

Irish NGO finds Israeli firm's spyware on phones of Palestinian activists

Front Line Defenders discovers traces of NSO's Pegasus programme on six phones

Sophisticated surveillance tool gives attacker complete access to phone's data

KARLIN LILLINGTON

The controversial spyware programme Pegasus, from Israeli company NSO, has been found on the phones of six Palestinian human rights activists working for established non-governmental organisations (NGOs), a report from Irish human rights organisation Front Line Defenders (FLD) reveals.

FLD says forensic examination of 75 phones from three leading Palestinian organisations in mid-October disclosed traces of the NSO spyware programme Pegasus on six of their

phones. NSO has said it only sells Pegasus to legitimate governments focused on countering terrorism. The Israeli government must approve each sale of Pegasus to a client.

The groups affected are Addameer, Al-Haq, and the Bisan Centre for Research and Development.

Considered one of the world's most sophisticated surveillance tools, Pegasus can be put remotely on a phone, without its owner being aware. Once installed, the software gives an attacker complete access to a phone's messages,

emails, media, microphone, camera, passwords, voice calls (including over encrypted messaging apps), location data, and contacts.

Last week, the US commerce department blacklisted NSO, accusing it and another Israeli company, Candiru, of selling foreign governments the software tools "to maliciously target government officials, journalists, businesspeople, activists, academics, and embassy workers".

'Nota surprise'

A major investigation last July by 17 media organisations, including the Washington Post, the Guardian, and Le Monde, found that Pegasus spyware has been used to monitor human rights defenders, journalists and politicians across the world.

"It is sadly not a surprise to discover evidence that Pegasus

is being used against Palestinian human rights defenders in spite of assurances from NSO group. It is long past time for effective international regulation of the export, sale, transfer and use of surveillance technology," FLD director Andrew Anderson told The Irish Times.

None of the Palestinian NGOs was designated a terrorist organisation at the time of the forensic discoveries, which have been independently verified by digital forensic experts Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, Canada, and Amnesty International's Security Lab.

Within days of the phones being given to FLD for examination, Israeli minister of defence Benny Gantz announced that the three organisations along with three others had been newly classified as branches of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and therefore "terrorist organisations"

under Israel's anti-terrorism law 2016. The designation in late October provoked an immediate outcry from the United States, the United Nations and the European Union, which all dispute the claim.

Coveney visit

On a formal two-day visit to Israel last week, Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney told the Jerusalem Post: "We have not gotten any credible evidence to link the NGOs to terrorism." The paper said the issue was "high on his agenda".

The Government provides funding to two of the NGOs, Al-Haq and Addameer. Mr Coveney told the Jerusalem Post that both organisations had passed a government inspection and said that evidence provided by Israel did not make a sufficient case for the designation.

Lawyer Salah Hammouri, a

field researcher at Addameer Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association in Jerusalem, is one of the those whose phone was affected.

A French citizen, he was informed on October 18th that Israel intended to revoke his permanent residency in Jerusalem and deport him on the basis of his alleged "breach of allegiance to the state of Israel".

In a statement issued to the Associated Press, NSO Group said that it does not identify its customers for contractual and national security reasons, is not privy to whom they hack and sells only to government agencies for use against "serious crime and terror".

An Israeli defence official told AP in a brief statement that the designation of the six organisations was based on solid evidence and that any claim it is related to the use of NSO software is unfounded.

Xi lays the groundwork for third term

Tom Mitchell

in Singapore

China's president adopts Mao and Deng's power ploy at Beijing meeting

Xi Jinping has summoned hundreds of senior Chinese Communist party officials to Beijing for a meeting that is expected to pave the way for his unprecedented bid for a third term in power next year.

This week's annual autumn meeting, or plenum, of the party's central committee will review and approve a rare "resolution" on Chinese history, and comes just four months after Xi presided over an elaborate celebration of the 100th anniversary of the party's founding.

Both Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the party's two other transformational leaders to whom Xi compares himself, secured such resolutions at the beginning of their long tenures in power.

Mao was the party's unchallenged revolutionary leader for more than three decades and Deng reigned for about 15 years, steering the country away from Maoist autarky and opening its economy to the outside world.

Deng used his resolution to criticise the later years of Mao's rule, and justify his bold new economic programme. But analysts said Xi's resolution would ignore controversial episodes in the party's history and present himself as their natural heir, guiding China to its rightful place as a first-rank global power by the middle of the century.

In approving the plenum's agenda last month, the party's 25-member politburo alluded to what Chinese officials argue is the historical continuum linking Mao, Deng and Xi while disregarding interim figures such as former presidents Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Mao, they said, unified China, while Deng made it rich and Xi has made it strong.

"The Chinese nation has ushered in a great leap from standing up and getting rich to becoming strong," the politburo said. "The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has entered an irreversible historical process."

'Man of action' Ahead of the plenum, which will conclude on Thursday, state media has been even more effusive in its praise of Xi, who is now often referred to not just as president and party general secretary but "the people's leader".

A long article published by the official Xinhua news agency at the weekend called Xi "a man of determination and action, a man of profound thoughts and feelings, a man who inherited a legacy but dares to innovate, a man who has forward-looking vision and is committed to working tirelessly".

