

Charity witnesses executions in Tigray

MSF calls for more protection of Ethiopian civilians after men were shot by soldiers

Aid workers criticise failure of international community on humanitarian assistance

SALLY HAYDEN
in Freetown

Staff of the international medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) have spoken about seeing civilian men dragged off buses and executed in front of them in Tigray, northern Ethiopia, as the war there continues. They said the incident happened on Tuesday on the road between Tigrayan capital Mekelle and Adigrat, 117km away, when they came across

the apparent aftermath of an ambush on a military convoy. Ethiopian soldiers stopped the marked MSF vehicle and two minibuses behind it. After forcing passengers to leave the minibuses, men were separated from the women and shot. The driver of the MSF vehicle was later pulled from their car, beaten with a gun and threatened with death. "This horrific event further underscores the need for the protection of civilians during

this ongoing conflict, and for armed groups to respect the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including medical aid," said MSF emergency desk head Karline Kleijer. "Our teams are still reeling from witnessing the senseless loss of lives from this latest attack."

Ethiopia's federal government declared a military offensive on the northern region of Tigray in November, reportedly after attacks by Tigray fighters on Ethiopian army bases. Humanitarian workers continue to call for hospitals in Tigray to be supported, and medical professionals protected. Of 106 health facilities recently assessed by MSF, only 13 per cent were fully functional and 65 per cent were not operational at all. "We're very worried about the scale of deliberate destruction and looting of health facilities

that we've seen across the whole region of Tigray," said Kate Nolan, an MSF emergency co-ordinator. "More than 70 per cent [were] damaged by shelling and gunfire."

One in five health facilities were occupied by fighters at

“We’re very worried about the scale of deliberate destruction”

some point, and some remained occupied, she said. Ambulances have been commandeered by fighters and Ethiopian ministry of health staff are going unpaid. "Before the fighting broke out in early November, Tigray had one of the best health systems in the whole of Ethiopia, but now the health system has almost completely collapsed, with dire consequences," Ms Nolan said.

After Ethiopia's federal government declared its offensive on Tigray, telecommunications went down in the region, and the government restricted access by UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations.

Regardless of those limitations, the lack of international assistance in Tigray has been widely criticised. "In all my years as an aid worker, I have rarely seen a humanitarian response so impeded and unable to deliver in response for so long, to so many with such pressing needs," Norwegian Refugee Council secretary general Jan Egeland, a former UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emer-

gency relief, said last month.

Mr Egeland said the failure of the aid sector to be vocal, to co-ordinate and to respond early had "crippled the collective response" in Tigray. "As an international community, we are clearly failing to deliver."

Protection

Ms Nolan said there needed to be a "big scale-up" of assistance for civilians caught up in the conflict. She has heard reports of pregnant women dying at home because they couldn't access a healthcare facility. Other sick and injured people died waiting for ambulances.

"Health facilities and health structures need to be protected. Obviously that's guaranteed under international law but that's not the case on the ground, there is no respect for the medical mission," she said.

Navalny says he is being tortured in jail

Russian opposition leader says he is sleep deprived and denied medical care

DANIEL McLAUGHLIN

Jailed Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has accused prison authorities of subjecting him to "torture" through sleep deprivation and damaging his health by denying him proper treatment for a deteriorating back problem.

Mr Navalny was jailed for 2½ years last month for allegedly breaking the terms of a 2014 suspended sentence by not returning immediately to Russia after recovering abroad from a near-fatal nerve agent poisoning in Siberia last August.

The EU and the US have imposed sanctions on Russian officials for their alleged persecution of Mr Navalny (44), who vows to continue campaigning from his prison cell against Russia's ruler of 20 years, Vladimir Putin.

The Russian prison authorities said yesterday that Mr Navalny's condition was "stable and satisfactory", but after visiting him later in the day, lawyer Olga Mikhailova said she and her colleagues "really fear for his life and health".

In formal complaints to the prison authorities made public by his anti-corruption foundation, Mr Navalny says he has severe pain and numbness in his right leg and is having difficulty walking, but has been denied an examination by a specialist and receives only painkillers and pain-relief cream from prison doctors.

'Escape risk'

"I regard the deterioration of my health as a direct consequence of the actions and inaction of the [prison] officers, which are deliberately intended to deny me proper medical care and undermine my health," Mr Navalny wrote.

He also complained that, because he is classified as an "escape risk", he is woken up and filmed by a prison guard eight times every night.

"It is clear that through such actions staff... are preventing me sleeping, and so essentially torturing me with sleep deprivation," he wrote.

Mr Navalny has been Russia's main protest leader for several years, and his team has published many reports on alleged graft among top officials. In January, he accused Mr Putin of secretly building a €1 billion palace beside the Black Sea, in a video that has been watched 115 million times on YouTube.

The campaigner's wife, Yulia, demanded Mr Putin (68) release him immediately. "He locked him up because he



“I regard the deterioration of my health as a direct consequence of the actions and inaction of the [prison] officers”

is afraid of political competition and wants to sit on the throne for the rest of his life. What is happening now is personal revenge and payback," she wrote on Instagram.

