

REGIME OFFENSIVE IN NORTHWEST SYRIA

900,000 displaced since December

AFP, United Nations

A Russian-backed regime offensive in northwest Syria has displaced 900,000 people since the start of December, and babies are dying of cold because aid camps are full, the UN said yesterday.

“The crisis in northwest Syria has reached a horrifying new level,” said Mark Lowcock, the UN head of humanitarian affairs and emergency relief.

He said the displaced were overwhelmingly women and children who are “traumatized and forced to sleep outside in freezing temperatures because camps are full. Mothers burn plastic to keep children warm. Babies and small children are dying because of the cold.”

The Idlib region, including parts of neighboring Aleppo province, is home to some three million people, half of them already displaced from other parts of the country.

Lowcock yesterday warned that the violence in the northwest was “indiscriminate.”

“Health facilities, schools, residential areas, mosques and markets have been hit. Schools are suspended, many health facilities have closed. There is a serious risk of disease outbreaks. Basic infrastructure is falling apart,” he said in a statement.

“We are now receiving reports that settlements for displaced people are being hit, resulting in deaths, injuries and further displacement.”



A member of the Syrian Civil Defence, also known as the “White Helmets”, inspects through debris and rubble while searching for survivors at a destroyed hospital in the town of Darret Ezza, about 30 kilometres northwest of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo yesterday, after a reported air strike hit the building. Amid continued violence, Syria yesterday said that it would reopen Aleppo airport to civilian flights this week for the first time since the war forced its closure in 2012.

PHOTO: AFP

DETECTION OF CORONAVIRUS IN CRUISE SHIP IN CAMBODIA

WHO warns countries against ‘blanket measures’

AFP, Geneva

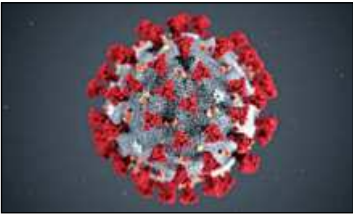
The World Health Organization (WHO) yesterday warned against “blanket measures” over the novel coronavirus outbreak, pointing out the epidemic outside of China was only affecting a “tiny” proportion of the population.

WHO also said that -- with a mortality rate of around 2 percent -- COVID-19 was “less deadly” than other coronaviruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).

“Measures should be taken proportional to the situation. Blanket measures may not help,” WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters in Geneva.

The outbreak has battered manufacturing and tourism across the region and led to multiple travel restrictions including for flights and cruises.

Michael Ryan, head of WHO’s health emergencies programme urged caution, but



not panic. He said that even at the epicentre of the crisis in the city of Wuhan in central Hubei Province, the “attack rate” -- a measure of the speed of spread of the virus -- was four per 100,000.

“This is a very serious outbreak and it has the potential to grow, but we need to balance that in terms of the number of people infected. Outside Hubei this epidemic is affecting a very, very tiny, tiny proportion of people,” he said.

Tedros said that more than 80 percent of patients infected with the virus have mild disease and recover, while 14 percent have severe diseases such as pneumonia.

Around five percent of cases are considered critical with possible multi-organ failure, septic shock and respiratory failure and, in some cases, death,” he added.

Tedros said there were “relatively few cases” among children and more research was needed to understand why.

‘Animals live for man’

China’s appetite for wildlife likely to survive virus

REUTERS, Hong Kong/Beijing

For the past two weeks China’s police have been raiding houses, restaurants and makeshift markets across the country, arresting nearly 700 people for breaking the temporary ban on catching, selling or eating wild animals.

The scale of the crackdown, which has netted almost 40,000 animals including squirrels, weasels and boars, suggests that China’s taste for eating wildlife and using animal parts for medicinal purposes is not likely to disappear overnight, despite potential links to the new coronavirus.

Traders legally selling donkey, dog, deer, crocodile and other meat told Reuters they plan to get back to business as soon as the markets reopen.

“I’d like to sell once the ban is lifted,” said Gong Jian, who runs a wildlife store online and operates shops in China’s autonomous Inner Mongolia region. “People like buying wildlife. They buy for themselves to eat or give as presents because it is very presentable and gives you face.”

Gong said he was storing crocodile and deer meat in large freezers but would have to kill all the quails he had been breeding as supermarkets were no longer buying his eggs and they cannot be eaten after freezing.

Scientists suspect, but have not proven, that the new coronavirus passed to humans from bats via pangolins, a small ant-eating mammal whose scales are highly prized in traditional Chinese

medicine.

Some of the earliest infections were found in people who had exposure to Wuhan’s seafood market, where bats, snakes, civets and other wildlife were sold.

“In many people’s eyes, animals are living for man, not sharing the earth with man,” said Wang Song, a retired researcher of Zoology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The outbreak of the new coronavirus, which has killed more than 1,600 people in China, revived a debate in the country about the use of wildlife for food and medicine. It previously came to prominence in 2003 during the spread of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which scientists believe was passed to humans from bats, via civets.

Many academics, environmentalists and residents in China have joined international conservation groups in calling for a permanent ban on trade in wildlife and closure of the markets where wild animals are sold.

Online debate within China, likely swayed by younger people, has heavily favoured a permanent ban.

Nevertheless, a minority of Chinese still like to eat wild animals in the belief it is healthy.

The United Nations estimates the global illegal wildlife trade is worth about \$23 billion a year. China is by far the largest market, environmental groups say.

UN: 14 children among 22 killed in Cameroon massacre

Armed men have massacred 22 villagers including 14 children in an anglophone region of Cameroon, according to the United Nations, with the opposition blaming the killings on government troops. The bloodshed occurred on Friday in the Northwest region of Cameroon, James Nunan, a local official with UN humanitarian coordination agency OCHA, told AFP yesterday. The central government has been battling separatists in the minority English-speaking regions for three years, a conflict that has left 3,000 people dead and forced more than 700,000 to flee their homes. The army has denied any involvement.

24 killed in Burkina Faso church attack: governor

Gunmen have killed 24 people and wounded 18 in an attack on a Protestant church in a village in northern Burkina Faso, officials said yesterday. The assault occurred on Sunday during a weekly service at a Protestant church, security officials said. Christians and churches in northern provinces have become frequent targets by armed Islamists. On February 10, suspected jihadists in Sebba seized seven people at the home of a pastor. Five bodies were found three days later, including the pastor, according to the local governor. According to UN figures, jihadist attacks in Burkina and neighbouring Mali and Niger left nearly 4,000 people dead last year.

India’s ‘Usain Bolt’ turns down sprint trial



A buffalo jockey in India has refused to take part in a track and field trial after his record-setting performance in a traditional footrace drew comparisons with Olympic sprint legend Usain Bolt. Srinivas Gowda and his buffaloes ran 142.5 metres in 13.62 seconds, setting a record in the annual race known as Kambala in Karnataka. With a time that equates to running 100m in 9.55 seconds, compared to the retired Bolt’s world record of 9.58sec, social media buzz erupted over the chiselled construction worker. But with the Tokyo Olympics looming in July, Gowda politely declined an invitation from India’s sports minister to try out at the Sports Authority of India in Bangalore. “Kambala and track events are different and those who have done well in one cannot replicate in the other.

SOURCE: AFP

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