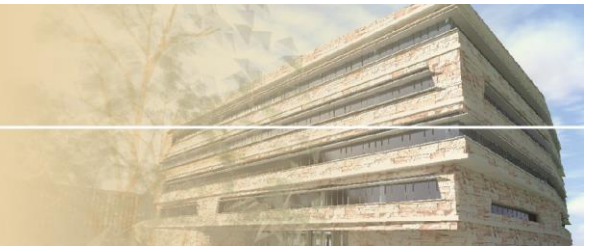




News Highlights



Wednesday, 05 August 2020

Today's highlights:

Africa: Africa's COVID-19 Chaos Opens Door for Opportunistic Extremists

GERD: Egypt to withdraw from latest dam talks for internal consultations -statement

Cameroon: UN 'outraged' by deadly attack on Cameroon displaced camp

Zimbabwe: Zimbabwe president vows to 'flush out' opponents

Libya: Trump security adviser warns against foreign military involvement in Libya

The AU Situation Room

Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division (CPEWD),
Peace and Security Department (PSD)
Tel. (251-11) 5526 373 Ext. 4150
Tel. Direct: (251-11) 5515 143
Fax: (251-11) 5519 321, 5514 227
P.O. Box: 3243, Addis Ababa
Email: situationroom@africa-union.org
Website: www.peaceau.org



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The AU Situation Room

Conflict Prevention and Early Warning Division (CPEWD)

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AFRICA

Africa's COVID-19 Chaos Opens Door for Opportunistic Extremists

JOHANNESBURG - As a pandemic rages and weakens fragile societies, terrorists lie in wait to pounce on vulnerable people, especially on the African continent, says a top U.S. military commander. U.S. military officials say their work on the continent has continued unabated, but that extremists are actively seeking every opportunity to gain a foothold, from Senegal to Somalia.

Violent extremist organizations, or VEOs, are seizing on Africa's coronavirus chaos to advance their goals in vulnerable societies, from Nigeria to Mozambique, says the head of U.S. Special Operations Command Africa, Maj. Gen. Dagvin Anderson.

"I do believe the extremists will look to exploit any opportunity they get, and COVID presents those opportunities, because COVID stresses any government. ... we know the governments and the nations of Africa are also feeling that stress, and the VEOs will look to exploit that. I can't tell you exactly how, because that will manifest itself in different ways in each of these countries. But these VEOs are very dynamic and they're very flexible, and they will look to see where those weak points are, where that can be exploited, and they will go after it," he said.

In West Africa, Islamist extremists have shut down educational systems — Anderson cited more than 3,000 schools shuttered by extremist groups in Mali and Burkina Faso. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic and Mozambique, they've harnessed local grievances to feed their activities.

And, he said, some of these groups count on foreign assistance from mercenary groups with murky affiliations. The shadowy Wagner Group is thought to be active in as many as 20 African countries, including Mozambique, Libya, Sudan, the Ivory Coast and the Central African Republic.

Anderson echoed analysts who believe the Wagner Group is closely connected to the Kremlin, a charge the Kremlin has denied.

"Russia is directly engaged with them. I see them as being very corrosive. I see them as being detrimental to what should be a common international threat. Unfortunately, what we see is they're fueling the conflict in Libya. To say that that is a private military contractor, I think, is a bit of a stretch, because they are bringing in weapons systems that we saw recently reported in the press that private companies just don't have access to. Those are state-provided weapons systems."

Anderson also touched on the recent announcement that U.S. Africa Command headquarters would move out of Germany, to another European nation. He noted that the disruptions of the coronavirus crisis didn't change or diminish U.S. operations in Africa, and reasoned that a change of headquarters would have little effect on their work.

What worries him more, he said, is the pandemic's disastrous effect on government services and institutions in Africa. And, he noted, the military's role is limited, and often too late.

“We are often the firemen, that if you're calling the firefighters it means the fire has already broken out and that we need to do things to do fire prevention and we need to be able to cut firebreaks to keep that fire from spreading. So while I appreciate everyone's interest in what the military brings, if you're ringing the fire alarm, it's probably a little late. We need to do things ahead of it in order to prevent,” he said.

Right now, the American general said, families and communities across the world face uncertainty and fear as the coronavirus continues to spread. A military solution alone will not address their needs for food security, schools, decent health care, and basic government services. Some extremist groups say they arose specifically to address those injustices — but, Anderson said, their violent methods are a dead end. (VOA)



ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia hospital boss faces questions over opposition leader

A court in Ethiopia has summoned the head of the country's main Covid-19 hospital to talk about the health of opposition leader Dejene Tafa.

Mr Dejene, from the Oromo Federalist Congress, was detained last month, along with many others, accused of organising and taking part in violence that hit the country following the death of prominent singer Hachalu Hundessa. He was then taken to hospital on 23 July.

The attorney general said that Mr Dejene was admitted because he tested positive for Covid-19.

But his defence team argued that he had no health issues and the police deliberately put him in hospital so that he could not appear in court while they search for evidence to build a case against him.

The hospital has not confirmed that he had tested positive, and eight days after his admission Mr Dejene was discharged and taken back to detention with a certificate showing that he was then clear of Covid-19.

The court wants the hospital chief to explain why Mr Dejene was admitted and why he was discharged within eight days.

Anyone who has tested positive has to be treated or isolated for at least 14 days according to the health ministry. (BBC)



SOUTH SUDAN

Covid-19: Dozens of South Sudan medics test positive

Some healthcare workers have deserted duty after witnessing coronavirus patients dying. South Sudan's health ministry says about 78 frontline healthcare workers have tested positive for Covid-19.

One male healthcare worker has died, according to a health official. "It is very unfortunate to mention that we have lost one of the healthcare workers. He used to work at Juba Teaching Hospital, he is one of the people that were affected by the virus and this is the only record we have as a fatality amongst healthcare workers," Dr Matthew Tut told journalists in the capital, Juba.

Last month, eight health workers resigned because of pressure from their families, who expressed concerns that they might bring the virus home and infect their relatives. (BBC)



TANZANIA

Tanzania bans Kenya Airways as coronavirus spat escalates

Tanzania banned Kenya's national airline from entering the country effective Saturday, in the latest move in a deepening row triggered by Tanzania's controversial handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Tanzania said Kenya Airways flights were being banned "on a reciprocal basis" after Kenya decided against including Tanzania in a list of countries whose passengers would be permitted to enter Kenya when commercial flights resumed on 1 August.

"Tanzania has noted... its exclusion in the list of countries whose people will be allowed to travel into Kenya," Tanzania Civil Aviation Authority director general Hamza Johari said in a letter sent to Kenya Airways on Friday.

