

'U.S. Trying to Hide Positive Trends in Restoration of Peace in Syria'

MOSCOW (Dispatches) – The United States wants to prevent the inhabitants of Syria's Rukban camp and the international community from seeing how peace is gradually returning to Syria with the help of the government, the heads of the joint Russia-Syria coordination center on refugee repatriation said on Monday.

"The United States is trying to conceal from the international community as well as the [Rukban] camp residents the positive dynamics of the restoration of peace, which has been achieved thanks to efforts made by the government of the Syrian Arab Republic with the support of Russia and other countries. Political and informational pressure is being put exercised on those who express readiness to contribute to Syria's restoration," the statement said.

According to the statement, the recently held third donor conference on Syria in Brussels demonstrated that the West was not interested in seeing Syrian refugees return from Europe. Syria donors pledged billions of dollars in aid to Syrian refugees abroad but refused to provide money to Damascus to help the country with the reconstruction process of refugee repatriation.

"The decisions of the Brussels forum to not allocate financial support to official Damascus have been made despite the fact that the situation in the country is normalizing, and the Syrian government is actively taking measures to revive Syria's economy,"



Druze residents of the Golan Heights hold the Syrian flag and portraits of President Bashar al-Assad during a rally in the Druze village of Majdal Shams on October 6, 2018.

the statement added.

The authors of the statement stressed that the only possible way to stop the suffering of the camp's residents was to resettle them.

"The Syrian authorities are ready at any moment to send six car convoys, prepared to evacuate Syrian citizens on comfortable buses, and rescue the suffering Syrian citizens... The consent of the U.S. side is the only thing necessary to disband the camp

and provide guarantees for the security of the movement of vehicles in the occupied area of At Tanf," they added.

Russia and Syria have repeatedly tried to draw the international community's attention to the deplorable conditions in which an estimated 40,000 camp inhabitants live and to the United States' reluctance to allow people to leave the camp, which is located in the U.S.-controlled At Tanf area.

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regime of Israel and Saudi Arabia, reiterating his longstanding charge that the U.S. and its allies are responsible for the country's ailing economy.

"Put all your curses on those who created the current situation," Rouhani urged Iranians, adding that "the United States, the Zionists" and Saudi Arabia were to blame.

On Sunday, the same day he inaugurated a new phase in the development of a massive natural gas field, Rouhani said Iran's inflation is "above 20 percent" and that this country of 80 million people has more than 3 million unemployed.

He promised to increase wages in both the government and the private sector, and raise pensions.

Rouhani, who first came to power in 2013, was re-elected for a second term in 2017, promising to improve the economy and foster more open relations with the world.

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to be completed within weeks, but it slowed down as opponents of the pullout frantically lobbied for troops to stay.

Last month, the White House announced that around 200 American troops would remain in Syria on a "peacekeeping" mission.

The U.S. denied the new report, saying plans for a residual force of around 200 troops had not changed.

"A claim reported this evening by a major U.S. newspaper that the U.S. military is developing plans to keep nearly 1,000 U.S. troops in Syria is factually incorrect," General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said.

Iran and Syria on Monday demanded the United States withdraw its troops from Syria.

The Iranian and Syrian military chiefs were speaking after a meeting in Damascus that also included their Iraqi counterpart, who gave a political boost to President Bashar al-Assad by announcing the Syrian border would soon be reopened.

The U.S. has a military base at Tanf, near the Damascus-Baghdad highway and the Iraq and Syrian frontier.

Ayoub noted there was no doubt that U.S. military capabilities were "big and advanced" but said that the Syrian army's sources of strength included a "readiness for sacrifices" and it was "capable of taking action and having an effect".

"America and others will leave Syria as they have left other areas, because this presence is illegal and rejected."

The Iranian armed forces chief of staff, Major General Muhammad Hussein Baqeri, echoed the demand for the departure of foreign forces that had deployed in Syria without the approval of Damascus.

He said the Damascus meeting had "studied the means that should be taken to recover" territories still outside government hands, including the areas of U.S. deployment, adding the decision in this regard was up to the Syrian state.

Baqeri said the meeting confirmed that the countries were "united against terrorism" and coordinating at a high level.

Syria's border crossing with Iraq has been closed for years. The area was overrun by Daesh in 2014, which swore to eradicate modern nation states and meld them into its self-declared caliphate.

"God willing the coming days will witness the opening of the border crossing and the continuation of visits and trade between the two countries," Iraqi Lieutenant General Othman al-Ghanimi said at a news conference broadcast by Syrian state television.

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a linguistics lecturer and Aziza al-Yousef, a retired computer science professor, were among those detained.

According to Hathloul's sister, Alia, the women were at first detained informally in what appeared to be an unused palace in Jeddah.

Activist groups say some of them,

including Hathloul, were held in solitary confinement and subjected to mistreatment and torture, including electric shocks, flogging and threats of rape and murder.

In an Op-Ed article for the NYT in January, Alia said that Saud al-Qahatani, one of MBS's closest aides who ran the SRIG and is accused of helping to plan Khashoggi's murder, was "present several times" when her sister was tortured, and that he threatened to kill her and throw her body in the sewer.

The treatment was so harsh that Nafjan tried to commit suicide, according to a U.S. intelligence assessment, the NYT reported.

The activists were later moved to the Dhahban Prison in Jeddah, where the physical abuse stopped and their relatives were allowed to visit, Alia said.

The three women were among 10 women who appeared before the criminal court in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, on Wednesday.

Reporters and diplomats were barred from attending the session and the government did not announce the charges against them.