Xi has made clear his admiration for Mao and rejected many of the institutional reforms championed by Deng, including a clearer separation of party and government roles and a regular transfer of power every decade. He is now

widely expected to remain party and state head for five to 10 more years, and the country's de facto ruler for as long as he lives.

"Mao is the benchmark for Xi," said Steve Tsang, director of the Soas China Institute in London. "The resolution is likely to cover the whole duration of the 100 years of the party and will project a much more positive assessment of the party - nearly always right if not right all the time, and certainly central to the achievements of China today," he added.

"In this sense, Xi is setting the scene for his third - and the beginning of his indefinite - term as top leader next year," Tsang said.

The fact that it took Xi almost a decade to secure an official party resolution on history is a sign of how sensitive his bid for lifetime rule remains, despite the absence of any effective internal opposition.

'Personality cult'

Wu Qiang, a former lecturer at Tsinghua University and outspoken party critic, said the resolution was intended to "prepare China for even more of Xi's personality cult".



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He added: "The resolution is about self-affirmation. It will turn a blind eye to negative parts of the party's history and will damage the country. Xi has used institutional and non-institutional methods to centralise all power around himself."

Another potential threat to Xi's hopes for a smooth transition to a third term will be his government's gamble on a "zero-Covid" policy. The policy has essentially closed the world's second-largest economy to inbound and outbound travel and could remain in place until after Xi is sworn in for his third presidential term at the March 2023 session of the National People's Congress.

"Xi must be aware of resistance to this approach and thus a wish among some of his 'comrades' [for him] to fail spectacularly just prior to [next year's] congress," said Tsang.

"But is Xi someone [who seems] worried about China being cut off from the rest of the world? Unless he sees an enormous economic catastrophe brewing, I am sure he is relaxed about the restrictions in place for travel between 'Covid-free' China and the rest of the Covid-infested world."

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A rush to claim the dead as thousands pay respects at mass burial for fuel-tanker explosion victims



Sally Hayden

in Freetown, Sierra Leone

As a mass burial of Freetown's fuel-tanker explosion victims was organised for yesterday afternoon, there was a rush to claim the dead.

A crowd gathered outside Connaught Hospital mortuary in the city centre where most bodies had been held for days. Some of those present were women wearing their best clothes - one clutched a photograph of a young boy. There was an acrid smell, and passers-by held their noses or covered their faces with scarves.

The deadly explosion in the Sierra Leonean capital took place on Friday evening, when the fuel tanker was hit mid-turn by a speeding truck. Dozens of people rushed towards the scene, trying to collect the leaking fuel, which they hoped to use or sell. Traffic built up, and the subsequent fire roasted passengers in minibuses and female traders who were selling soft drinks and sweets on the side of the road. The death toll had risen yesterday to at least 107, according to government and hospital sources.

In a national address on Sunday evening, Sierra Leone's president Julius Maada Bio - who had cut short a trip to Glasgow to attend the Cop26 climate conference - declared three days of national mourning, and said surviving victims would be taken care of and treated for free.

Alpha Jalloh lost his 34-year-old nephew in the incident. After identifying the body, he was told he had to pay 500,000 leones (£39.50) to get it released from the mortuary - a huge amount in a country where the minimum wage is 600,000 leones a month. The money would go towards pre-



paring the body and escorting it to the cemetery, and the fuel for transport, a mortuary worker said.

Jalloh's nephew had been a minibus conductor, while he himself is unemployed. He said there was no way he could pay and began to argue with the worker, who said that if Jalloh could not produce the fee his nephew would have to be interred as part of a mass burial.

Charge dropped

After this reporter shared this information with aid agency contacts, a representative from the government's national disaster management agency turned up and the charge was dropped.

At least 72 bodies were charred beyond recognition, another mortuary worker said. When we asked him to check whether a particular teenager

was being held there, on foot of a family's request, the man scrolled through photographs of bodies on his phone. He could not confirm the boy was there, but the teenager's family arrived, managed to identify him, and took his body away.

Six more victims had died in Connaught Hospital overnight, a medic said, as he sat outside the burns ward.

After staff at Freetown's hospitals said they were struggling to cope, the World Health Organisation pledged to send burn experts as well as 6.6 tonnes of emergency medical supplies. The first consignment arrived on Sunday.

Yesterday afternoon, families piled on to five buses at the site of the explosion, organised by the government, for transport to the cemetery at Waterloo 20km to the southeast. Others, who couldn't fit inside,

cramped on to motorbikes and minibuses and into keke (three-wheeler) taxis.

At the cemetery, the army and police bands performed in front of thousands of people - relatives, government officials, and charity workers.

The site has also served as a burial ground for victims of other disasters that this west African country of roughly eight million has faced over the past decade. Mourners walked past memorial stones for Ebola victims who died during the 2014-2015 outbreak, and some of the more than 1,100 people who perished during a devastating mudslide in 2017.

Beyond them, dozens of gravediggers had worked throughout the day to dig roughly 100 graves in rows spaced along the light brown earth.

Many relatives ended up

standing for the hours-long wait and the eventual ceremony, while dignitaries and officials sat in shaded sections under marquees. Dozens of morgue workers and medics in protective suits then came in and unloaded coffins from trucks, before prayers were said by both Muslim and Christian leaders.

Scattered applause

"This is a loss for Sierra Leone," said Bio, the president, who was introduced as the chief mourner. He said the country was united in grief, and this was not the time for blame. "As a society what can we do collectively, not just government, not just local government ... so that this doesn't happen to anyone? It is preventable."