"The Tanzanian government has decided to nullify its approval for Kenya Airways (KQ) flights between Nairobi and Dar/Kilimanjaro/Zanzibar effective August 1, 2020 until further notice," Johari wrote.

"This letter also rescinds all previous arrangements that permit KQ flights into the United Republic of Tanzania."

Kenya Airways chief executive Allan Kilavuka said Saturday he was "saddened" by the letter and hoped the situation would soon be resolved.

Tanzania has taken a controversially relaxed approach to tackling the coronavirus pandemic and began reopening the country two months ago.

President John Magufuli's refusal to impose lockdowns or social distancing measures, and to halt the release of figures on infections since late April, has made him a regional outlier and caused concern among Tanzania's neighbours and the World Health Organization.

Magufuli declared Tanzania free of coronavirus in June, thanking God and the prayers of citizens for the disease's defeat.

The diplomatic spat between Kenya and Tanzania erupted soon after the outbreak of the pandemic in East Africa, when Kenya blocked Tanzanian truck drivers from entering the country, fearing they would spread the disease. (AFP)



UGANDA

Uganda COVID-19 cases surpass 1,200 mark

KAMPALA, Aug. 4 (Xinhua) -- Uganda's health ministry on Tuesday reported eight new cases of COVID-19, bringing the total number of infections in the east African country to 1,203.

The ministry in a statement issued here said out of the 1,765 samples collected over the past 24 hours, four Ugandan cross-border truck drivers, two alerts, one contact and a returnee from abroad tested positive for the virus.

Additionally, 12 foreign truck drivers who tested positive for COVID-19 at Uganda's common border points of entry were not permitted into the country.

According to the ministry, the country has a total of 1,073 recoveries and five deaths since the index case was reported on March 21. (XINHUA)



NIGERIA

Nigerian airline sacks pilots, cuts pay over virus hit

Nigeria's largest airline Air Peace said Tuesday it had laid off a number of pilots and cut salaries in order to cope with the impact of the coronavirus on its operations.

The private carrier did not disclose the number of pilots affected, but industry sources put the figure at around 70.

Air Peace serves cities in Nigeria as well as elsewhere in West Africa and in the Middle East.

The group said it had "taken a very painful but rightful decision... to terminate the employment of some of its pilots" due to "the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on its operations and financial health."

"This decision was taken for the greater good of the company and its almost 3000 workforce," including the affected pilots, it said in a statement.

"Anything short of what we have done may lead to the collapse of an airline as could be seen in some places worldwide during this period. Therefore, we decided to review the salaries being paid to all staff."

Many other airlines in other parts of the world have taken similar measures to stay afloat.

Global businesses have been hit by the effects of the coronavirus pandemic since its outbreak late last year.

Nigeria recently eased the lockdowns on businesses and economic activities, but most have yet to fully recover. The virus has infected over 44,000 and killed 896 people in Nigeria since the first case in February. (AFP)



Secondary schools reopen in Nigeria

Secondary schools in Nigeria reopened on Tuesday for classes almost four months after they closed to halt the spread of coronavirus.

Final-year students now have just two weeks to prepare for their exams.

Face masks, social distancing and hand-washing facilities are mandatory within all schools, the education ministry says.

There are indications the government may be using this reopening to test-run the system for possibly opening all schools in Nigeria. (BBC)



ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe's president names his deputy as new health minister

HARARE (Reuters) - Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa on Tuesday appointed his deputy Constantino Chiwenga as the new health minister, tasking him with reforming a decaying health sector amid a rise in COVID-19 infections and strikes by health workers.

Chiwenga replaces Obaddiah Moyo who was removed from the post last month after allegations of corruption. [nL8N2CH5ZO]

In his new role, Chiwenga will be required to "stabilise, restructure and reform" the national healthcare system, the government said in a statement.

The main opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) immediately criticised the appointment, saying Chiwenga was not the right man for the job in a time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Zimbabwe has recorded more than 4,000 COVID-19 cases and 80 deaths and health officials say infections will continue to rise for sometime.

The MDC said in appointing Chiwenga, Mnangagwa had shown a "gross display of incompetence."

Chiwenga spent four months in China receiving medical treatment for an unknown illness until November last year. He has returned three times since then for medical check-ups, according to government officials. (REUTERS)



After arrest, Zimbabwean novelist decries state "chokehold"

HARARE, Aug 4 (Reuters) - A prize-winning Zimbabwean novelist and filmmaker arrested at recent protests accused President Emmerson Mnangagwa's government on Tuesday of holding its people in a repressive "chokehold" as they endured an economic emergency.

Tsitsi Dangarembga, whose latest book "This Mournable Body" has been nominated for a Booker Prize, was bundled into a police truck while holding placards on Friday and charged with breaking the COVID-19 lockdown to hold an illegal gathering.

Bailed pending trial after a night in jail, the 61-year-old said she could not keep quiet while neglect and mismanagement left Zimbabweans unable to afford a decent meal and healthcare.

"These are things that are outside the reach of most Zimbabweans. It's like the people of Zimbabwe are in a chokehold," she told Reuters from her home in Harare's affluent Borrowdale suburb.

"It's a matter of survival really."

Security forces deployed on Friday to block planned opposition protests over corruption and economic hardships. Foes say Mnangagwa is behaving like his autocratic predecessor Robert Mugabe and exploiting the coronavirus crisis as cover.

'WHO IS PAYING YOU?'

Popular anger is high over inflation above 700%, hospital strikes, and shortages of medicines and foreign currency.

Mnangagwa blames the opposition, Western sanctions, droughts and the pandemic. "Dark forces both inside and outside have tampered with our growth and prosperity," he said in a speech on Tuesday.

Dangarembga said she had been lucky after rights groups said some activists rounded up over Friday's unrest were abducted and tortured. The government denies that.

"When we got into the (police) truck one of the first thing that happened is I was asked 'who is paying you?' I was very outraged by that question," she recalled.

"What was going through my mind was: 'what do we do now? The main thing is not to escalate the situation, we have not done anything wrong so we shouldn't be frightened'."

Dangarembga noted that a new hashtag #ZimbabweansLivesMatter was helping focus global attention.

"Trying to change Zimbabwe for the better is going to be a long engagement and we have to strategise," she said.

Dangarembga's first novel "Nervous Conditions" was part of Zimbabwe's school curriculum and won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989. She also wrote "Neria", Zimbabwe's most successful film. (REUTERS)



ZAMBIA

Zambia imposes COVID-19 negative certificate requirement for travellers

LUSAKA, Aug. 4 (Xinhua) -- Authorities in Zambia have imposed a requirement that all travellers to the southern African nation should be required to produce a negative COVID-19 certificate, a state agency that runs airports said in a notice seen on Tuesday.

The Zambia Airports Corporation Limited said all travels will be required to provide a certificate as per guidelines issued by the country's health ministry.