Dozens of prominent Russian cultural and media figures, including film director Andrei Zvyagintsev and author Lyudmila Ulitskaya, appealed to the authorities yesterday to "take all measures to create conditions for Alexei Navalny in prison that are normal and do not threaten his health and life".

His team plans nationwide protests when 500,000 people register online their intention to take part.

'I have nothing': Fire in Freetown devastates slum, displaces thousands



Sally Hayden
in Freetown

More than 80 people injured in crowded part of Sierra Leone capital

The day after a devastating fire in a Freetown slum, which displaced as many as 5,000 people, residents were reduced to selling the ashen remains of their homes for scrap metal.

Yealimamy Bangura piled up what was left of her roof and walls, before encouraging her six children to beat it into shape. She would sell it for 1,500 leones per kilo (12c) – about 35,000 leones (€2.91) in total – providing something to sustain them as she contemplated what to do next.

The fire broke out at about 6pm on Wednesday, quickly tearing through Susan's Bay, which was packed with homes and people, while fire services were effectively unable to respond. It was visible from across the city.

"The entire community has been burnt to the ground," said Freetown's mayor, Yvonne Aki-Sawyer, in a statement posted to Facebook. "There was no access for the fire service. A six-storey building under construction... blocked what access there previously would have been."

"Disaster risk reduction cannot happen without effective urban planning and a building permit regime which is focused on reducing environmental and man-made risks," she added. "Please join us in praying for the victims."

Survivors described sprinting and screaming as they fled the flames, some carrying whatever belongings they could and others only the clothes they wore. Residents close to the sea boarded fishing boats, rowing out from the coast to escape.

"I couldn't do anything, I just grabbed all the children to secure their lives. It was commotion," said Isatu Kabia (60). "I have no idea what caused the



■ A fire broke out on Wednesday night at Susan's Bay slum in Freetown. As many as 5,000 people have been left homeless. Right: Isatu Kabia stands with her family on the site where her home used to be. PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN

fire. The fire brigades couldn't get down here and it burnt for hours."

Kabia lived across 19 rooms with more than 60 relatives. Everything was destroyed. Yesterday afternoon, they crouched together under black plastic bags, held up by wooden sticks. One woman displayed burns across her legs, saying she had been treated by a medical worker that morning.

"I have no clothes. I am trying to ask for help from the government," Kabia said. "I never imagined something like this would happen."

According to Sierra Leone's Red Cross Society, more than 80 people were injured but no one was thought to have died.

"This is one of the disaster-prone communities," said



“I thought they'd rescue us but the wind was so high they were unable to stop it”

Sinneh Mansaray, the acting director for the Sierra Leonean government's disaster management department. "It's the way the houses are built. Everything is clustered. We must give [them] shelter, provisions,

food. What happens at night, where do they sleep?"

Mansaray was directing his staff and residents through a process where they would register everyone who lost property.

They started at 8am, and reached the halfway point by 2pm. Later, the charity Save the Children would distribute food and water, while aid agencies and the government met to discuss what could be done.

Mansaray said this was the biggest recent disaster in Sierra



Leone, besides the 2017 mudslide, which killed at least 1,100 people, and the 2014-15 Ebola outbreak.

Ibrahim Sesay, who works as a medical officer in prisons, said he believed the fire started in one home, but the owner panicked, shut the door and ran away.

"I thought it was a minor thing, it wouldn't reach this area because of the distance," he said. "I thought they'd rescue us but the wind was so high

they were unable to stop it."

Along with his wife, he managed to save a lot of their belongings by putting them close to the sea, where there was no construction. As smoke spread, he witnessed people fainting and collapsing. "They were totally hopeless," said Sesay.

His extended family, of 24 people, lived across eight rooms. Among them were his wife and five children. "Before this incident we lived a peaceful life," he said. "We want the government to help us. Fires keep happening. They should move us to a conducive atmosphere where I can live a happy life. A community where our children can grow up, get the basic facilities."

"Where I'm presently standing is my house," said Idrissa Turay (23), who lived next door to Sesay with his wife, brother and child. He was on a cement floor surrounded by ash and metal. He said he had lived there his whole life.

"I have nothing [now]. I can't do anything unless someone helps me," Turay said. "I think the government should do something but they won't."

Efforts to dislodge ship stuck in Suez Canal may take weeks

DAVID SHEPPARD, HARRY DAMPSEY and HEBA SALEH

Rescuers have warned that the Suez Canal could remain blocked by a grounded giant container ship for "weeks", raising fears of significant disruption to global trade.

As dredgers arrived yesterday to help dig out and refloat the 220,000-tonne Ever Given after it became wedged across the canal during a sandstorm on Tuesday, Boskalis, a salvage company involved in the rescue, likened the operation to trying to free a beached whale.

