in Iraq that included special operations personnel, “focused on locating ...and identifying opportunities to recover her.”

Syria:

U.S. Sends New Logistics Convoy for Kurds in Eastern Euphrates

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – Hundreds of trucks carrying U.S. logistical equipment destined for the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces arrived in eastern Syria to back up the group, Kurdish-language media sources reported.

“Over 250 trucks carrying logistical support for SDF arrived in Syria’s Eastern Euphrates after crossing the border with Iraq,” the Kurdish-language Xeber24 news website reported.

The news website noted that the U.S. convoy comprising equipment, drilling equipment, oil tankers and several more covered trucks are now in Eastern Euphrates to continue providing support for the SDF.

In a relevant development last week, media reports revealed

that Washington has dispatched new military aid to the SDF in Eastern Euphrates after it said mission has been accomplished in the war on Daesh.

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported last Monday that the U.S.-led coalition has sent new military convoys, including tens of trucks carrying military aid and logistical equipment, from Iraqi Kurdistan region to areas occupied by the SDF in Eastern Euphrates.

It added that nearly 700 trucks, carrying vehicles and military and logistic equipment of the U.S.-led coalition have arrived from Iraq to Eastern Euphrates.

Last month, Washington-backed Kurdish fighters in Syria declared their final victory over

the Daesh terrorist group, ending bloody battle against the group that once held territory spanning a third of Syria and Iraq.

The U.S. Defense Department also announced that the Daesh no longer holds any territory in Syria, according to former White House Spokeswoman Sarah Sanders.

In December 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump declared the Daesh terrorist group defeated in Syria and announced American troop pullout from the country but gave no timeline. The surprise announcement resulted in the resignation of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, U.S. coalition envoy Brett McGurk and Pentagon Chief of staff Rear Admiral Kevin Sweeney who dis-

proved of the American president’s decision.

But last month, the American leader confirmed that 400 U.S. troops will remain in the war-torn country indefinitely. Notably, Trump did not give any credit to the Syrian Army, Russia and other allies for reducing the self-styled caliphate to its current miserable state.

Notably, the U.S. troops have been operating in Syria as part of an international coalition for about five years without the permission of Syrian authorities or the UN Security Council. The United States has, in particular, supported the Kurdish-led militia controlling the territories to the East of the Euphrates and opposing the Syrian government.

Civilians Killed in Terrorist Rocket Attack on Syria’s Aleppo

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) – At least six civilians have lost their lives after a barrage of rockets fired by terrorists hit some neighborhoods of Syria’s northwestern city of Aleppo.

Syria’s official news agency SANA reported that the rocket attack, launched by “terrorist groups”, also wounded at least seven others.

The Aleppo province is situated next to Idlib, a province still held in most parts by terror groups, the most prominent of them is called the terrorist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

According to the so-called Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the attack, composed of at least 20 rockets, was conducted mainly by HTS terrorists against several neighborhoods of the city.

Since the Syrian government troops regained control of Aleppo at the end of 2016, the city has been targeted intermittently by an array of terror outfits.

Foreign-backed militancy, supported by the United States and many of its Western and regional allies, erupted in Syria in 2011. The terrorists overran large swathes of Syria’s territory before government forces retook

almost all of them with help from its allies.

Meanwhile, Iraq has begun trying nearly 900 members of the Daesh terrorist group captured in neighboring Syria, a judiciary official says.

The suspects will be tried by the specialized terrorism court which has “received the interrogation files of nearly 900 Iraqi Daesh members coming from Syria,” a court official told AFP on Sunday.

Iraqi authorities say the terrorists have been captured in Syria and handed over to them by the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

A security source said additional Iraqi suspects, including “very influential leaders” of the Daesh terror group, are in SDF custody and “will be handed over in batches on the Syrian-Iraqi border.”

One of the suspects who would soon be handed over to Baghdad was deeply involved in Daesh efforts to develop chemical weapons, the source said.