"The test should have been conducted within the previous 14 days and any traveller that does not have this document will not be allowed into the country," the notice added.

Zambia has recorded a spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths in recent weeks although most of the cases were domestically transmitted. Cumulative cases currently stands at 6,793. (XINHUA)



SOUTH AFRICA

No COVID-19 virus in breastmilk: S. African health minister

CAPE TOWN, Aug. 4 (Xinhua) -- Health Minister Zweli Mkhize assured South Africans on Tuesday that the COVID-19 virus has not been found in breastmilk.

Research evidence has shown that the virus is not transmitted through breastmilk or by giving breastmilk that has been expressed from a mother who is confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19, Mkhize said in a statement commemorating the World Breastfeeding Week which started on August 1.

"This year we continue to commemorate World Breastfeeding Week under the difficult challenge in dealing with the COVID-19 global pandemic," said Mkhize.

He said there has been growing concern over the possible transmission of the COVID-19 virus through breastfeeding.

Under the current circumstances, families, mothers, caregivers and even some healthcare workers in particular are worried and asking many questions whether the coronavirus can be passed on through breastmilk and how can they protect themselves and their babies, said Mkhize.

Academic experts in South Africa have established a pregnancy register to evaluate potential harm to pregnant women and/or their babies caused by COVID-19 infection, according to Mkhize.

Excellent progress has been made in studying mothers and babies who have been affected by COVID-19 and the issue of breastfeeding in the context of COVID-19 came into sharp focus, Mkhize said.

Based on these studies, mothers who have suspected or confirmed COVID-19 are encouraged to continue breastfeeding while practicing good respiratory hygiene such as wearing a mask, washing hands frequently with soap, water or hand sanitizer, and routinely cleaning and disinfecting surfaces, said Mkhize.

A baby's immune system is not yet fully developed and requires the immune protection from breastmilk, he said.

This life-saving protection is more important than ever right now during the COVID-19 pandemic, said the minister.

World Breastfeeding Week remains an important strategy to reaffirm South Africa's commitment to protecting, promoting, and supporting breastfeeding to improve the health, nutrition and development of babies, Mkhize said. This year's theme is "Support breastfeeding for a healthier South Africa."

"I would therefore like to launch this year's World Breastfeeding Week in South Africa and call on everyone including partners, healthcare workers, employers and families to play their part in creating a conducive environment for mothers to breastfeed their babies for a healthier South Africa," Mkhize said. (XINHUA)



MOROCCO

Morocco to reform state bodies in virus response, Finance Ministry says

RABAT (Reuters) - Morocco plans to reform, merge or dissolve some state bodies to reduce their dependency on a state budget hit by the coronavirus pandemic, the finance minister said on Wednesday.

The plan could include a merger of the indebted state railway operator, ONCF, and the highway company ADM into a single entity, the minister, Mohamed Benchaaboun, told reporters.

Morocco expects its economy to shrink by 5% this year, with the fiscal deficit rising to 7.5% of gross domestic product and treasury debt to 75.3% of GDP. Despite a tough lockdown, it has confirmed 26,196 cases of the coronavirus.

The state has already announced some measures to help with the economic impact. Last week, King Mohammed VI announced a \$12.8 billion stimulus, equivalent to about 11% of GDP.

The stimulus includes 75 billion dirhams (\$8 billion) in state-guaranteed loans to private and public enterprises and 45 billion dirhams as a strategic investment fund to finance public-private projects, Benchaaboun said.

State airline RAM will receive 6 billion dirhams, of which 60% is a direct capital injection and 40% loans guaranteed by the state.

Morocco's plan to generalize social security in five years would guarantee health insurance, retirement pensions and unemployment compensation for everyone, he said.

More than a third of Moroccan workers already work in unregistered businesses without social protection, doing manual labour or selling in the streets, accounting for 14% of GDP, according to the planning agency.

Unemployment is expected to surge to 14.8% in 2020 from about 9.2% before the pandemic, the agency said.

Morocco intends to issue an international bond this year. "All preparations have been made," he said ,without offering further details. (REUTERS)



EAST AFRICA



GERD

Egypt to withdraw from latest dam talks for internal consultations -statement

CAIRO, Aug 4 (Reuters) - Egypt said on Tuesday that it has decided to withdraw from the latest round of tripartite negotiations with Ethiopia over its multi-billion dollar dam on the Blue Nile for internal consultations after Addis Ababa proposed new draft of filling guidelines.

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is being built about 15 km (9 miles) from the Ethiopian border with Sudan on the Blue Nile, has become a major sticking point between the three countries. Egypt fears the \$4 billion project could lead to water shortages upstream, while Sudan is concerned about the dam's safety.

The Blue Nile is a tributary of the Nile river, from which Egypt's 100 million people get 90% of their fresh water.

Cairo said Addis presented a proposal on Tuesday that excluded "operating guidelines" as well as "a legal mechanism to settle disputes."

Sudan's irrigation ministry said the latest Ethiopian position presented in talks on Tuesday raised new fears over the track the negotiations had been on.

" stress the seriousness of the risks that the dam represents for Sudan and its people, including environmental and social risks, and for the safety of millions of residents along the banks of the Blue Nile... which reinforces the need to reach a comprehensive agreement covering both filling and operation," the Sudanese irrigation ministry said.

Ethiopia's Irrigation Minister Seleshi Bekele had expressed optimism over the talks and tweeted earlier on Tuesday saying: "Ethiopia would like to sign the first filling agreement at the soonest and also continue negotiation to finalize a comprehensive agreement in subsequent periods."

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had said earlier in July that his country had already achieved its first-year target for filling the reservoir, thanks to a heavy rainy season. (REUTERS)



SOMALIA

Somalia sets up disaster warning centre to battle floods and locusts

MOGADISHU (Reuters) - At a government building in a former United Nations compound in Mogadishu, Khadar Sheikh Mohamed stares at a bank of giant screens displaying weather conditions across the country.

Mohamed is the director of the new national disaster early warning centre designed to help Somalia predict disasters. This year it has already suffered from flooding and a locust invasion.

"Finding the accurate data which may save lives is ... important for us," he told Reuters at the centre.

The centre opened in June, and is funded by Saudi Arabia through the United Nations' World Food Programme. It was conceived after cycles of floods and drought caused widespread food shortages, including a famine in 2011 that killed more than a quarter of a million people.

Out of Somalia's 15 million people, 5.2 million currently need aid, the United Nations says, and more than 2.6 million are displaced due to fighting and natural disasters.

Somalia has been rent by civil war since 1991, and a fragile, federalist government is battling al Qaeda-linked al Shabaab insurgents.

The violence has destroyed almost all the country's infrastructure and driven many educated Somalis abroad, but in recent years the internationally backed administration has been trying to rebuild government institutions.

