

UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

Russia held 6,000 for 're-education'

Says report; UN warns grain deal in 'difficult territory'

AGENCIES

Russia has held at least 6,000 Ukrainian children - likely many more - in sites in Russian-held Crimea and Russia whose primary purpose appears to be political re-education, according to a US-backed report published on Tuesday.

The report said Yale University researchers had identified at least 43 camps and other facilities where Ukrainian children have been held that were part of a "large-scale systematic network" operated by Moscow since its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

The children included those with parents or clear familial guardianship, those Russia deemed orphans, others who were in the care of Ukrainian state institutions before the invasion and those whose custody was unclear or uncertain due to the war, it said.

"The primary purpose of the camp facilities we've identified appears to be political re-education," Nathaniel Raymond, one of the researchers, said in a briefing to reporters.

Some of the children were moved through the system and adopted by Russian families, or moved into foster care in Russia, the report said.

The youngest child identified in the Russian program was just four months old, and some camps were giving military training to children as young as 14 years, Raymond said, adding that researchers had not found evidence those children were later deployed in combat.

Russia's embassy in Washington, responding to the reports that Russia forcefully holds children, said Russia accepts children who were forced to flee Ukraine, reports Reuters.

"We do our best to keep underage people in families, and in cases of absence or death of parents and relatives - to transfer orphans under guardianship," the embassy said on the Telegram messaging platform.

It also reiterated Russia's allegations that Ukraine, using Western weapons, strikes civilian infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the UN warned yesterday that agreements to enable grain shipments from war-torn Ukraine, desperately needed to ward off hunger in poor countries, were in "difficult territory."

The hard-won Black Sea Grain Initiative was brokered by the UN and Turkey last July. It was renewed a first time in November and is up for renewal again on March 18, reports AFP. "I think we're in slightly more difficult territory at the moment," UN humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths told reporters.



Children walk in a camp for Syrian refugee in Turkey set up by Turkish relief agency AFAD in the İslahiye district of Gaziantep yesterday after a 7.8-magnitude earthquake on February 6 has killed at least 41,000 people and devastated swathes of Syria and neighbouring Turkey.

PHOTO: AFP



UNDERCOVER MEDIA PROBE

Israeli firm meddled in more than 30 polls worldwide

AFP, Paris

An Israeli firm sought to influence more than 30 elections around the world for clients by hacking, sabotage and spreading disinformation, according to an undercover media investigation published yesterday.

It adds to a growing body of evidence that shadowy private firms across the world are profiting from invasive hacking tools and the power of social media platforms to manipulate public opinion.

The firm was dubbed "Team Jorge" by investigating journalists who posed as potential clients in order to gather information on its methods and capabilities.

Its boss, Tal Hanan, is a former Israeli special forces operative who boasted of being able to control

supposedly secure Telegram accounts and thousands of fake social media profiles, as well as planting news stories, the reports say.



The investigation was carried out by a consortium of journalists from 30 outlets, including the Guardian in Britain, Le Monde in France, Der Spiegel in Germany and El País in Spain, under the direction of the France-based non-profit Forbidden Stories. "The methods

and techniques described by Team Jorge raise new challenges for big tech platforms," the Guardian wrote.

"Evidence of a global private market in disinformation aimed at elections will also ring alarm bells for democracies around the world."

Hanan did not respond to detailed questions, saying only: "I deny any wrongdoing."

The 50-year-old told three undercover reporters that his services, often called "black ops", were available to intelligence agencies and political campaigns.

"We are now involved in one election in Africa... We have a team in Greece and a team in [the] Emirates... [We have completed] 33 presidential-level campaigns, 27 of which were successful," the Guardian quoted him as saying.

SHIPWRECK OFF LIBYA

73 migrants presumed dead: IOM

REUTERS, DUBAI



At least 73 migrants were reported missing and presumed dead following a shipwreck off the Libyan coast on Tuesday, the official Twitter account of International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Libya said yesterday. Seven survivors made it to shore from the boat, which was carrying around 80 people, who had reportedly departed from Qasr Alkayar, east of Tripoli, to head to Europe, the IOM added. So far, 11 bodies have been retrieved by the Libyan red Crescent and the local police, while the seven survivors are in hospital, the IOM said. Libya has become a major launching point for migrants seeking to reach Europe via a dangerous route across the desert and over the Mediterranean. The central Mediterranean remains the world's deadliest migratory sea crossing. The latest tragedy brings the numbers of deaths there since the beginning of this year alone to 130, IOM said. According to the agency's Missing Migrants Project, more than 1,450 migrant deaths were recorded on that route in 2022.

Sturgeon quits

Says she is too divisive to win independence

REUTERS, LONDON

Nicola Sturgeon quit as Scottish first minister yesterday, saying her dominance over her party and the country was no longer the asset it once was in the fight for an independent Scotland. The 52-year-old, who has been first minister since 2014, also said she would stand down as leader of the ruling Scottish National Party (SNP), saying a fresh face would have a better chance of reaching across the political divide, and that she had become too divisive - and too tired - to lead that fight any more. She will stay in place until a successor is found. Sturgeon became SNP leader in the wake of a 2014 independence referendum when Scotland voted 55 percent to 45 percent to remain part of the UK. But in recent months she has been outmanoeuvred by Sunak's government over attempts to hold a second referendum.

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