Bio said it was necessary to create a "rule-based society" and "collective discipline". He

added that the same mistakes would be repeated if there was not some minimal, scattered applause.

Standing at the back of the family section was a man who said his brother, a mechanic, was somewhere among the unidentified dead. "It was very nice," he said of the ceremony afterwards, adding that he had seen a mass burial like it before on television when the 2017 mudslide happened.

"I had nothing to do with it," said a woman nearby, who was also grieving for a brother. "It was what the government wanted."

Ortega sweeps to fourth term in office

Nicaragua's president Daniel Ortega easily locked in a fourth consecutive term after suppressing political rivals, results showed yesterday, leading Washington to warn it would press for a "return to democracy" and free and fair elections.

Nicaragua's electoral council said that with roughly half the ballots counted, a preliminary tally gave Mr Ortega's Sandinista alliance about 75 per cent of votes.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken said the United States would work with other democratic governments and was ready to use a range of tools, including possible sanctions, visa restrictions and co-ordinated actions against those it said were complicit in supporting the Nicaraguan government's

"undemocratic acts". However, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov backed Mr Ortega, saying US calls for countries not to recognise the outcome were "unacceptable".

The criticism of Sunday's contest by Western and many Latin American nations began well before the vote, after Mr Ortega detained opponents and business leaders, cancelled rival parties and criminalised dissent over the course of months.

Election observers from the European Union and the Organisation of American States were not allowed to scrutinise the vote and journalists have been barred from entering the country.

A statement by all 27 EU member states accused Mr Ortega of "systematic incarceration, har-

assment and intimidation" of opponents, journalists and activists. The EU said the elections "complete the conversion of Nicaragua into an autocratic regime".

Mr Ortega's victory consoli-



Daniel Ortega: detained opponents and business leaders

dates the increasingly repressive political model he has built in recent years along with his wife, vice-president Rosario Murillo.

A former Marxist rebel who helped topple the right-wing So-

moza family dictatorship in the late 1970s, Mr Ortega says he is defending Nicaragua against unscrupulous adversaries bent on ousting him with the aid of foreign powers. His government has passed a series of laws that make it easy to prosecute opponents for crimes such as "betraying the homeland".

On Sunday, Mr Ortega - the longest-serving leader in the Americas - hailed the election as a victory delivered by the "immense majority of Nicaraguans", and lashed out at domestic opponents, calling them "demons". Just five little-known candidates of mostly small parties allied to Mr Ortega's Sandinistas ran against him on the ballot. The electoral council said turnout was 65 per cent. - Reuters

Singapore court stays man's execution

REBECCA RATCLIFFE

Singapore's high court has stayed the execution of a man convicted of smuggling heroin, following outrage among rights groups who said he had learning disabilities and the sentence was a violation of international law.

Nagaenthran K Dharmalingam, a Malaysian national, was arrested in April 2009, when he was 21, for attempting to smuggle 43 grams of heroin into Singapore. The drugs had been strapped to his thigh. He was sentenced to death the following year and, having spent more than 12 years on death row, was told he would face execution tomorrow.

The sentencing has been widely condemned by interna-

tional groups including Human Rights Watch, the International Federation for Human Rights, Anti-Death Penalty Asia Network and Amnesty International. An online petition in support of Mr Dharmalingam has attracted more than 62,000 signatures.

According to campaigners, it was disclosed during the trial that Mr Dharmalingam has an IQ of 69, a level recognised as indicating a learning disability, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. His supporters say there is evidence that Mr Dharmalingam was forced to courier drugs as a victim of human trafficking.

The Malaysian prime minister, Ismail Sabri Yaakob, has written to Singapore's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, to

ask for leniency in his case, according to Malaysian media, while the EU's delegation to Singapore has issued a statement calling for the execution to be stopped.

Discretion

More than 200 family members and friends of prisoners who have lived on death row in Singapore have also called for Mr Dharmalingam to be spared, and for the death penalty to be abolished.

Singapore has some of the world's harshest drugs laws, and the death penalty is mandatory for anyone found guilty of importing more than 15 grams of heroin.

However, amendments passed in 2014 granted the court discretion to impose a

life sentence rather than the death penalty if the defendant was only acting as a courier and "was suffering from such abnormality of mind as substantially impaired his mental responsibility for his acts and omissions in relation to the offence". Rights groups say that executing someone with an intellectual or psychosocial disability is a violation of international laws and standards.

During yesterday's hearing, Mr Dharmalingam's lawyer argued that executing his client would violate Singapore's constitution. The high court ordered the stay of execution pending the hearing of an appeal to the court of appeal, his lawyer said. It is not clear when the appeal hearing will take place. - Guardian



A WEEK IN A CITY UNDER SIEGE BY BOKO HARAM

Trenches surround the Nigerian city of Maiduguri to protect it – for the time being – from a group notorious for indiscriminate killing and mass abductions



Sally Hayden
in Maiduguri, Nigeria

Ibrahim was still a teenager when Boko Haram took over his town, its fighters raging through the streets he had grown up on, slitting the throats of his neighbours, and rounding up young people, like him, whom they felt they could make use of.