At the centre, dozens of Somali analysts use the latest satellite data, from temperatures to wind pressure, to provide early warnings for flooding, drought, and locust movements.

Government officials said they had initially struggled to recruit skilled workers locally.

"Somalis don't really have the expertise," said Muqtar Sheikh Hassan, the director general at the ministry of humanitarian and disaster management, so they had hired foreign experts to train local analysts.

Now the centre is fully staffed by Somalis, said Mohamed. "Sometimes you have only 24 or 72 hours to evacuate people. If the information is in another language, it takes more time to translate and disseminate. Now we are able to release warnings quickly." (REUTERS)



SUDAN

Across Sudan, heavy rains and flash floods destroy houses, wash away crops – UN relief wing

According to an update issued by the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) on Monday, Khartoum, Blue Nile and River Nile states are among the hardest-hit, while damage has also been reported in El Gezira, West Kordofan and South Darfur regions.

More than 1,200 houses are said to have been damaged or destroyed, and several hundred people rendered homeless.

"According to preliminary information from local authorities, several hectares of crops might have been lost and over 150 livestock washed away, increasing the risk of heightened food insecurity in the months ahead," noted the update.

In addition, the collapse of the Bout Earth Dam in Blue Nile state, after it exceeded its full capacity, risks compromising access to water for over 84,000 people living in its vicinity.

The heavy rainfall has also increased the risk of disease outbreaks and could pose obstacles to efforts to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, said the update.

There are fears that the situation could worsen in the days to come, with higher-than-average rainfall forecast throughout August in at least three quarters of the country.
Humanitarian needs and response

According to the UN, Government and humanitarian organizations are supporting affected families with life-saving assistance, and the Flood Task Force, led by the Government's Humanitarian Aid Commission, has been activated at the federal level to coordinate the response. Assessments are ongoing in all affected areas.

"Currently, partners are using the propositioned supplies and identifying possible gaps, as well the need for replenishing the material deployed for the response," said the update.

Logistics are the most critical challenge to meet the immediate needs, especially in Blue Nile state, as roads are impassable and the area can only be reached via helicopter. (UN NEWS CENTRE)



UGANDA

Ugandan stars petition parliament over censorship

Ugandan artists have petitioned parliament over laws that they say are hurting the country's music industry.

Speaker Rebecca Kadaga quoted the musicians as saying they were not consulted while the new legislation was being drawn up earlier this year.

It includes the vetting of new songs to prevent negative comments about the government.

The musicians presented their petition through their union and Ms Kagada said she would present it to parliament. (BBC)



TANZANIA

Tanzania plans to employ 12,000 teachers

DAR ES SALAAM, Aug. 4 (Xinhua) -- The government of Tanzania is planning to employ 12,000 teachers in public primary and secondary schools, a senior official said on Tuesday.

"The government is in final stage of employing the 12,000 teachers," said Selemani Jafo, the Minister of State in the President's Office responsible for Regional Administration and Local Government.

Jafo said in a statement issued in capital Dodoma that for the last five years, the government has employed 18,000 teachers for public primary and secondary schools.

Jafo said the government has released a total of 1.09 trillion Tanzanian shillings (about 469 million U.S. dollars) for free education in the last five years.

The free education policy went in tandem with the improvement of schools' infrastructure, including the construction of classrooms and science laboratories as well as the making of school desks, said Jafo.

"The free education policy has helped children from poor families to access education in both public primary and secondary schools," he said. (XINHUA)



CENTRAL AFRICA



CHAD

Chad slows internet after viral video 'exposes soldier'

Chad says it has reduced internet speeds to curb the spread of messages on social media that it says incite hate and division.

This follows the circulation of a video showing a soldier shooting a man at point-blank range after he was threatened with a knife.

Activists say the soldier is from the same ethnic group as President Idriss Déby, which they say rules Chad with impunity.

Mr Déby said last week that social media should not be used to criticise ethnic groups. He has been in power for 30 years. (BBC)



LAKE CHAD BASIN

UN censures 'heinous attacks' in Lake Chad Basin

The Secretary-General strongly condemned "heinous attacks" against civilians in the Lake Chad Basin, a UN spokesperson said on Monday.

"The attacks led to the killing and abduction of many civilians, including women, children and displaced people who had fled violence", Deputy Spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a statement, referring to assaults in the Lac Province of Chad and the Far North Region of Cameroon on 31 July and 2 August, respectively.

News reports pinned responsibility for this most recent aggression in the troubled region on Boko Haram jihadists.

Mr. Haq spelled out that "those responsible for these atrocities must be held accountable".

"International human rights law and international humanitarian law must be fully respected and all civilians in Cameroon and Chad must be protected", he stressed on behalf of the UN chief.

In conclusion, the spokesperson upheld the UN's "steadfast" support to the countries of the Lake Chad Basin in their efforts "to overcome the scourge of terrorism, and address the security, political, humanitarian and socio-economic challenges in the region".

Internally displaced targeted

In separate coverage on Tuesday morning, the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) expressed outrage over an “unprovoked and brutal attack” on 800 internally displaced people (IDPs) in a makeshift camp in Cameroon’s Far North region.

“At least 18 people were killed and 11 injured in the incident during the early hours of Sunday 2 August”, UNHCR spokesperson Babar Baloch told journalists at a regular press briefing in Geneva.

While some of the wounded were evacuated to Mokolo district hospital, an hour’s drive from Nguetchewe, another 1,500 people, including terrified residents of the hosting village, fled to the nearby town of Mozogo for safety.

“UNHCR is deploying an emergency mission to assess the situation and evaluate the protection and health needs of those affected, Mr. Baloch updated.

Spiraling situation

This attack follows a significant rise in violent incidents in Cameroon’s Far-North Region in July, including looting and kidnapping by Boko Haram and other armed groups active in the region.

The Far North region, tucked between Nigeria’s Borno and Adamawa states and Lake Chad, currently hosts 321,886 IDPs and 115,000 Nigerian refugees.

The UNHCR spokesperson called this incident “a sad reminder of the intensity and brutality of the violence in the wider the Lake Chad Basin region that has forced more than three million people to flee”.

“UNHCR calls on all actors to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of IDP camps, and to respond promptly to the urgent needs of people who have fled violence and suffered multiple displacements”, concluded the UN refugee agency’s spokesperson.

UNHCR calls on all actors to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of IDP camp -- UNHCR

Children in crosshairs

Meanwhile, the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) condemned the attack on civilians in Nguetchewe, while expressing its deepest condolences to the victims’ families.

According to preliminary reports, 10 children lost their lives in the assault that also injured five .

