

Living on grass soup

HRW calls for aid to 'starving' Iraqi city of Fallujah

AFP, Baghdad

Human Rights Watch yesterday called for Iraq to allow aid to reach starving residents of the city of Fallujah, and for the Islamic State group to allow civilians to leave.

"The people of Fallujah are besieged by the government, trapped by (IS), and are starving," HRW's deputy Middle East director, Joe Stork, said in a statement. "The warring parties should make sure that aid reaches the civilian population."

HRW cited Iraqi activists who are in contact with Fallujah residents as saying that people "were reduced to eating flat bread made with flour from ground date seeds and soups made from grass."

Anti-government fighters took control of Fallujah, just 50 kilometres west of Baghdad, in early 2014 during unrest that broke out after security forces demolished a protest camp farther west, and it later became an IS stronghold.

IS seized more territory in surrounding Anbar province after launching an offensive later that year, but pro-government forces have since regained significant ground from the jihadists.

Iraqi forces have largely cut off access to Fallujah, while IS is preventing residents from leaving the city.

Kerry urges Iran to help end Yemen, Syria wars

HRW says US bombs used in deadly Yemen market strikes

AFP, Manama

US Secretary of State John Kerry urged Iran yesterday to help end wars in Yemen and Syria, where Tehran and its Gulf Arab rivals are backing opposing sides.

On the first visit by a US chief diplomat to Bahrain since 2010, Kerry also told authorities in Manama accused of discriminating against the country's Shia majority that respect for human rights was "essential".

Kerry was to meet his Gulf counterparts later yesterday, two weeks before President Barack Obama is scheduled to attend a Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh when Washington's Middle East policy is likely to come under the microscope.

Kerry called on Iran to "help us end the war in Yemen... help us end the war in Syria, not intensify, and help us to be able to change the dynamics of this region".

He told a news conference in Manama that Tehran should "prove to the world that it wants to be a constructive member of the international community and contribute to

peace and stability".

Bahraini Foreign Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, whose government accuses Iran of stoking persistent protests among the kingdom's Shias demanding an end to Sunni minority rule, echoed Kerry's call. "Yes, we do want to see Iran change its foreign policy," he said, speaking alongside Kerry.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said yesterday that bombs supplied by the United States were used in coalition air strikes on a market in Yemen that killed at least 97 civilians including children last month.

Asked to comment on the report, Kerry said: "With respect to Yemen I don't have solid information, any documentation, with respect to what weapon might or might not have been used."

The United States has been exerting efforts to "try to secure a full ceasefire in Yemen", he added. In his meeting with Gulf ministers, Kerry was to discuss "some of the critical regional issues, primarily Yemen, Syria, the situation in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region," a US official said.



GLOBETROTTER Kerry breaks Hillary's record

AP, Manama

John Kerry is now the most travelled secretary of state in US history, breaking the record as he arrived in the Middle East kingdom of Bahrain on Wednesday.

The trip pushed Kerry past 1.06 million miles as America's top diplomat, narrowly beating

Condoleezza Rice by about 1,000 miles. Rice, who was secretary of state under President George W Bush, held the previous mark with 1.059 million miles.

Kerry eclipsed Hillary Clinton's mileage tally in December. With 10 months left before a new president takes office, Kerry is showing no signs of tempering his hectic travel schedule.

He flew to the Mideast on Tuesday from New York after attending an energy conference, stopping in Ireland to refuel. He plans to visit Japan later in the week.

With no immediate plans to leave the State Department, Kerry could easily pad his new record by hundreds of thousands of miles before departing government.

The former Massachusetts senator and former Democratic presidential nominee has spent more than 96 days in the air since becoming secretary of state in February 2013. He has spent parts of 467 different days on his well-worn government plane.

One record eludes Kerry still: Clinton's 112 countries visited on the job. Having shuttled regularly between several favourite destinations, Kerry had only been to 80 countries. Bahrain makes 81.



Migrants and refugees clash with riot police during a protest to call for the reopening of the borders at their makeshift camp in the northern border village of Idomeni, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Turkey will ditch migrant deal if EU breaks promises'

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday warned the European Union that Ankara would not implement a key deal on reducing the flow of migrants if Brussels failed to fulfil its side of the bargain.

Erdogan's typically combative comments indicated that Ankara would not sit still if the EU fell short on a number of promises in the deal, including visa-free travel to Europe for Turks by this summer.

"There are precise conditions. If the European Union does not take the necessary steps, then Turkey will not implement the agreement," Erdogan said in a speech at his presidential palace in Ankara.

"Everything that has been promised (must be put into action by the EU), everything that is specified under the accord."

The March 18 accord sets out measures for reducing Europe's worst migration crisis since World War II, including stepped-up checks by Turkey and the shipping back to Turkish territory of migrants who arrive in Greece.

In return, Turkey is slated to receive benefits including visa-free travel for its citizens to Europe, which in the accord is promised "at the latest" by June 2016.

Turkey is also to receive a total of six billion euros in financial aid up to the end of 2018 for the 2.7 million Syrian refugees it is hosting.

The first transfer of over 200 migrants from the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios to Turkey took place on Monday. But the process has been stalled by a last-minute flurry of asylum applications by migrants desperate to avoid expulsion.



ENERGY CRISIS Venezuela extends weekends

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan workers will get Fridays off for the next two months as part of an emergency plan to save electricity, the president said.

Now, because of a severe drought that has left levels at hydroelectric dams at extremely low levels, in order save on electricity the government is effectively shutting the labor force down for a three-day weekend, starting today and lasting until June 6.

The decision was announced by President Nicolas Maduro. He said the country is in dire straits because of low water level in 18 hydroelectric dams.