Some civilians got away, fleeing to the forest or caves in the nearby Manderu Mountains. Others, those who managed to avoid the initial massacre, succumbed to life under the Islamic militant group, watching as they raised black flags and declared Gwoza the headquarters of their caliphate – an expanse of territory that at one stage, between 2014 and 2015, stretched to the size of Belgium.

"There was no way to escape. They gathered all the youth, took them and trained them," explains Ibrahim, now 23, who is only being identified by his first name for safety reasons. He became a fighter with the insurgents, who were well known for indiscriminate killing, mass abductions, forced marriages and sexual slavery.

By the time we meet, Ibrahim has been out of Boko Haram for just 11 months. He was convinced to defect by Nigerian security forces who phoned him directly after getting his number from other escapees. Ibrahim says they promised him skills training, some money, equipment to start a business and a place to live.

After months under surveillance, Ibrahim was released. He thought he had found shelter with his family in a camp for displaced people, where he estimates that hundreds of the so-called "repentant Boko Haram" are living. But weeks later, the government announced a plan to close it, saying camps are no longer necessary because security has improved.

"The government lied," Ibrahim charges, explaining that he hadn't been given the tools he needed to set up a business and is now homeless. He is contemplating his options: whether to return to Gwoza, now occupied by the Nigerian military, where he worries about people judging him for his past; or to join a group of five other Boko Haram defectors who would travel nearly 1,700km to Lagos, Nigeria's economic capital, in the hopes of finding work.

There is a third option too, one that he knows others in his situation are choosing: rejoining the insurgents.

Ibrahim's story illustrates a microcosm of the challenges presented by an unfathomably huge, yet globally largely forgotten,

conflict and humanitarian crisis, where locals and authorities are facing daily quandaries around survival, forgiveness and how to forge the best path towards peace. The nearly 13-year-long insurgency in northeast Nigeria has displaced around 2.4 million people and likely caused hundreds of thousands of deaths, though no one has managed to accurately count them.

It is certainly still a war zone. That is clear from the time you land in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno State, which is bordered by Niger, Chad and Cameroon. This is the city that birthed Boko Haram, whose name roughly translates as "Western Education is Forbidden". The militant group was founded by Mohammed Yusuf, a popular cleric who was summarily executed by the police in 2009, triggering a violent backlash and the beginning of the conflict. Both the insurgents and the Nigerian security forces have since been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including rape, murder, torture, intentionally directing attacks against civilians, and the forcible recruitment of children. In December 2020, the International Criminal Court's prosecutor announced that the criteria to open an investigation into both had been met.

Siege refuge

Maiduguri is now both a city under siege and a refuge from the militants, who were pushed into more rural areas almost nine years ago. The city's population doubled as displaced people fled here for safety. Armed soldiers patrol inside and outside the airport; new arrivals are greeted by four anti-aircraft guns loaded on the back of vehicles in the carpark.

At points during the insurgency even commercial flights were halted. This time I had no problem boarding a flight with Nigerian airline Arik Air, which suspended flights to Maiduguri for four years because of security concerns.

This was my third visit. During the last two, in 2016 and 2017, the situation was visibly tenser. There were curfews of 6pm or 8pm (an 11pm curfew remains) and, on my second visit, a spate of deadly suicide bombings carried out by young female abductees.

Ironically, or maybe optimistically, vehicle number plates issued in Borno State still read "home of peace", which was set as the state's slogan in better times. On the streets, there are tuktuks and bicycles, but none of the motorbikes ubiquitous across much of Africa, which have been banned because of how easily they can be utilised by attackers.

Today, Maiduguri is also surrounded by a trench. In 2017, the same year the digging began, the Nigerian military implemented a new tactic: creating fortified garrison towns ringed by farms across the state. This was a big about-turn from claims they were winning the war, coming two years after Nigerian president and former dictator Muhammadu Buhari was elected on exactly that promise.

"There's beauty in numbers, there's security in numbers," Kashim Shettima, the

governor of Borno State, told Reuters news agency at the time. "So our target is to congregate all the people in five major urban settlements and provide them with means of livelihood, education, healthcare and of course security. It's a long-term solution, certainly." Aid agencies – whose workers have been attacked, held hostage, and even executed by the insurgents – are effectively barred from leaving the garrison towns and areas under military control.

This left civilians with an impossible choice: should they stay in the protected areas, away from their farms, where they risked disease and starvation, and were dependent on unreliable aid, or live outside the military zones, where they could farm but might be attacked by both insurgents and Nigerian soldiers, who would regard them as Boko Haram supporters or even combatants?

The displaced people I speak of in Maiduguri are not willing to go home. In one neighbourhood, a group gather to tell their stories. The day is hot. Outside, children play with plastic bags with string tied to them, which they hold aloft like kites.

Goni Bukar (55) holds prayer beads in his right hand as he explains that he fled years ago, when Boko Haram attacked. "They were shooting sporadically and killing a lot of people. So many people died and I was able to run."

In Maiduguri he was reunited with some of his family. Four of his 15 children and his brother died during the attack. His brother's children were abducted. Those who survived had swollen legs and nothing to eat. "They were suffering from one disease to another."

Bukar wipes away tears, explaining that he used to be a farmer, growing millet, peanuts, cowpeas and maize. Now, he gets paid meagre amounts of money to pray for others while his two wives beg on the streets. They have found some peace but no security. "We are in a rented apartment here. I have not paid my bill and the landlord is knocking."