UNICEF cited estimates in saying that that since January 2017, attacks in the Far North Region of Cameroon may have slaughtered more than 150 children. The UN agency underscored that the “unacceptable” violence against children is “a grave violation of child rights”.

“All efforts should be made to ensure that children are protected,” said Jacques Boyer, UNICEF Representative to Cameroon. “We once again strongly urge all parties involved in crises in Cameroon to do everything in their power to make sure children live and grow in an environment free from threats of any kind.” (UN NEWS CENTRE)



CAMEROON

UN 'outraged' by deadly attack on Cameroon displaced camp

The UN refugee agency on Tuesday voiced outrage after an "unprovoked and brutal attack" on a camp for displaced people that left at least 17 civilians dead in northern Cameroon.

The Nguetchewe camp, hosting 800 internally displaced people, came under assault early Sunday which a local politician blamed on the Boko Haram jihadist group.

"Assailants threw an explosive device, thought to be a grenade, into the makeshift camp while people were sleeping," the UNHCR said in a statement, giving the death toll as 18.

Cameroon's defence ministry said the "terrorist attack coupled with suicide bombings" killed 17 civilians, two suicide bombers and wounded 16 other people.

"Unidentified terrorists" had entered the village in the West African country's Far North region during the night to commit "various abuses and atrocities", the ministry said.

The two suicide bombers chased civilians into their homes before setting off their explosives, it added.

The UNHCR said "some 1,500 people, including terrified residents of the hosting village, have fled to the nearby town of Mozogo for safety".

It has deployed an emergency mission to assess the situation. The agency added it was "outraged" and "strongly condemns" the attack.

"This attack follows a significant rise in violent incidents in Cameroon's Far North region," it noted.

There have been 87 Boko Haram attacks recorded near Cameroon's border with Nigeria since January, the statement said, quoting Cameroonian figures.

Local mayor Mahamat Chetima Abba told AFP "it is clear that it was Boko Haram that was responsible" for the attack.

Cameroon's Far North, an impoverished strip of land between Chad and Nigeria, has been a regular target of raids and assaults by Boko Haram since 2013.

The jihadist group launched its insurgency in Nigeria in 2009 before spilling over into neighbours Cameroon, Niger and Chad. It has killed more than 30,000 people, forcing three million to flee their homes, according to the UN. (AFP)



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Congo to suspend value-added tax exemption for mining imports

KINSHASA (Reuters) - Democratic Republic of Congo's government has decided to suspend the value-added tax (VAT) exemption on mining companies' imports in an effort to bolster state revenue, the budget minister said.

In a letter dated July 31 and seen by Reuters on Tuesday, Budget Minister Jean-Baudouin Mayo instructed the finance minister to move to implement the decision taken at last week's cabinet meeting.

Congo, which is Africa's top copper producer, originally agreed to suspend the tax in July 2016 to help companies during a commodity price downturn and to pay down hundreds of millions of dollars in VAT reimbursements owed to the companies.

Congo's economy has been badly damaged by the coronavirus pandemic and is forecast to contract by 2.4% this year. (REUTERS)



CAPE VERDE

Cape Verde Agrees to Extradite Maduro Ally to US

PRAIA, CAPE VERDE - A court in the West African nation of Cape Verde has approved extradition of Colombian businessman Álex Saab to the United States, where he faces charges involving money laundering on behalf of Venezuela's socialist government.

The court made its decision Friday but did not inform the defense team until Monday evening, João do Rosário, an attorney on Saab's legal team, told VOA's Portuguese service.

Rosário said the defense team would appeal Saab's extradition to Cape Verde's Supreme Court. He said it has 10 days from the date of notification to take such action.

"We will necessarily have to appeal this decision," Rosário said, adding that it was "not properly grounded."

He said the legal team also is considering an appeal to the country's Constitutional Court.

Saab, a 48-year-old Colombian lawyer and businessman, was arrested on the island of Sal on June 12, when his private plane stopped for refueling en route from Venezuela to Iran. The United States requested Saab's extradition within days of his arrest.

Venezuela's government protested Saab's arrest, contending he was on a "humanitarian mission" to get food and medical supplies, according to The Associated Press.

Saab is considered a possible front man for the family of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. The United States and other countries blame Maduro's socialist policies for a political and economic crisis threatening regional stability.

Saab and another Colombian businessman were indicted in July 2019 in U.S. federal court in Miami for their alleged participation in an illegal bribery scheme from late 2011 through at least September 2015, according to a U.S. Justice Department news release last year. The men allegedly laundered money from bank accounts in Venezuela “to and through bank accounts located in the United States,” a U.S. Justice Department news release said when the indictment was issued.

In September, Saab was among three individuals targeted by the U.S. Treasury Department for allegedly enabling Maduro “and his illegitimate regime to corruptly profit from imports of food aid and distribution in Venezuela,” a U.S. Treasury Department news release said at the time.

This account originated in VOA’s Portuguese service, with Eugenio Teixeira reporting from Cape Verde and Alvaro Andrade from Washington. (VOA)



Cape Verde court rejects Maduro envoy's appeal against US extradition

Aug 4 (Reuters) - A court in Cape Verde has rejected an appeal from a detained Colombian businessman seeking to avoid extradition to the United States on money laundering charges, his defense team said on Tuesday.

Alex Saab, who has been working on behalf of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, was arrested in June when a plane he was traveling on landed in the West African island nation. Maduro's government said Saab was traveling as a state "agent" on business to obtain humanitarian supplies to help combat the coronavirus pandemic.

The United States last year charged Saab in connection with a bribery scheme to take advantage of Venezuela's state-controlled exchange rate. It also sanctioned him for allegedly orchestrating a corruption network that allowed him and Maduro to profit from a state-run food subsidy program.

Saab's defense team, led by former Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon, said in a statement that it would appeal the decision against "Special Envoy Saab" before Cape Verde's Supreme Court.

If that appeal were to fail, Saab's lawyers said they would then make a request to the Constitutional Court. His lawyers called the U.S. charges "politically motivated."

The U.S. Department of Justice said in June that Saab, who also has a Venezuelan passport, was arrested pursuant to an Interpol red notice issued with respect to his indictment. (REUTERS)



WEST AFRICA



MALI

UN pledges to help Mali rebuild heritage sites damaged in conflict

The UN's cultural organisation, Unesco, is backing a \$1m (£767,000) plans to help restore the heritage of central Mali damaged by recent armed conflict.

The Cliff of Bandiagara is famous for its homes carved into the rock as well as the traditional way of life.

Unesco says inter-communal fighting has destroyed a number of villages in the area - also known as the Land of the Dogon - as well as artefacts. It was declared a World Heritage Site in 1989.

Unesco has teamed up with the Switzerland-based International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas, which is providing the money.