Iraq has already tried hundreds of Daesh members, many of whom were detained as the outfit’s strongholds crumbled throughout Iraq. They have included foreigners, especially Saudi nationals.

Some... (Continued From Page One)

wealth fund for relief and reconstruction after devastating floods.

Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli said Sunday the weeks of heavy rain across the country had caused an estimated \$2.5 billion in damage to roads, bridges, homes and farmland.

“Using the National Development Fund is authorized if no other sources are available,” Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a letter to President Hassan Rouhani.

However, the Leader urged the government to explore other budgetary measures to fund the relief efforts before tapping the sovereign fund.

The letter did not give an amount but Morteza Shahidzadeh, who is in charge of the fund, said earlier that Rouhani had asked to withdraw \$2 billion and Ayatollah Khamenei had agreed in principle.

Trump ... (Continued From Page One)

What Kushner has offered are suggestions about economic opportunities for Palestinians in exchange for Israeli annexation of the West Bank and all other disputed territories.

Kushner and other U.S. officials have indicated that peace and economic development for Palestine are intertwined with the Arab world’s recognition of Israel and their acceptance of a Palestinian “autonomy” as opposed to a “sovereignty,” sources said.

“What we’ve tried to do is figure out what is a realistic and what is a fair solution to the issues here in 2019 that can enable people to live better lives,” Kushner said in an interview with Sky News Arabia as he sought Arab support on a visit to the region in February.

Zionist PM Benjamin Netanyahu gave away the most substantial hints at the deal’s contents when he promised on the eve of his re-election last week that he will annex some settlements in the West Bank.

The package, according to the sources, is expected to pledge tens of billions of dollars in aid and investment in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the two areas with the most Palestinians, and billions more to Egypt and Jordan, the two Arab nations that have made peace with Israel.

Kushner stands little chance of success, analysts say, as European and some Arab leaders have already lost faith in his attempts.

A series of actions that Trump has taken in favor of Israel, including moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem Al-Quds after recognizing it as the Zionist regime’s so-called capital, have killed any hopes of a breakthrough.

Trump has also stirred anger by cutting annual aid to Palestine and shuttering the offices of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Washington.

Those actions have alienated the Palestinian Authority, which has boycotted all negotiations with Washington. Ilan Goldenberg, the chief of staff to the lead U.S. negotiator in the last failed attempt under former president Barack Obama, said he still expects the package to be a nonstarter that would pave the way for annexation by forcing the Palestinians to reject the offer.

U.S. ... (Continued From Page One)

racist bullying, the congresswoman on Saturday said she would not be silenced by “an administration that ran on banning Muslims from this country.”

“No one person – no matter how corrupt, inept, or vicious – can threaten my unwavering love for America,” Omar tweeted.

Trump’s attack amplified a cover run by the tabloid New York Post, owned by Rupert Murdoch, which splashed a quote from Omar over a picture of the World Trade Center in flames. In response, a group of New York City corner-store owners announced a boycott of the newspaper.

The Yemeni American Merchants Association, which represents Yemeni Americans who own and run an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 of the city’s thousands of delis and corner stores, known as “bodegas”, wrote that the front page “provoked hatred” and “aims to harm

Omar and her family and other people of the Islamic faith”.

“This rhetoric threatens the safety and wellbeing of Omar, Muslim leaders, and the larger Muslim American community at a time when Islamophobia is at an all-time high,” it added.

Andrew Gillum, a former mayor of Tallahassee who made a strong run in 2018 for the Florida governorship, said on CNN’s State of the Union Trump was making a racist attack on Omar as part of his strategy to win re-election.

“Obviously Ilhan has become a little bit of an easy target for this White House, for this administration,” Gillum said.

“But I think his attack is beyond Congresswoman Omar. This is about the fact that she looks a certain way, she is a woman of color, she happens to be of the Muslim faith. The president is setting, in my opinion, the groundwork for the kind of campaign he wants to run, which is to pit Americans against Americans, to turn brown and black people against his base.”

