

Hamas admits kidnapping Israeli teens

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

A top Hamas official admitted the three Israeli teenagers whose deaths in June caused the current spiral of violence were taken by the military arm of the organisation.

Hamas has until now refused to respond to Israeli accusations it planned the abduction and murder of the three boys, one a joint US-Israeli citizen, in Hebron.

Eyal Yifrah, 19, Gilad Shaer and Naftali Fraenkel, both 16, were abducted while hitchhiking in the Israeli occupied West Bank on 12 June and killed.

Their deaths were the final spark for the current violence, which has seen more than 2,000 Palestinians, mostly civilians, killed. Israel has lost 67 people, all but three of them soldiers.



Palestinian mourners carry the body of one of three senior Hamas commanders during their funeral in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah, yesterday. Top Right, A man grieves over the body of his son at Gaza city's Al-Shifa; placards show anti-Israeli slogans.



PHOTO: AFP

US patients beat Ebola

AFP, Washington

Two American missionaries who were sickened with the dangerous Ebola virus while working in Liberia are doing better and have been released from an Atlanta hospital, doctors said yesterday.

Doctor Kent Brantly, 33, and Nancy Writebol, 60, both Christian aid workers, were infected with Ebola in Monrovia last month as the largest outbreak in history swept West Africa killing 1,350 people.

They were airlifted to Emory University Hospital for treatment three weeks ago.

"The discharge from the hospital of both these patients poses no public health threat," said Bruce Ribner, director of Emory's Infectious Disease Unit.

"This is a fairly devastating disease, but we would anticipate that in general most patients, if they have not had any substantial organ damage, will make a complete recovery."

Writebol was released on August 19, and did not appear at a press conference with Brantly.

Her release was not announced earlier this week because she had requested privacy and did not want details of her medical condition to be made public, doctors said.

Both American patients were given an experimental treatment called ZMapp, which is made in tobacco leaves and contains a cocktail of antibodies. However, the drug is in short supply and doctors have stressed they have no way of knowing if it helped the patients recover or not.

AFTERMATH OF JOURNO BEHEADING Obama urged to clear his strategy in Iraq

AFP, Washington

In calling for global action against the "cancer" of Islamic State militants, President Barack Obama puts the fight against them at the top of his agenda in a move that also raises questions about his military strategy in Iraq.

Obama made it clear. The beheading of American journalist James Foley at the hands of the group that has captured swaths of Iraq and Syria shocks the world's conscience, and only reinforces Washington's determination to fight "this kind of nihilistic ideologies."

Obama had already insisted for days that the struggle to rout out IS will play out over the long term, and that there was no timeline for targeted US airstrikes.

And Washington has highlighted encouraging results obtained in close collaboration with Kurdish and Iraqi forces since in the more than 90 air raids conducted since August 8, such as the recapture of Iraq's largest dam.

Defense policy expert Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations noted, however, that challenges remained ahead, despite the success of the initial air strikes two and half years after American troops withdrew from the country.

"In this kind of war, the early airstrikes have an immediate effect partly in destroying targets that haven't taken adequate precautions," he said.

But once the fighters adapt, spread out their military equipment and mix in the civilian population, it's a major game-changer. He called for a medium- and long-term strategy to be clearly defined.

While the Pentagon insists its goals are clearly defined, the definition itself -- delivering humanitarian aid and protecting US assets and personnel -- is open to interpretation.

Nearly two weeks after the first US air raids in northern Iraq, many questions remain on how it is being carried out -- and about the scope of US military actions in the weeks and months to come.

"That, of course, remains the big unknown -- how far will President Obama go?" Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations wrote in Commentary magazine.

"Beyond protecting the Yazidis and retaking Mosul dam, we still need a strategy to annihilate ISIS. It can be done -- and if done right it will be the best, indeed the only worthy, response to James Foley's barbaric demise."

He called for sending 10,000 US soldiers and military advisors to Iraq, as well as for a significant reinforcement of the air raids.

On the domestic front, the release of Foley's execution video could make the American public sense a greater threat from IS, and the price it is willing to pay to confront it.

Senator John McCain told The Arizona Republic that Obama should attack the militants in Syria too.

"One of the decisions that he has to make is to attack ISIS in Syria because they are moving the captured equipment there and they are fighting there and their enclaves are there. They have erased the border between Iraq and Syria," he said.

US strikes IS after hostage horror

Reveals failed bid to rescue captives; jihadists demanded ransom for slain journo

AGENCIES

The United States sought to maintain pressure on jihadist militants in Iraq yesterday, launching air strikes after the murder of a journalist underlined the international threat posed by the Islamic State.

And, in the latest sign that a reluctant America could be dragged deeper into the fighting, officials revealed that US special forces had already carried out a failed hostage rescue mission inside Syria.

On Tuesday, the Islamic State released a video in which a militant with a British accent is seen beheading American journalist James Foley and threatening a second US hostage. The man said Foley was killed to avenge US air strikes against IS.

The murder has stoked fears in Britain and beyond that the territory that IS militants have seized in Syria and northern Iraq could become a launching pad for a new round of global extremist attacks.

US President Barack Obama called on countries in the region to join with the United States to "extract the cancer" of the Islamic State's jihadist ideology.

In six bombings near a dam north of Mosul yesterday, US warplanes damaged three Humvee armored trucks, another vehicle and several roadside bomb "emplacements," Central Command said.

The US military has conducted 90 air strikes in Iraq since August 8.

Separately, officials confirmed that in recent months US special forces had carried out a raid inside eastern Syria to try to rescue people held hostage by IS militants, reportedly including Foley.

The White House and Pentagon released statements on Wednesday confirming that President Barack Obama personally authorised the July mission, which culminated in a

firefight between militants and more than 20 Delta Force commandos, one of whom received a "minor injury".