Both buildings and cultural objects have been lost resulting in the "deterioration of cultural practices and traditions of the Dogon, Peuls, Bozo, Bambara and Sonrhai groups", Unesco said in a statement.

It estimates that of 15 of the area's 289 villages have either been totally or partially ruined. Fifteen others have been affected close to the Cliff of Bandiagara.

While historically there had often been conflict between the more settled communities, such as the Dogon, and the pastoralists in the Mopti region, this began to become more violent after the militant jihadist uprising in northern Mali in 2012.

It spread to central areas by 2015 and brought more instability, weapons and a lack of government control into Mopti.

Unesco also argues that the disappearance of certain traditions has fuelled inter-communal conflict.

"Culture is not only all too often a victim of protracted armed conflicts - it is also a critical source of resilience and an important foundation for peacebuilding," Unesco Director-General Audrey Azoulay said in a statement.

The \$1m will be spent over the next three years on restoring the damaged architectural heritage "notably housing, granaries and sites dedicated to traditional culture, as well as to restore the production of cultural objects, and safeguard ceremonial objects in a memorial collection", Unesco says.

UN experts will work with the Malian government.

The continued insecurity in the country has sparked mass protests with people calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.

Cultural sites have also been targeted in the conflict in the north of the country.

At the International Criminal Court In 2016, Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi pleaded guilty to destroying nine mausoleums and a mosque in Timbuktu.

As head of jihadist group Ansar Dine's moral "accountability" enforcers, known as the the Hisbah, he led the destruction of key shrines in 2012. (BBC)



GUINEA

Guinean group files graft lawsuit in France against Conde

A group of Guinean dissidents said they had filed a lawsuit in France on Tuesday, accusing President Alpha Conde and others of corruption, money laundering and influence-peddling.

The complaint was filed with the French national financial prosecutor, Jean-Baptiste Soufron, a lawyer for the Collective for Change in Guinea (CTG), told a press conference.

The announcement was made amid speculation that Conde this week will be named a candidate in upcoming elections -- a scenario that has sparked fierce protests in the West African country.

Soufron said the lawsuit "targets a range of activities which have taken place since 2012-13, partly in Paris and partly in Guinea, and which support concerns about corruption benefitting Alpha Conde, his son Mohamed Conde, but also Defence Minister Mohamed Diane."

The complaint focusses on a concession to exploit rich bauxite reserves in Boke, western Guinea, CTG said.

The concession was first awarded to a French company called ARM, set up in 2015, which then sold the rights to a French-Chinese-Singaporean consortium for 171 million euros (\$201 million), according to the CTG.

The Guinean government did not immediately respond to an AFP request for comment, although a source close to the presidency said the lawsuit was "provocation... (and) pure slander."

"Every time an important date comes up, we are targeted for blackmail," the source said.

The CTG's spokesman, Ibrahim Sorel Keita, said: "This is the best time to hope that people will wake up and learn about the realities of the financial activities of this regime."

- Running again? -

The former French colony is rich in minerals, but suffers from entrenched poverty and a history of instability.

Conde, 82, was a decades-long opponent of previous leaders who kept an iron grip on Guinea after it gained independence in 1958.

He was first elected in 2010 and voted back into office five years later, although critics say his rule has now veered towards authoritarianism.

Last October, bloody protests erupted over suspicions that Conde wanted to sidestep a two-term limit by pushing through constitutional changes enabling him to reset his time in office.

The changes were approved in a referendum in March by 91.59 percent of those voting, in a turnout of 61 percent, according to official figures.

Conde has been coy about whether he intends to run again, but the uncertainty may end this week when the ruling Rally of the Guinean People (RPG) holds a convention on Wednesday and Thursday to choose its election champion.

The electoral commission has proposed that the presidential poll be held on October 18, but Conde has yet to issue a decree to confirm a date. (AFP)



SOUTHERN AFRICA



ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe president vows to 'flush out' opponents

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa on Tuesday warned he would "flush out" opponents as rights groups reported dozens of activists had been arrested in a crackdown on dissent.

Mnangagwa, who took over from longtime ruler Robert Mugabe after a coup in November 2017, said his administration was facing "many hurdles and attacks" including "divisive politics of some opposition elements".

"The bad apples who have attempted to divide our people and to weaken our systems will be flushed out," he warned in an impromptu nationwide address.

"We will overcome attempts at destabilisation of our society by a few rogue Zimbabweans acting in league with foreign detractors."

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights said Tuesday it had represented more than 20 people arrested since last week when authorities thwarted anti-government protests that had been scheduled for last Friday.

The protests had been called by opposition politician Jacob Ngarivhume, the head of a small party called Transform Zimbabwe, against alleged state corruption and the country's slumping economy.

The police banned the protests, which the government described as an "insurrection". "We make no apologies for fixing our systems across the socio-economic and political spectrum," Mnangagwa said from the State House in the capital Harare.

Among those arrested was top Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga and Fadzayi Mahere, a lawyer and spokeswoman for the main opposition party Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-Alliance).

Both were charged with inciting public violence and released on bail. MDC-Alliance vice-president Tendai Biti said the situation had become "untenable".

He condemned the regime for "closing political space", engaging "massively in corruption" and "abusing the constitution". "We are at a tipping point, something is going to give," Biti told AFP, warning that another military coup could be "around the corner".

- 'It really is scary' -

The latest government clampdown sparked outrage on social media with the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter trending worldwide on Twitter since Monday.

Celebrities and politicians across the globe have posted outrage over the arrests and condemned the long-standing repression of protest movements in Zimbabwe.

Soldiers opened fire on demonstrations over delayed election results shortly before Mnangagwa officially took office in 2018, killing at least six and injuring dozens.

Another 17 protesters were shot dead in January last year during a march against rising fuel prices that was dispersed by the army.

Activists and opposition figures are regularly kidnapped by suspected government agents and some are physically abused. "This pattern is becoming established," said Dewa Mavhinga, Human Rights Watch director for Southern Africa.

"Security forces (are) being complicit in abductions, in torture, in harassment and in silencing government critics." Mavhinga was worried Mnangagwa's harsh rhetoric could be the sign of an even greater crackdown.

"It really is scary," he told AFP. "We are likely to see an escalation in attacks in government critics because this is what has happened in the past."

- 'Ruthless government' -

Amnesty International has meanwhile condemned what it calls the "witch-hunt and repression of peaceful dissent."

Zimbabwean human rights activist Jestina Mukoko deplored the lack of accountability in both government and police forces. "We are suffering repression and criminalisation of our rights work," she said, adding that democracy had been "compromised".

Activist Douglas Mahiya noted that "state agents" had used violence against a "peaceful demonstration".

"This is the most ruthless government with no respect for its people," said Mahiya, who heads a coalition of 80 local civil society groups. "It is as clueless as it is brutal."