He says it is not safe for him to return to his farm. As an Islamic malam, a preacher, he would be targeted. "I preach peace," he says. "Boko Haram interpret the Koran upside down to confuse those who don't understand it. The malams were the target at the beginning so they

wouldn't preach against Boko Haram. More than 20 malams I knew were killed."

Some locals benefit from charities such as Christian Aid. Fatima Mustapha (60), who has nine children and 15 grandchildren, says she receives four goats and gets 17,000 naira (€36) each month. She helps others when she can, but feels compelled to be careful, aware her family could also starve if they lose their monthly payments. "Here there is no food, people don't even have means to take care of their children," she says.

Falmata Mustapha is one of those suffering. Each day she walks two hours to and from the city's trench, passing an army checkpoint and venturing outside the city's perimeter to collect firewood, though it fetches her less than 200 naira (40 cents). The 50-year-old fled her home six years ago. She takes care of seven chil-

dren, including her grandchildren, whose father was murdered by militants. "I'm getting no assistance," she says.

At night, Maiduguri goes dark. There has been no electricity citywide for a year, ever since Boko Haram bombed the transmission lines. Those who can afford it use solar power or diesel generators. "There's no political will to fix anything," complains one aid worker.

Abdulrahman A Hashim, who runs a general store in the central Milk Shop area, says electricity used to cost him a maximum of 10,000 naira per month (€21.50); now he pays 30,000 (€64.50) just to light the shop in the evening and keep one fridge on with the generator. "Honestly, the government

are trying, they're telling us that light will come by February or March," he says, with some hope.

A man who runs an electrical goods shop, and asks not to be named, says his sales have been cut in half. "We used to have customers lining up, people buying irons, kettles, hot plates. All these things use a lot of power. We don't even import them any more.

"We want to see the light," he adds, though he is glad the city is a bit safer than before. "It's getting better, but we pray for a better tomorrow."

Social media campaign

Northeast Nigeria's conflict hit headlines worldwide in April 2014 when 276 schoolgirls were abducted from a boarding school in Chibok, 125km south of Maiduguri. The Nigerian government was slow to react, or even to admit what had happened, until a social media campaign, #BringBackOurGirls, spread across the world, receiving contributions from Michelle Obama, Ellen DeGeneres and Malala Yousafzai.

More than 100 were later freed through mediation or managed to escape, but others died, were killed by military air strikes, or married and stayed with their captors.

Last year a few more Chibok captives left Boko Haram, though sources familiar with their situation say at least one already wants to go back to the Boko Haram life she is now used to.

When you mention it, many of Maiduguri's residents are still bemused that this specific kidnapping garnered so much attention. Abductions are commonplace. Tens of thousands of people, many of them children, are thought to have been taken since the war began.

In 2016, two years after the Chibok kidnapping, Boko Haram split into factions: one still led by Abubakar Shekau – a man known for releasing rambling, threatening videos in which he leered and cackled – while the other named itself Islamic State West Africa Province, or ISWAP. Former fighters and captives describe regular communication between its members and fighters from the so-called Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. They remember the sporadic arrivals of visitors and weapons from countries with an IS presence, including Libya.

While Shekau regarded anyone living outside his territory as a legitimate target, ISWAP appears to be more strategic. Reports say the group is now involved in state-building in its territory: charging taxes, digging wells, providing some healthcare and putting caps on food prices.

Last May, ISWAP achieved what a decade of Nigerian military efforts could not, and became effectively responsible for Shekau's death. The former Boko Haram leader was said to have blown himself up during a battle between the two groups. In the subsequent months, thousands of his fighters defected.

The Nigerian military ended up placing thousands of these fighters – whom locals call the "repentant Boko Haram" – in a camp inside Maiduguri known as Hajj. Residents of that neighbourhood complain that they were not consulted before it was set up.

In the months since, they say they smell open defecation and hear former fighters arguing between themselves at mealtimes, complaining the food they are given is not enough. "Almost every day they used to shout or protest," one man says. "They are fighting among themselves at breakfast and dinner, abusing each other." He says he often hears the words "para yanne" ("f***k you").

Journalists are not allowed to enter, but I look through a hole in one of the camp's walls. There is a line of white tents and a group of men seemingly constructing a toilet. Locals tell me detainees sometimes play music or football, or pray in an enclosed area next to the local mosque. "We are worried because the fence is small," says one resident. "Many people are fearful. This is a residential area." He says one man even sold his house because of the placement of the camp.

"They have nowhere to go," says another resident, wondering about the camp's future. "If they are not de-radicalised, peo-

ple will kill them." Former Boko Haram fighters who surrendered before the latest wave have been allowed to visit friends in the Hajj camp, though most aid agencies are still barred.

Another day, in a cholera treatment centre, medics tell me to avoid one tent because it is full of Hajj camp detainees. I see them lying on beds, some connected to intravenous fluids. There is clearly a cholera outbreak here. Another source says as many as eight people have died because of it. "If you encourage them to surrender and you can't engage them or take good care of them, isn't it better to engage them in battle?" a Maiduguri resident asks me.

Surrenders continue. The military says more than 24,000 "terrorists" have given themselves up since May, including more than 11,000 children and 7,550 women. What to do with them is a question that may determine the future of this region.

