

World forgot about Syria

Says WHO as aid trickles in

AFP, Dubai

A senior World Health Organization official bemoaned Syria's "forgotten crisis" yesterday, as aid began trickling into rebel-held areas, days after a devastating earthquake.

As the WHO prepared to fly medical supplies to Syria from Dubai, Mike Ryan, executive director of the WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, said a huge backlog of aid was waiting to reach Syria's rebel-held northwest.

The single aid corridor bypassing government-controlled areas and servicing the war-shattered region, which is home to four million people, was temporarily cut off by Monday's massive quake.

The first convoy of emergency supplies finally passed through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey on Thursday. More than 22,000 people have died in the disaster in both countries.

"The world's forgotten about Syria," Ryan told reporters in Dubai, during preparations for the aid flight.

"Frankly, the earthquake's brought attention back. But those millions of people in Syria have been struggling now for years. That's become a forgotten crisis."

UN chief Antonio Guterres urged the Security Council on Thursday to authorise the opening of additional crossings on the Turkey-Syria border for the delivery of UN aid to rebel areas.

This week, WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned of a "race against time" to save lives in the quake zone as aftershocks continue and freezing winter conditions bite.

Even before the earthquake, a decade of civil war and Syrian-Russian aerial bombardment had destroyed hospitals and prompted electricity, fuel and water shortages in the rebel-held northwest.

"There's a huge backlog of supplies ready to go," Ryan said. "Many agencies, including our own had pre-stocked because we're into the winter, they're already very exposed."

"There's a huge problem with millions of people."

The chances of finding survivors had dimmed before the first aid arrived, after the end of the three-day period that experts consider critical to save lives.

Syria is now facing a "secondary disaster" of lives lost due to a lack of medical supplies, Ryan warned.

"We have to recognise the scale of this disaster is so large, it's overwhelming everyone's capacity," he said.

"If they don't have equipment, they can't do their job -- it's like asking a fireman to rush to a fire without a fire hose."



Rescuers carry 27-year-old survivor Rabia Ofkeli in the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in Hatay, Turkey, yesterday, more than 100 hours after the disaster hit the region.

PHOTO: STAR

No deal as IMF leaves crisis-hit Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

An IMF team left Pakistan yesterday after crisis talks with the government failed to deliver a deal on financial aid that would help the South Asian country avert economic collapse.

After months of deadlock, the International Monetary Fund delegation arrived last week for last-ditch negotiations with a government fearing the political consequences of enforcing bailout conditions in an election year.

Pakistan's economy is in dire straits, stricken by a balance-of-payments crisis as it attempts to service high levels of external debt amid political chaos and deteriorating security.

Inflation has rocketed, the rupee has plummeted and the country can no longer afford imports, causing a

severe decline in industry.

"Considerable progress was made during the mission on policy measures to address domestic and external imbalances," the IMF said in a statement. "Virtual discussions will continue in the coming days to finalise the implementation details of these policies."

The IMF is demanding that the nuclear-armed nation boost its pitifully low tax base, end tax exemptions for the export sector, and raise artificially low petrol, electricity and gas prices meant to help low-income families.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif previously called the conditions for the \$1.2 billion loan instalment "beyond imagination".

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar addressed the nation after the IMF team left the country yesterday

morning, saying talks had "concluded successfully" and that a draft memorandum on broadly agreed policies had been shared by the lender with the government.

He said petrol prices would rise by roughly four percent and additional taxes would be imposed, without giving further details.

Years of financial mismanagement and political instability have damaged Pakistan's economy -- exacerbated by a global energy crisis and devastating floods.

After months of holding out in search of alternatives, the government began to bow to IMF pressure in mid-January, loosening controls on the rupee to rein in a rampant black market in US dollars -- a step that caused the currency to plunge to a record low.

Car ramming kills 2 in east Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Two people including a child were killed and several injured when a driver rammed his car into a group of people at a bus stop on the outskirts of Jerusalem yesterday, Israeli emergency services said. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described the incident as a terrorist attack and ordered security forces to be reinforced. Police said the driver had been "neutralized" but it was not immediately confirmed that he had been killed. The incident occurred during a period of high tension following an attack in which a lone Palestinian gunman shot seven people outside a synagogue last month.

ADANI CONTROVERSY

Modi's popularity intact: survey

REUTERS, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's enormous popularity remains intact despite the biggest political attack on him in years as rivals accuse his government of giving undue favours to the Adani Group, approval ratings showed yesterday. Data from polling agency C-Voter, shared with Reuters, showed almost half of those surveyed until Feb. 5 were "very much satisfied" with Modi's work as prime minister and a further 30% said they were "satisfied to some extent". Both ratings have hovered around the same levels since Nov. 2022, the data showed.

Macron mulls stripping Putin of France's top honour

AFP, Brussels

French President Emmanuel Macron yesterday said he might strip his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin of France's top honour, but is waiting for the "right moment" to do so. Putin received the Grand-Croix de la Legion d'Honneur, the top rank in France's honours system, in 2006 at a time when Moscow enjoyed better relations with Paris and the West. But since Putin ordered last year's all-out invasion of Ukraine, ties have all but broken down and the European Union has imposed a range of tough economic sanctions.

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