South African radical opposition leader Julius Malema on Tuesday demanded the immediate closure of the Zimbabwean Embassy "until they restore the human rights in that country". Zimbabwean political scientist Richard Mahomva suggested Mnangagwa was acting to defend himself from a "regime-change project".

"There are indications of a huge role of state intelligence (against) anti-establishment elements," Mahomva acknowledged. "This could be emanating from the traditional, but now upscaled existential threat posed to the ruling (party)." (AFP)



Zimbabwe President Calls for Unity as He Deals With 'Divisive' and 'Rogue' Elements

HARARE - Zimbabwe's president, Emmerson Mnangagwa, has appealed for national unity against what he called "evil" and "dark forces." In a televised address Tuesday the president blamed opposition groups, who he described as "terrorists" working with outsiders, for destabilizing Zimbabwe's economy. The comments come days after he ordered troops to stop anti-government protests over poverty and corruption.

In a surprise address broadcast from the State House, President Emmerson Mnangagwa called for unity and patience among Zimbabweans as he deals with "detractors" who he said are derailing his efforts to turn around the economy, which has struggled for more than two decades.

He said opposition elements, economic sanctions, cyclones, drought and, most recently, the deadly COVID-19 pandemic were affecting progress toward Zimbabwe's economic recovery.

"Added to this economic aggression, local currency manipulation and detractors who fear the inevitable imminent success of our reforms," said Mnangagwa. "Although our progress has been slowed down, rest assured that we shall achieve our objectives. We will defeat the attack and bleeding on our economy. We will overcome attempts of destabilization of our society by a few rogue Zimbabweans acting in league with foreign detractors. Those who promote hate, and disharmony will never win."

Alexander Rusero is a former international relations and security studies lecturer at Harare Polytechnic College. He says Mnangagwa was "ill advised" to address the nation Tuesday.

"It (the speech) ill timely given the circumstances at hand. It looks like the president was bulking to pressure following the surprising trend of the hashtag #ZimbabweanLivesMatter which has seen almost all people on social media converge at global level raising concerns of human rights abuses," said Rusero. "So there was really nothing to take away from that state of the nation address because there was absolutely nothing to look into."

Makomborero Haruzivishe is one of 14 political activists wanted by police in connection with anti-government protests that were planned for last Friday but stopped by a heavy police and army presence in the streets of Harare.

Speaking to VOA by phone from an undisclosed location, he noted that Mnangagwa's speech was silent on gross human rights abuses and corruption in Zimbabwe.

"He is only seeing shadows," said Haruzivishe. "He just was sweeping over critical issues, issues to do with accountability and transparency. But we will not allow Emmerson Mnangagwa to use the coronavirus pandemic to quarantine our rights, to quarantine our future, quarantine our freedom. That will never happen. Peace unites Zimbabweans. Development unites Zimbabweans."

Haruzivishe accused the president of subverting the constitution and said activists will continue to tweet #ZimbabweanLivesMatter to, in his words, "reclaim the democratic space which has been lost" under Mnangagwa's rule.

Upon taking power with the help of the military in 2017, Mnangagwa said he would not rule the country with an iron fist like former president Robert Mugabe. But his critics say he seems to be sliding into the dictatorship of his predecessor. (VOA)



NORTH AFRICA



LIBYA

Trump security adviser warns against foreign military involvement in Libya

WASHINGTON, Aug 4 (Reuters) - The United States on Tuesday condemned all foreign military involvement in Libya, including the use of mercenaries and private military contractors, and said Libyans themselves must rebuild a unified country.

U.S. President Donald Trump had spoken with several world leaders about Libya in past weeks, and it was clear there was "no winning side," U.S. national security adviser Robert O'Brien said in a statement on Tuesday. He did not name the leaders.

Trump discussed the need to de-escalate the situation in Libya in recent weeks with French President Emmanuel Macron, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, according to White House statements.

It was not immediately clear whether he also discussed the situation with Turkish leaders.

He said efforts by foreign powers to exploit the conflict posed a grave danger to regional stability and global commerce.

He urged all parties to enable Libya's National Oil Corp to resume its work, with full transparency, and to implement a demilitarized solution for Sirte and al-Jufra, respect the UN arms embargo, and finalize a ceasefire under UN-led talks.

Libya descended into chaos after the NATO-backed overthrow of leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Since 2014, it has been split, with an internationally recognized government controlling the capital, Tripoli, and the northwest, while military leader Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi rules the east.

Haftar is supported by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia, while the government is backed by Turkey.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned that there are "unprecedented levels" of foreign interference and mercenaries in the oil-producing country.

O'Brien, who returned to the White House on Tuesday after recovering from a mild case of COVID-19, said the United States was deeply troubled by the escalating conflict, and intervention by foreign powers undermined the collective security interests of the United States and its allies.

"Escalation will only deepen and prolong the conflict," O'Brien said. "It is clear there is no 'winning' side. Libyans can win only if they come together to reclaim their sovereignty and rebuild a unified country."

He said Washington was committed to playing an "active, but neutral" role in helping find a solution that supported Libyan sovereignty and protected the shared interests of the United States, and its allies. (REUTERS)



Russian Mercenaries in Libya Leave Mines as Deadly Calling Cards, Observers Say

WASHINGTON - International observers are sounding the alarm about an alliance between Russian mercenaries and a Libyan militia, which they say imperils civilians and risks intensifying Libya's civil war.

In recent weeks, forces loyal to Libyan General Khalifa Haftar have retreated from neighborhoods surrounding Tripoli. In their wake, human rights groups and the U.S. military say they left behind Russian-made landmines — many of them planted in residential neighborhoods.

The U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM, and independent analysts accuse mercenaries with the Wagner Group, a private Russian company, of being behind the mines. Late last month, AFRICOM said in a tweet that Russia and the Wagner Group continue to be involved in both ground and air operations in Libya and that Russia continues to play an unhelpful role in Libya by delivering supplies and equipment to the Wagner Group.

"They've been involved in kind of booby trapping civilian neighborhoods, setting up defense systems in the middle of oil fields and oil terminals and really kind of preparing for an enlarged conflict, and they are being supported militarily by Russia," said Tarek Megerisi, a policy fellow with North Africa and the Middle East program at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Megerisi said the Russians are making little effort to conceal their actions. "We see Russian planes regularly traveling from Russia to Syria and then from Syria to Libya where they're bringing arms and they're also allegedly bringing Syrian mercenaries to join up with the Russian groups," he told VOA.

In May, a top AFRICOM official said Russia was further destabilizing Libya to gain a stronghold in northern Africa, just as it has in eastern Europe and the Middle East. Brigadier General Gregory Hadfield, AFRICOM deputy director for intelligence, said fighter jets and bomber aircraft were "flown by members of the Russian military" into Libya "by way of Iran and Syria" to support Russian state-sponsored private military contractors who are helping forces fighting the U.N.-supported Libyan government.