"The more secure the ship is, the longer an operation will take," Peter Berdowski, chief executive of Boskalis, told the Netherlands' Nieuwsuur television programme. "It can take days to weeks. Bringing in all

the equipment we need, that's not around the corner."

Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, the technical manager of the Ever Green, said Boskalis subsidiary Smit Salvage, had been appointed to help the rescue effort, but that an attempt to refloat the vessel in the morning had been unsuccessful. In addition to two dredgers already at the site, a specialised suction dredger has also arrived, the company said.

Tonnes of cargo

The 400m long Ever Given, operated by Taiwan-based Evergreen Marine, is one of the world's largest container ships and is weighed down by thousands of tonnes of cargo, with its position suggesting its bow and stern are wedged on the shallower banks of the canal

edge at the southern end.

While salvage experts are hopeful higher tides may help release the vessel if the dredgers can remove enough sand and soil, there are growing fears that refloating the Ever Given may prove more complex.

The salvage companies may need to remove fuel from the ship's tanks to help lighten the vessel and consider offloading some of its containers – an arduous and risky task given the relatively remote location, sheer height of the ship and lack of infrastructure on the ground.

Maersk, the world's largest container shipping company, said nine of its ships and two partner vessels were held up by the blockage. Ranjith Raja, an analyst with financial services data firm Refinitiv, said more



■ The Ever Given vessel ran aground diagonally across the Suez Canal on Tuesday after losing the ability to steer amid high winds and a dust storm. PHOTOGRAPH: SUEZ CANAL/AFP VIA GETTY

than 206 ships were waiting on either side of the canal.

John Glen, an economist at the Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply said a prolonged shutdown of the canal risked severe disruption to supply chains.

"If goods have to be rerouted via Africa due to the blockage this could add as much as 10

days to delivery times for UK businesses," Mr Glen said. "If this does happen it will inevitably lead to shortages of goods and inflationary price rises for consumers."

Oil prices have been supported by the blockage as long lines of tankers wait to pass. Brent crude, the international benchmark, has risen almost 5 per

cent to about \$63 a barrel since the canal closed.

Evergreen said in an emailed statement that there was no harm or damage to the crew, the ship and the cargo so far. It also denied reports that there had been a power outage aboard before the vessel ran aground. – Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2021

Fatah and Hamas to fall short of majority in elections, poll shows

MICHAEL JANSEN

Neither Fatah nor Hamas is likely to secure a majority of seats in the Palestinian legislative election in May, according to a new poll, an outcome which would force the parties into an uneasy coalition or into government with smaller parties.

The poll, conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research, reveals that if elections were held now, each party would win about 30 per cent of the vote.

Two defectors could deny Fatah a majority. The faction headed by former Gaza strongman Mohammed Dahlan could gain 10 per cent and the party of ex-central committee member Nasser al-Qudwa could receive 7 per cent.

A 14-year resident of the Emirates, Dahlan has been trying to attract voters by securing Covid vaccines for Gaza and courting Hamas, which expelled him from the Gaza Strip in 2007.

A nephew of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, al-Qudwa served as UN ambassador and foreign minister but broke with Palestinian president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas when he decreed this year's legislative, presidential and Palestine Liberation Organisation council elections.

Neither Dahlan nor al-Qudwa would be expected to join a Fatah-led coalition.

Independents

The poll did not cover the party of independents formed by ex-prime minister Salam Fayyad, which won two seats in the legislature in the last election. He intends to remain in the opposition.

Despite Fatah's fracturing, pollster Khalil Shikaki said it is unlikely that Hamas – which is criticised for its stewardship of Gaza – would repeat its victory in the 2006 election. Having fielded one candidate per constituency then, Hamas won 74 of the 132 seats. Fatah, which split its vote by backing multiple candidates in each constituency, took just 45. Unlike Fatah, Hamas re-

mains united as campaigning begins, but potential West Bank candidates face arrest and intimidation by Israel, while the West Bank-based election commission could be refused entry to Gaza by Israel, which controls access by land, sea, and air.

Unlike Israelis, who have cast ballots four times in 23 months, Palestinians have voted in just four elections in the 27 years since the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority was formed. The first presidential and parliamentary elections were in 1996; the second presidential election was in 2005 and the second legislative election a year later.

Despite Israeli interference in the campaign and the conduct of the vote, former US president Jimmy Carter, who monitored all four elections, said they were the best-run and most free and fair he observed.

■ Mahmoud Abbas, leader of Fatah, polls put his party's support at about 30%

Neither Fatah nor Hamas has impressed prospective voters with effective handling of the pandemic. A lack of funds has denied Palestinians PPE, medicine and test kits. Limited supplies of vaccines have been received only this month.

Some 13,500 of three million West Bank residents have been inoculated: there have been 232,000 cases and 2,500 deaths in Palestine.

Israel has begun vaccinating some of the 133,000 West Bankers who work in Israel and the settlements but, despite international pressure, Israel refuses to vaccinate others, which the UN has said is in violation of international law.

World View
Listen to the podcast on irishtimes.com