Omar, who represents a district including Minneapolis, has been in Congress just over three months but she has been targeted by Trump more than once. In February, after Omar suggested support for Israel was fueled by donations from a lobby group, she was accused of antisemitism.

“I did not run for Congress to be silent,” she tweeted on Saturday. “I stand undeterred to continue fighting for equal opportunity in our pursuit of happiness for all Americans.”

Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, the other Muslim American woman in Congress, was the first on Friday to call for Democrats to support Omar.

“Enough is enough,” she wrote. “No more silence, with NY Post and now Trump taking Ilhan’s words out of context to incite violence toward her, it’s time for more Dem[ocrats] to speak up. Clearly the GOP is fine with this shameful stunt, but we cannot stand by.”

Senator Bernie Sanders called attacks on Omar “disgusting and dangerous” and said Omar would not “back down to Trump’s racism and hate, and neither will we”.

Senator Elizabeth Warren said: “The president is inciting violence against a sitting congresswoman – and an entire group of Americans based on their religion. It’s disgusting. It’s shameful. And any elected leader who refuses to condemn it shares responsibility for it.”

Former representative Beto O’Rourke and New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said Trump’s attacks amounted to an “incitement to violence”.

Trump’s own controversial remarks and false claims about September 11 have come under renewed scrutiny. Speaking on CNN’s State of the Union on Sunday, the New York congressman Jerrold Nadler, whose district covers lower Manhattan, said he was not offended by Omar’s remarks because she referred only in passing to September 11.

But Trump was speaking out of turn, Nadler said, because after 9/11 he had taken money from a federal grant fund for small businesses that were damaged in the terrorist attacks.

“He stole \$150,000 from some small business person who could have used it to help rehabilitate himself,” Nadler said.

“He has no moral authority to be talking about 9/11 at all.”

Zarif’s... (Continued From Page 2)

“We are ready, if the talks don’t yield results, to apply sanctions firmly, and they know it,” Le Drian said.

Earlier this month, Britain, France and Germany accused Iran of “developing missile technology in violation of UN resolution,” and called for a full UN report in a letter delivered to UN chief Antonio Guterres.

The EU trio also claimed that Iran’s launch of a space vehicle and unveiling of two new ballistic missiles in February were inconsistent with UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which was adopted just after the signing of the 2015 nuclear agreement.

Resolution 2231 calls on Iran “not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.”

Iran denies having any such program and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly confirmed the peaceful nature of Tehran’s nuclear activities.

Last month, IAEA head Yukiya Amano once again reaffirmed Iran’s compliance with its commitments under the deal.

Egypt Parliament to Vote on Constitutional Changes

CAIRO (Dispatches) – Egypt’s parliament will vote on constitutional amendments including an extension to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s current four-year-term, its speaker, Ali Abdelaal, says.

Proposed constitutional amendments had previously suggested that Sisi would be allowed to seek two new six-year terms after his current one expires in 2022.

But according to a recent draft seen by Reuters, those latest amendments could allow Sisi to stay in power until 2030 by extending his current term by two more years and al-

lowing him to run once again in 2024.

State television reported that parliament’s legislative committee had approved the amendments and they were ready to go to the full house for a vote, scheduled for Tuesday.

Abdelaal said the changes were the result of civic discussions organized by parliament to hear diverse views on the proposed amendments.

If approved by parliament on Tuesday, the amendments would be put to a public referendum, widely expected later this month, before they go into effect, Abdelaal said.

Sisi’s supporters, dominate the 596-member assembly.

The proposed changes also call for setting up a second parliamentary chamber to be known as the Senate, composed of 180 members, and giving the president new powers over appointing judges and the public prosecutor.

They also include amending article 200 of the constitution to add that the military’s duty is to protect “the constitution and democracy and the fundamental makeup of the country and its civil nature.”