The raid on an oil refinery in northern Syria was ultimately unsuccessful because the hostages, thought to have been held there in the weeks leading up to the operation, had recently been moved.

Foley, 40, was a freelance reporter and videographer who worked predominantly for GlobalPost. He was kidnapped with another journalist close to Syria's border with Turkey in November 2012.

GlobalPost yesterday said his jihadist captors had demanded a ransom of 100 million euros for his release.

It said the captors made contact with GlobalPost and the Foley family fewer than half a dozen times, and "the kidnappers never really negotiated" over their huge sum, but simply made their demand.

IRAQ CRISIS



Supporters of Pakistani opposition politician Imran Khan attend an anti-government protest in front of the Parliament building in Islamabad, yesterday. News on page 16.

PHOTO: AFP

MICHAEL BROWN SHOOTING Protests cool off in Ferguson

AFP, Ferguson

Protests in the strife-torn town of Ferguson cooled late Wednesday after the top US law enforcement official pledged a full investigation into the slaying of teenager Michael Brown that kicked off days of racially charged unrest.

Police said six people were arrested, down from 47 on Tuesday, and that demonstrators refrained from throwing projectiles and firing weapons as they had in the worst moments of the rioting in this St Louis suburb.

Earlier Wednesday Attorney General Eric Holder met with the parents of Brown, a black unarmed 18-year-old who was shot dead by a white police officer on August 9.

Holder promised the family in a private meeting there would be a "fair and independent" inquiry into the death of their son.

A grand jury was to begin hearing witnesses to Brown's killing, with widespread calls for the police officer to be put on trial for the fatal shooting.

The attorney general, who is African-American, told Ferguson residents he had assigned the justice department's "most experienced agents and prosecutors" to investigate Brown's death, amid local suspicion that police will protect one of their own.

Police say that Brown was rushing at the officer, but other witnesses say the teen -- who was about to start vocational college -- had his hands up, ready to surrender.

UNSC lacks resolve to end world crises

Outgoing UN rights chief takes swipe at the body

AFP, United Nations

The UN's outgoing rights chief leveled harsh criticism at the Security Council yesterday, saying the top world body too often lacked resolve to end conflicts and save lives.

Navi Pillay, who steps down in the coming days as UN Human Rights Commissioner after six years, said national interests often trumped human suffering when the council weighed action to put an end to wars.

"There has not always been a firm and principled decision by members to put an end to crises," Pillay said in a swansong address to the 15-member council.

"I firmly believe that greater responsiveness by this council would have saved hundreds of lives."

South African-born Pillay said the use of vetoes to block measures was a "short-



Navi Pillay

term and ultimately counter-productive tactic", and urged the powers to develop a "broader conception of national interest."

The five permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- wield veto power on the council, and their use highlights deep divisions.

In May, Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution giving the International Criminal Court the green light to open cases for war crimes prosecution in the Syria conflict.

The United States, which has repeatedly vetoed resolutions critical of Israel, has resisted attempts to push for a strong resolution on ending the conflict in Gaza.

In his address, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon complained that a failure to overcome divisions and a slow response "can be measured in terrible loss of life" and loss of credibility for the UN.

Syria war death toll tops 180,000

AFP, Beirut

More than 180,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict broke out in March 2011, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said in a new toll published yesterday.

The Britain-based monitoring group, which relies on a network of sources on the ground, said it had documented the deaths of 180,215 people.

Among them were 58,805 civilians, including 9,428 children and 6,036 women.

The group said 49,699 members of the armed opposition had been killed, among them fighters from jihadist groups like al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State. It did not break the figures down further.

The new toll includes 66,365 regime forces -- 40,438 from the military, and 25,927 members of a pro-regime militia.

The Observatory also documented the deaths of 561 members of Lebanon's Hezbollah movement, which is fighting alongside the regime, and 1,854 other non-Syrian pro-regime fighters.

The toll also includes 2,931 unidentified people whose deaths the Observatory has confirmed without being able to record their identities.

The conflict in Syria erupted in March 2011, with peaceful anti-government protests that the authorities responded to with force.

It has also displaced nearly half the country's population.

Poroshenko 'talks peace' amid raging civil war

AFP, Donetsk

Ukraine's president said he will "talk peace" with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin by demanding the withdrawal of pro-Kremlin militants from the war-torn east when they meet next week for the first time in months.

President Petro Poroshenko yesterday said that "the whole world is tired of war" and that he would "call for militants to be pulled out of Ukraine" when he meets Putin for crunch talks in Minsk alongside top EU officials.

His strident tone reflects the fact that government forces have made significant gains against the pro-Russian rebels in recent days. A fierce offensive continued yesterday, with Kiev hoping for a knock-out blow ahead of the fresh round of diplomacy.

Meanwhile, a controversial Russian aid convoy inched closer to the border with rebel-held areas. Ukraine's customs officials said they had started processing the first of the lorries after a week of wrangling caused

by fears that the convoy could be used to smuggle in military supplies to the rebels.

Kiev has accused Moscow of ramping up support to the rebels as their situation grows more desperate, and the West fears the Kremlin could even launch a full-scale invasion as a last roll of the dice.

Russia has persistently denied allegations that it is arming and effectively running the rebellion. It says it wants an end to the Ukrainian offensive and to four months of fighting that has killed over 2,200 people.

It ridiculed claims from Kiev that Russian military documents had been found in armoured vehicles captured following a battle near the rebel stronghold of Lugansk.

On the ground, fighting continued in a string of key rebel towns as government forces refocused attempts to cut off alleged supply routes from Russia.

Shelling near the main separatist city of Donetsk left two civilians dead yesterday, while an interior ministry official said 16 servicemen were killed in fierce battles for control of a railway hub in the region.

UKRAIN CRISIS