When I ask how they know the surrendered fighters are not a threat, Samuel Sesay, Unicef's child protection manager for Borno State, says the so-called disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process is basically "non-existent". DDR has been used in other conflicts to support ex-combatants so they can be reintegrated in society and become active participants in a peace process.

"How do you know who is a combatant or non-combatant? How do you know who is a farmer or who participated? To what level?" Sesay asks, seemingly without a clear answer.

'Lost generation'

Since 2017, Unicef has been involved in the care of more than 5,000 unaccompanied children who lived with Boko Haram. Staff trace their relatives or place them with foster families. "Almost 99 per cent have never been to school," Sesay says, calling them a "lost generation".

On the other side, Unicef has successfully encouraged the northeast's vigilante groups to stop recruiting children. Boko Haram was first chased out of Maiduguri by the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) vigilantes armed with sticks nearly a decade ago. They are visible across the city, sitting at the entrances to buildings or on intersections, often behind walls of cement bags.

A central post office has been commandeered as their headquarters. Goats wander around the compound. A man washes his boots with soapy water while another blows a kiss. A monkey, which CJTF spokesman Bello Danbatta greets fondly, is tied to a tree.

Sitting in his almost empty office, Danbatta explains that the group now has 26,332 members. He calls it "a child of necessity... doing the will of God". They no longer need sticks to protect themselves – Nigeria's military loans them AK47s – and members are paid 20,000 naira (€40) per month. "There is synergy between all the security agencies," he says.

Almost 500 vigilantes have died in the war. Yet Danbatta welcomes the surrender of Boko Haram fighters, whom he calls "the BH". "It's a welcome development... They have tired of this insurgency... The government have been broadcasting that those people are our relatives, they're our people. You cannot use a cutlass to cut your own hand."

Still, he says, the situation is unstable. "The madness of Boko Haram is that at any time they can try to move place to place and attack innocent people." He says fighters can disguise themselves as civilians. "Those BH, they don't write it on their face."

As to when the insurgency will finally end, Danbatta says that is up to the will of God. "If God says it will end this December, it's possible."

– Additional reporting by Sani Adam



SOMALIA POISED ON THE BRINK OF FAMINE

As drought takes hold, the UN has warned that 350,000 children could die by summer. But there is reluctance from the international community to declare this a famine



Sally Hayden
in Dullow, Somalia

On a sandy stretch of land in south-west Somalia, several hundred people disembarked trucks, their eyes taking in the barren, makeshift camp that will be their new home. Among them was Halima Ismael Ibrahim, a skinny single mother of 10.

"We left to save ourselves," Ibrahim tells me the next day, as she cradles her youngest boy, a crying two-year-old, under the beating 40-degree sun from which they still have no respite. She recalls how her family's goats, camels and donkeys had collapsed and died from lack of food and water.

Ibrahim's family walked for three days, accompanied by her sister-in-law, who is breastfeeding a newborn. From there, they were able to board trucks rented by good Samaritans to carry what had become a group of nearly 300 people, all displaced by drought.

"I kept hearing from other people that there are organisations in Dullow giving out things, so this was the destination," says Ibrahim. "Relatives paid for the trucks, we told them we would pay them back later. I've never moved away from my home, this is the first time, but over the last two years we kept feeling like it was coming, it was getting worse every year."

Eleven years ago, Somalia's famine – the first big famine of the 21st century – killed a quarter of a million people, half of them children under the age of six. Unlike then, phones are now readily available in the countryside, so people who have lost everything else still manage to communicate, sharing information on where aid might be available. That is how this group ended up in Dullow, a Somali town of roughly 60,000 right on the Ethiopian border, where about 20 local and international organisations are operating.

Survivors of Ibrahim's journey said two children and a man died in the vehicles en route: their bodies were buried by the side of the road. The new arrivals – mostly women and children, and a few dozen men – slept, unsheltered, on the ground they were dropped off on.

Climate change
The story of Somalia's drought is one of climate change, a failure of the federal government and western indifference. Three consecutive rains have failed in a country said to be one of the most vulnerable to the climate crisis on Earth. The fourth – expected in mid-April – has still not arrived. The result is that an estimated six million Somalis are now experiencing extreme levels of food insecurity, and 81,000 people across six areas are already thought to be experiencing famine.

The coming months are expected to be worse. But international attention is elsewhere – not least, on the war in Ukraine, which has driven up food and fuel prices across Africa. A humanitarian response plan, aimed at feeding the hungry and saving lives, is only 4.4 per cent funded.

Harsh climate is nothing new to Somalis. In A Land of Drought, one of the country's most famous 19th-century poets, Seyid Mohamed Abdulle Hassan, wrote of livestock facing ground where "teeth will find no food to chew" as "a rotting carcass . . . proves to be that of a man or a woman or a child".

Experts say the situation is much more extreme, with mean annual temperatures expected to increase by about 3 degrees this century. Rainfall is increasingly unpredictable, less regular and more intense when it does fall, which can lead to failed harvests, soil erosion and flash flooding.

Conflict is one likely consequence, as people fight over scarce grazing opportunities and water sources. Drought has driven 745,000 people from their homes since the end of last year, according to the UN, which projects that the number may rise to more than one million by the middle of 2022.

Pastoralism has been a way of life for much of this population for generations. Once their animals die, displaced people face an existential crisis: what does the future hold for them now?