At the time of the arrests, the public prosecutor said five men and four women were being held on suspicion of harming the country's interests and offering support to hostile elements abroad.

In 2017, MBS locked hundreds of princes, businessmen and former officials in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel on what the government said were accusations of corruption.

Many of those detained at the hotel were subject to physical abuse, and one died in custody, according to witnesses.

The NYT said while it was not known whether members of the SRIG were involved in the abuse, Qahatani and Maher Abdulaziz Mutrib were at the hotel, helping pressure detainees to sign over assets, according to associates of detainees who saw them.

Mutrib, who is accused of involvement in the killing of Khashoggi, is a diplomat and major general who has frequently been seen travelling with MBS, including on tours of Boston, Houston and the United Nations in New York.

A Saudi source with intimate knowledge of his country's intelligence services told MEE that Mutrib was "the spinal cord of the tiger squad".

"He was chosen by MBS himself, who depends on him and is close to him," the source said.

As well as domestic operations, MEE revealed in October that the SRIG was involved in the forcible repatriation of Saudis from other Arab countries.

The Saudi source told MEE that the SRIG's assassination methods vary.

Sometimes it gets its hands dirty, such as with Khashoggi, who was tortured, murdered and dismembered by the squad in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul on October 2.

But the unit also plans assassinations that keep the victim at arm's length, and are intended to appear as accidents, such as a car crash or house fire.

The unit has even had a dissident injected with deadly viruses as he visited hospital for a routine checkup, the source told MEE.

The Tiger Squad was named after Major General Ahmed al-Assiri, the deputy chief of Saudi intelligence, who is also accused of involvement in Khashoggi's murder.

"Assiri is well-known among his colleagues as 'the Tiger of the South'. Since the coalition's war [on Yemen] the Saudi media also started calling Assiri 'the Beast', and he liked this nickname," the source said.

The NYT said the unit had been so busy that last June its leader asked a top adviser to MBS whether the crown prince would give the squad bonuses for Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, according to US officials familiar with the intelligence reports.

A spokesman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington told the NYT the kingdom "takes any allegations of ill treatment of defendants awaiting trial or prisoners serving their sentences very seriously".

'Rabbi, Wounded in Alleged Palestinian Attack, Dies'



Zionist troops patrol a street in the northern West Bank village of Salem, east of Nablus, on March 18, 2019, during a search operation for an a Palestinian suspect.

AL-QUDS (Dispatches) – A rabbi died on Monday of wounds from an alleged Palestinian attack a day earlier in the occupied West Bank in which a trooper was killed - an incident

that played into Israeli politics three weeks before a national election.

The rabbi, Achiad Ettinger, 47, was a father of 12 and a resident of an illegal settlement in the West Bank. He was shot on Sunday shortly after the trooper was stabbed to death at an intersection on a busy highway in the territory.

The assailant allegedly used the 19-year-old conscript's rifle to fire at the rabbi and wound a second trooper before fleeing in a hijacked car, Zionist regime officials said.

The Zionist regime's military on Sunday raided an area near the Palestinian village of Burqin in their search for the assailant who fled the scene. Troops continued their search

on Monday, according to Palestinian media reports.

Tensions have been running high in the West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip since December 2017, when President Donald Trump decided to recognize al-Quds as the Zionist regime's "capital" and moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to the occupied Palestinian city.

The decision has emboldened the Israeli regime which regularly opens fire on Palestinians, accusing them of seeking to stab its troops.

Human rights groups have repeatedly slammed Tel Aviv for its shoot-to-kill policy, saying many of the Palestinians killed in such attacks did not pose any serious threat to Zionists.

'Almost Quarter of Sex Workers in Israeli-Occupied Territories Minors'

WEST BANK (Dispatches) – A new report has revealed that some 14,000 people in the Israeli-occupied territories are currently engaged in prostitution, including 3,000 minors.

Citing figures presented at the annual conference on the status of women held last week, Israeli daily the Jerusalem Post said 95% of sex workers in the occupied territories are women.

The conference was held by the Gender and Feminism Studies, M.A. at the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem al-Quds, the paper said.

The age of entry into prostitution in the occupied territories is as low as 13, and only 20% of the women engaged in the vocation ultimately manage to escape the cycle of prostitution, it said.

Most of the women engaged in prostitution have experienced severe sexual abuse in childhood, according to testimonies from women caught up in the cycle and those who have left it.

Na'ama Goldberg, founder and director of the Don't Stand Aside (Lo Omdot Mineged) organization, said women entering prostitution in the occupied territories are those who have no choice.

"In many cases we are talking about severe traumas such as incest, girls coming from non-functioning homes, complete with neglect of their emotional needs, running away from home and straight into the arms of pimps with the aim of seeking love. That's where the vicious circle begins."

2 Soldiers Killed in Clash With PKK Militants in Northern Iraq

MOSUL (Xinhua) – Clashes in northern Iraq have killed two Iraqi soldiers and wounded five Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants, the Iraqi military said.

A soldier asked the force of Turkish PKK militants to show their pass permission at a checkpoint before the PKK vehicles ran over the soldier, sparking a clash that killed two

soldiers and wounded five PKK militants, according to a statement by media office of the Iraqi Joint Operations Command (JOC).

Earlier, a security source put the death toll at three PKK militants and a soldier, while saying the PKK militants were conducting smuggling activities in the area.

Turkish forces frequently carry out ground

operations, airstrikes and artillery bombardments against the positions of the outlawed PKK militants in northern Iraq, especially the Qandil Mountains, main base of the PKK.

The PKK, which has been engaged in a separatist war against Turkey since 1984, is listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.