He said the U.S. also was aware of additional Russian cargo planes and personnel that have been brought in, along with older surface-to-air missiles.

Moscow has denied the recent deployment and described AFRICOM's accusation as "crazy talk."

Civilians, many of whom are returning to their homes after a forced evacuation, are falling victim to the mines. According to a July 13 U.N. report, landmines or booby traps had killed 52 people and injured 96 in southern Tripoli. Since then, Libyan media outlets have reported more carnage, including a July 16 mine explosion that injured three children.

Haftar's forces, called the Libyan National Army, are based in the east of the country. More than a year ago, they advanced on Tripoli, where the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) is based. Haftar said he wanted to restore order and end terrorism in the country. But for nearly a year, the forces were stalled outside the Libyan capital.

Megerisi said the goal of the LNA booby traps is simple: kill and maim as many people as possible to discourage forces loyal to the GNA.

"This is really just a way to slow down the government troops to make sure that they couldn't stay hot on their heels," he said. "But also just to kind of suck the joy of victory out of the morale from the government-aligned forces. Because they've gone from finally freeing Tripoli from this conflict and lifting the siege to losing over 100 people in the space of a month as they go house to house trying to unpick these booby traps."

Megerisi says Russia also is printing billions of counterfeit Libyan dinars to finance Haftar's army and undermine the overall Libyan economy by causing inflation. "These cash injections and this kind of parallel currency that they've printed on behalf of Haftar has allowed this opposition or entity to remain solvent and to be able to continue buying weapons, buying mercenaries and prosecuting this war against the Libyan government," Megerisi said.

Haftar's forces and their Russian allies have returned to the eastern part of the country. At the same time Russia, as well as Egypt, another Haftar ally, have called for a cease-fire. This has led some to wonder whether this might pave the way for a partitioning of the country between Haftar and the GNA.

Jason Pack, a non-resident fellow at the non-profit Middle East Institute in Washington and founder of Libya-Analysis, warned that Russia's history in other parts of the world indicate a cease-fire may be a precursor to further attacks.

"What we've seen in Syria is when Russia calls for a cease-fire and negotiated settlement, what they're really doing is buying time when they're in a position of tactical weakness as the Russian-backed Haftar forces are in Libya now," Pack said.

Pack says he fears that Russia and its Libyan allies will use any cease-fire to prepare for a new onslaught to take the capital. "Haftar's forces are losing. Russia wants a timeout so they can build up defenses so that they can eventually surge and hopefully take Tripoli," he said. (VOA)



EGYPT

Egypt invites Musk after 'aliens built pyramids' tweet

Egypt has invited Elon Musk to visit its famed pyramids after the SpaceX and Tesla founder posted a satirical tweet stating that clearly extra-terrestrials had built the giant monuments.

"Aliens built the pyramids obv," Musk had tweeted, picking up on a theme popular with conspiracy theorists and kicking off a predictable flood of replies ranging from light-hearted to furious.

Among the avalanche of one-liners, memes and potshots were some angry messages from nationalistic Egyptians who demanded the eccentric engineer and high-tech billionaire better check his facts.

Egyptian International Cooperation Minister Rania al-Mashat, a savvy social media user, however, saw a marketing opportunity to help revive the country's pandemic-battered tourism sector.

"I follow your work with a lot of admiration," wrote Mashat, a former tourism minister. "I invite you & Space X to explore the writings about how the pyramids were built and also to check out the tombs of the pyramid builders.

"Mr. Musk, we are waiting for you," she added, inviting the entrepreneur to come and see for himself one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Egypt's enormous tombs built for pharaohs and their consorts.

Musk followed up by posting a link to a BBC article about the history of the giant structures, calling it "a sensible summary" of how they were constructed.

The most famous and largest of Egypt's ancient monuments, the Giza Pyramids outside Cairo, reopened to the public last month after a three-month closure forced by the coronavirus pandemic.

Egypt's tourism sector suffered a decade of turmoil after the 2011 Arab Spring protests and overthrow of longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak, with militant attacks and political instability keeping many tourists away.

The tourism sector, which accounts for a fifth of the country's GDP and employs some three million people, had recovered to draw record visitors, around 13.6 million last year, when the COVID-19 crisis struck. (AFP)



ALGERIA

Algerian leader secures fugitive officer with Erdogan call, source says

ALGIERS (Reuters) - Algeria's president phoned his Turkish counterpart last month to secure the return of a fugitive military official who fled Algeria days after its powerful army chief died in December, a top Algerian security source said.

Guernit Bounouira was handed over to Algerian security officials in Turkey on Thursday, accused of leaking military secrets, and will face a military judge on Monday in Blida prison southwest of Algiers, the source told Reuters.

Turkish officials were not immediately available to comment on Sunday, which is not a working day in Turkey. A lawyer for Bounouira was not immediately available for comment.

Turkey's surrender of Bounouira to Algerian authorities underscores the importance Ankara attaches to its relationship with Algeria, a powerful neighbour of Libya where Turkish forces have intervened in the civil war.

Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune phoned Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan about a week before Islam's Eid al-Adha holiday, which began on Friday, to request he hand Bounouira over, the source said.

Bounouira, a top aide to the late army chief Ahmed Gaed Salah, is accused of leaking a chart showing movements of army officers including their names and codes, the source said. The chart has circulated on social media, embarrassing the army, although it was unclear who posted it.

Gaed Salah emerged last year as Algeria's most powerful man when weekly mass protests succeeded in unseating the veteran president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and a host of other officials.

SECRETS

However, Gaed Salah died suddenly of a heart attack on Dec. 23, weeks after a presidential election that he had pushed for, but which the street protest movement opposed as illegitimate.

Bounouira fled to Turkey in the week after Gaed Salah died and the Algerian security source said he had subsequently leaked military secrets to activists based abroad.

"Guermi was Gaed Salah's closest man. As such he was aware of military secrets," the source said.

Tebboune, who won the December election, is trying to stamp his own mark on Algeria's government after Bouteflika's two decades in office and appointed a new army chief in January, though the military remains Algeria's most powerful institution.

The Algerian president has pushed for Libya's neighbours to have a bigger role in finding a solution to the conflict there, and opposes direct foreign involvement.

Turkey directly intervened there in January in support of the internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) against eastern-based Libyan forces backed by Russia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

For Ankara, any direct Algerian opposition to its role in Libya could complicate a military operation far from its own shores.

However, despite some disagreements over Libya, Algeria and Turkey have maintained good relations. "We have worked very well with our counterparts in Turkey," the Algerian security source said. (REUTERS)