"These people's livelihoods are gone, so what next? A dignified way of life is gone. That is climate change"



■ Clockwise from main: Halima Ismael Ibrahim, a single mother of 10, with her youngest boy, a two-year-old; Hane Issack (19) gave birth to twins but worries about how she will feed them; a member of the Dullow drought committee shows a photo he says shows livestock which died as a result of the drought. PHOTOGRAPHS: SALLY HAYDEN



“These people's livelihoods are gone, so what next? A dignified way of life is gone. That is climate change”

what next? A dignified way of life is gone. That is climate change. It is directly attributable to climate change," says Paul Healy, the country director at Trócaire, which operates in Dullow.

Goodwill tested
Somalis have a culture of sharing with others in need. During Ramadan, particularly, charity is common. But that goodwill is also being tested.

The night before we met, villagers brought food and water for the nearly 300 new arrivals in Qansahley camp, where Ibrahim ended up. But they were a few hundred among tens of thousands, and more arrive each day. Abdiya Barre Ali, the local area chief, is using her own land to house 2,000 families. "I'm 70 years old and I have not seen a drought like this one," she says. "We are worried. Even tonight we don't know what we will give them. Of course it's not enough."

In nearby Kabasa camp, a young boy searches through a makeshift rubbish dump for scrap metal which he could sell for a pittance. A girl, only slightly taller than the first boy, pushes a wheelbarrow ahead of her, piling up anything she spots

that might have a value. This camp is now home to more than 40,000 people.

Four medics sit in a small two-room health centre constructed of wood and corrugated metal. They were hired by Trócaire on four-month contracts – charged with spotting the most urgent medical cases from among the displaced and sending them to the hospital. But the bar for "urgent" is high.

At a time when almost everyone is struggling to eat, this has created a conundrum for people who suffer through each day listening to their children's hungry cries and know the small amount of food they can procure is not nutritious enough for growing bodies.

Medics measure each child's arm to evaluate how malnourished they are; if they are deemed to be in need, they are referred to hospital and assigned a month-long course of the therapeutic food Plumpy'Nut. One of Trócaire's staff says sometimes parents deliberately keep food from their children so they reach the threshold, resulting in a course of Plumpy'Nut that is meant for one but is shared among the whole family.

Adam Mohamed Dakne, a clinical nurse, says they see as many as 50 children a day, as well as a few dozen adults. "We don't have time to ask about their histories," he says. "They don't get enough food, shelter. Sanitation is poor. . . The water they're drinking is not clean."

Terrorist group
Large swathes of Somalia are controlled

by Islamic militant group Al-Shabaab, which was formed in 2006. Its existence, and US measures against it once it was designated as a terrorist group, exacerbated the effects of the 2011 famine. Aid agencies were frightened of providing assistance that might be accessed by the group, and remittances sent by Somalis living abroad faced extra blocks.

Today, the al-Qaeda-aligned group – which bans foreign entities from entering its territory – still creates tough challenges for humanitarian organisations. Desperate people living under its control are forced to leave to reach assistance. Many escapees speak of the group in a coded way, calling them "the boys" or "S". But they also wonder whether Al-Shabaab needs to be included in the drought response – conditions are unimaginable, they say, and that is not being properly documented.

Authorities echo this. "If this drought continues, for sure we will receive a lot of people who will come to this area and this is a problem," Aden Bare Ali, the deputy district commissioner for Dullow, tells me. He suggests using businesspeople to distribute aid to Al-Shabaab-controlled areas – while the militants will not take it from foreigners, they would be more receptive to locals, he says.

Just a month ago, Mariam Abdi Mohamed was under Al-Shabaab's control. The 20-year-old mother of six says the group was trying to recruit everyone around them, including her husband. "If [anyone] didn't join they would be slaughtered, it

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was daily," she says.

The family's 20 sheep succumbed to hunger and thirst. Sitting in a burl – the small round shelter, made of branches and pieces of fabric, which is her new home – she mourns two of her children, who she says died on the road to Dullow. "We know Dullow is peaceful and there's a functioning government, and there are many NGOs," she says. "I don't imagine going back there in the current situation, the problem is still there and I've lost all my livelihood now."

Despite her escape, she has received no aid, except some rice given by local Somalis. Three of her remaining children sit around her, one crying in front of an empty pot. "Only God will help me," Mohamed says.

Her direct neighbour, Madina Muktar (30), says two of her four children died on the way to the camp, as well as her husband. Ten of her goats perished during the drought. The journey from Dinsoor, which was under Al-Shabaab control, took them 10 days of walking. "The boys don't allow aid," she recalls, "and people are fighting over water."

Al-Shabaab took over dams which were used by pastoralists during previous dry seasons, Muktar says. "I need shelter, food

and any humanitarian assistance. I'm not willing to go back, my husband and two kids are dead."

In Ladhan camp, newly arrived people have gone from praying for the rain to fearing it. There are only five toilets for 1,313 households, meaning the camp will be turned into an open sewer and a breeding ground for disease if the expected April rains begin soon.

Katra Aden Abdi, a 27-year-old with two children, has spent 10 months there. Her husband stayed behind, 60km away, to mind their few remaining animals. "We still communicate but he has nothing to offer us. It's worse there now." She says Al-Shabaab believe that if they allow any NGO or charity to operate, "others will follow them and they will be attacked. They don't care about people affected."