PANAMA PAPERS SCANDAL

Probe opened against Argentina president

AFP, Panama City

Argentine President Mauricio Macri became the latest world leader caught in the storm of the so-called Panama Papers yesterday as prosecutors opened an investigation into his offshore financial dealings.

Macri, the leading symbol of a budding right-wing resurgence in Latin America, joins Russian President Vladimir Putin and China's Xi Jinping in the tempest unleashed by the leak of millions of offshore financial documents from Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca.

But unlike Putin and Xi, who are only connected to the revelations via their inner circles, Macri is listed on the board of directors of two offshore firms -- one registered in the Bahamas and the other in Panama.

Argentine federal prosecutor Federico Delgado said he had asked a judge to request information from the national tax authority and anti-corruption office to determine whether Macri "omitted, with malicious intent, to complete his sworn declaration" of assets, a require-

ment for Argentine public officials.

Macri did not list either company in his financial declarations when he became Buenos Aires mayor in 2007 or president last December.

The conservative leader, who vowed to fight corruption during his presidential campaign, denies wrongdoing and says the firms were legitimate operations set up by his father, a wealthy business magnate.

The ICIJ coordinated the investigation with more than 100 media groups around the world after the 11.5 million documents were obtained from an anonymous source by German daily Sueddeutsche Zeitung.

Already, they have toppled Iceland's prime minister and led to a Swiss police raid on the headquarters of European football body UEFA.

Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela fended off accusations that his country has allowed the rich and powerful to hide their funds from international tax authorities and the law, vowing to "confront whoever comes to put down Panama's image."



Mauricio Macri

Clinton, Sanders clash over leaks

AGENCIES

Hillary Clinton and leftist challenger Bernie Sanders turned up the heat yesterday in the Democratic race for the White House, locking horns over trade and the "Panama Papers" scandal ahead of the New York primary.

Clinton is not "qualified" to be US President, Bernie Sanders has claimed, while Clinton has said that she is "not even sure" if Sanders is a Democrat.

Compared to their counterparts in the race for the Republican nomination, Clinton and Sanders have conducted a relatively cordial campaign. However, relations between the two camps have grown increasingly hostile in recent weeks.

Clinton, the frontrunner and former secretary of state, holds a six-point lead over Sanders in the RealClearPolitics national poll average but lost seven of the last eight voting contests to the Vermont senator.

The 74-year-old senator sought to capitalize on the leaked "Panama Papers," which lay bare how terror groups, drug cartels and pariah countries can hide money in banking havens, by conflating it with Clinton's support for a 2012 Panama free trade agreement.

"I don't think you are qualified if you supported the Panama free trade agreement, something I very strongly opposed, which has made it easier for wealthy people and corporations all over the world to avoid paying taxes owed to their countries," he told a rally in Philadelphia on Wednesday.

Sanders contended at the time that the free trade agreement would make it harder for the United States to crack down on offshore tax havens in Panama.

The former first lady has repeatedly questioned whether Sanders is a qualified commander-in-chief when the 74-year-old Senator has served his entire career in the small state of Vermont, first as mayor then as representative in Congress.

"If the Clinton campaign wants to engage in a more bare-knuckled kind of approach, we're happy to do that as well," Sanders's campaign director Jeff Weaver told MSNBC on Thursday.

"Secretary Clinton is funded by Wall Street interests and other special interests. You know, she's really made a deal with the devil, and the devil always wants his due. So that time will come," he said.

Clinton leads Sanders 54-42 percent among likely Democratic voters in New York and 50-44 percent in Pennsylvania, according to Quinnipiac University polls.

China largest market for Mossack Fonseca

AFP, Beijing

Nearly a third of the business of the law firm at the centre of the Panama Papers scandal came from its offices in Hong Kong and China, reports said yesterday.

More than 16,300 of Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca's active shell companies were incorporated through its Hong Kong and China offices, 29 percent of the worldwide total, according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which co-ordinated a year-long investigation into a trove of 11.5 million documents.

The investigation found that relatives of at least eight current or former members of China's Politburo Standing Committee, the ruling party's most powerful body, have been implicated in the use of offshore companies.

Such vehicles are not illegal in themselves and can be used for legitimate business needs. But they commonly feature in corruption cases, when they can be used to secretly move ill-gotten gains abroad.

Media in the Communist-ruled country have avoided reporting on the leaks' Chinese revelations, and social media has been scrubbed of references to them, with foreign news broadcasters such as the BBC blacked out when they report on the Panama Papers.

Impeachment bid should go ahead

Says Brazil parliamentary commission on Rousseff's illegal conduct

AFP, Brasilia

The impeachment of Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff should go ahead, the representative for a congressional commission said Wednesday, bringing the country's political crisis a step closer to a showdown.

Jovair Arantes, rapporteur for a special impeachment commission in the lower house of Congress, said he had concluded the "legal admissibility" of the case against the leftist president.

"The magnitude and scope of the violations made by the president of the republic constitute a serious abuse," he said.

The decision was given in a lengthy report that Arantes read aloud, live on national television, to the 65-member impeachment commission, sometimes interrupted by deputies shouting and arguing.

Although Arantes' decision was non-binding and mostly symbolic, it meant the opposition drew first blood just as an increasingly bitter battle to remove Brazil's first woman president from office gathers pace.

On Monday, the full commission will vote its recommendation. Then on April 18, the lower house of Congress meets to hold a decisive vote on whether impeachment will go ahead.

"Today's vote was expected," said Mendonca Filho, a deputy from the conservative, pro-impeachment Democrat party. "Now we have to find out the position of the whole commission ... and then we move on to the main battle in the full chamber."

Rousseff is accused of presiding over large-scale fiddling of government accounts to mask the depth of budgetary shortfalls during her re-election in 2014.



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