The politics of famine
Famine is a political word with a specific meaning, and the international community is slow to declare it because certain criteria must be met and – more problematic – data must be gathered. In 2011, Somalia was the first country to meet the requirements of a famine using measurements created under the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) scale, which was developed by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation in the early 2000s.

Now, a "famine" means that at least 20 per cent of households have a complete lack of food and other basic needs, more than 30 per cent of children are acutely malnourished, and two people per 10,000 are dying each day. That threshold has not been met in recent years of drought in Somalia, though the level of suffering has still been extreme by most understandings of the word.

Now, the UN has warned that 350,000 children could die by the summer of this year if nothing is done to help them. A famine declaration would hugely assist in attracting international donations and funding. But data in Somalia can be rough for a host of reasons: it is not even clear whether many of the deaths experienced by families I spoke to were investigated or officially counted. Some aid workers worry that if a declaration comes, it will be too late.

In a health facility in Dullow, doctors say they are not overwhelmed, but they are getting close to it. "This is the worst thing I've ever encountered," says Dr Shueb Ali, who has worked there for 2½ years. "It is very upsetting, it is quite challenging to see."

Nearby is Istar Mohamed Abdi (20), whose malnourished 16-month-old boy had been admitted for treatment. Abdi said she had lived in Kabasa camp since the 2011 famine. "I want some assistance. The drought has affected everyone," she says.

On another bed is a 15-year-old girl who recently crossed the border from Ethiopia, where drought is also badly affecting people. Her baby, at just 12 days old, had a wrinkled face and an impossibly small body, even after three days in the facility.

"At home there was nothing," the girl says, explaining that she could not produce milk for the baby.

Exacerbating the danger is a measles outbreak, which has gone on for four months and spread among the camps. Though measles is transmitted through air, there is no capacity to isolate patients, according to Dr Ali, and "almost everyone has it now". An admitted mother even died from measles, he says.

Somalia's drought has been so devastating that even normally happy news is no longer a cause for celebration. In the health centre's maternity ward, one day after giving birth to twin girls, 19-year-old Hane Issack is downcast, worrying about how she will feed them once she returns to the camp she has lived in for seven years. Her own mother, watching on, explains she has a donkey and cart that she uses to transport goods, but it isn't enough to support the family.

An aid worker speculates that the babies will "most likely" be back in the malnutrition clinic at some point soon.

"We're only applying for humanitarian aid," Issack says, her babies squirming beside her. "We left our home because the drought is recurrent. We don't have anything."

How to . . . say sorry (and act like you mean it)

Expert answers to everyday questions

Sorry seems to be the hardest word
And it should be, says psychotherapist and member of the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Mary Lynn. "It's actually quite difficult for people to say sorry. If you find it very easy, it is probably not heartfelt. The other person will usually recognise that."

Really sorry
To be really sorry, you need to know what you did wrong. If you are genuinely stumped, ask some questions.

"You could ask, 'What did you hear me say?' It comes down to perspectives," says Lynn. "Sometimes someone can hear something differently to what you intended. If you are going to say sorry, it has to come from a place where you accept you have caused upset, even if it wasn't intentional, and then you take responsibility for it."

Sorry, not sorry
Some "sorrlys" are not sorry. Saying "I'm sorry you feel that way" is an example. "If you do that, you are not really validating someone's feelings," says Lynn. "You are putting it back on the other person. It's almost passive-aggressive. You are saying, 'I have no part in that.' Phrases like, 'You are being too sensitive', 'Don't be ridiculous', or the very worst, 'Calm down', will just send anyone into orbit."

In their shoes
Sorry is about two people communicating. "Listen to the other person, don't diminish their feelings," says Lynn. "There are triggers going off everywhere and it's all about perception. To actively listen, stop talking. 'Put yourself in their shoes and then you can say, 'That was not my intention. Let me just say what I meant and see if it sounds the same to you.'"



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I'm sorry, but . . .
If you have a complaint of your own, it might be best to hold it for a separate conversation. "If you are doing sorry, do the sorry," says Lynn.

Apologise for not inviting them to lunch, for example, but if you have noticed that they never take the lead on social activities, address that another time. According to Lynn, in such a situation you could try: "I've noticed I am the one often contacting you, are you aware of this? I would love for you to invite me some time, I really enjoy meeting up."

Act promptly
If you know you did wrong, act quickly. "What happens is your brain tries to protect you by creating a story or a narrative to make you feel you are doing the right thing by not saying sorry. Then you go on reinforcing this," says Lynn.

Saying sorry is a form of emotional intelligence. "It's about being bigger and saying, 'Look, I got this completely wrong."

I wasn't sensitive to your feelings, I am truly sorry. It's actually a strength and builds your own self-esteem."

Make it better
"Sorry" done right should make the other person feel better. "All of us want to feel acknowledged and listened to. It is about seeing and hearing the other person and validating that they have these feelings rather than diminishing them," says Lynn.

Show the kids
Another upside to saying "sorry" is it teaches your kids how to do it, says Lynn. "It's good practice in a household that people can have disagreements and make up. The kids are seeing that you can say sorry and that things can be mended."

There is great power in saying sorry, she says. "We are human and we don't get it right all the time and it can be a relief to say sorry. It's about compassion for yourself and the other person."

JOANNE HUNT