

Sudan nomads untouched by Bashir downfall



OMDURMAN, Sudan: A camel struggles with bondage rope as another is lifted by a mobile crane to be loaded into a waiting truck headed to the border with Egypt at El-Molih camel market on July 10, 2019. — AFP

EL MOLIH, Sudan: Not far from Sudan's capital Khartoum, the epicenter of an uprising that toppled autocratic ruler Omar Al-Bashir, dozens of camel traders are oblivious to the country's biggest political upheaval in decades. "What protests? We have all that we need in the desert - water, food and livestock, we don't have any demands," said Ali Habiballah, 52, a camel trader in El Molih, a vast swathe of desert about 100 km west of Khartoum.

Habiballah, with his deep, black eyes and leathery skin - the product of working under a scorching sun for years - buys and sells camels, just like his father and grandfather before him. "I love the desert and drinking camel milk is enough to make me happy," Habiballah told AFP during a tour of El Molih's camel market. "We don't care about politics. I don't even go to Khartoum," he said as his young son, dressed in traditional attire and seated in a leather saddle, rode by on a camel.

Sudan has been rocked by a political crisis since Dec

19, when protests erupted against the tripling of bread prices by the then government of Bashir. The demonstrations swiftly escalated into a nationwide anti-Bashir campaign that finally led the army to oust him in April, ending his ironfisted rule of three decades.

El Molih's daily camel market is a hit among tourists visiting Sudan. Some camels are sent to slaughter houses for meat, but superior breeds are exported to Gulf countries to take part in races. When it comes to politics, many traders in El Molih simply laugh. "With or without Bashir, this country is just the same for us," said Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed, a camel seller, as he sat with other men in a mud house used for storing animal fodder. "All we are interested in is whether the price of livestock goes up or down," he said, sipping hot tea.

In the distance, a mobile crane loaded a camel onto a truck heading to the border and onwards for sale in Egypt, Israel or the Gulf. The price of each camel depends on what purpose the animal is sold for. A

camel sold for meat exports fetches between 60,000 and 90,000 Sudanese pounds (\$1,330 to \$2,000) from slaughter houses. And a camel destined for racing in Gulf countries can bring in as much as 1.5 million Sudanese pounds.

Thousands of Sudanese nomads live in vast desert stretches of North Darfur, North Kordofan and along the border with Chad, Egypt and Libya. Many hail from the Arab tribes who supported Bashir's brutal war against ethnic African rebels in Darfur that broke out in 2003. While many traders profess to have no interest in politics, others have strong opinions. "The Arabs would be happy if Bashir was still around," said Ali Salim Hamid, 35, who owns around 200 camels. "I want Bashir, our father, to be back," added Hamid, who hails from North Kordofan, one of Bashir's erstwhile support bases.

For him, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) "had nothing to do" with a raid on a protest camp in Khartoum on June 3 that killed scores of

demonstrators. Protesters and rights groups have accused the RSF, which has its origins in the feared Arab Janjaweed militias that were unleashed in Darfur, of carrying out that raid. But its commander General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo - widely known as Himeidi - has defended his men, insisting there was an attempt to distort the paramilitaries' image.

"Previously, camel traders were targets of thieves in the desert but it was Himeidi who caught them and handed them to the authorities," said Hamid. "Thanks to him our business continues." Dagalo, who hails from Darfur, is the deputy chief of Sudan's ruling military council, which seized power after Bashir's downfall. In an interview with AFP in 2016, Dagalo said that he used to sell camels and sheep in Sudan, Libya and Chad. For people like Hamid it does not matter who forms the new administration in Sudan. "Civilian or military government - it is of little importance to us as long as it does not interfere in our business," he said. — AFP

Children among 14 civilians killed in Syria strikes

BEIRUT: Fourteen civilians, including six children and infants, were killed yesterday in air strikes in northwest Syria, targeted for months now by deadly regime and Russian bombardment, a monitor said. Most of the children were among civilians killed when Russian aircraft raided an informal camp of internally displaced Syrians after midnight Friday, said the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

The camp near the town of Khan Sheikhou, in Idlib region, houses Syrians who had fled raids and clashes in neighboring Hama province. Hours later a man and his heavily pregnant wife were killed in the eastern Idlib town of Kefraya in air strikes carried out by unidentified aircraft, the Britain-based Observatory said. White Helmets

volunteers found the bodies of the dead woman, and her well-formed baby lying next to her open stomach the umbilical cord still attached, an AFP correspondent said.

In the north of Hama province, three civilians including a child were killed by artillery fire, the Observatory said. Russian and Syrian regime aircraft have ramped up strikes on Idlib since the end of April, killing more than 590 civilians, while 45 others have perished from rebel fire, according to the Observatory. Regime forces have also been locked in battle with jihadists and allied rebels on the edges of the bastion, which is held by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), including the north of Hama province.

Idlib and its surrounding areas are supposed to be protected from a massive regime offensive by a September 2018 deal between Russia and rebel backer Turkey. A buffer zone planned under that accord was never fully implemented, and the region has seen an uptick in violence. Syria's war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it started in 2011 with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests. — AFP



KEFRAYA, Syria: A member of the Syrian Civil Defense (White Helmets) carries the body of an infant following a regime airstrike on this village in Idlib province yesterday. — AFP

Hurricane takes aim at...

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"No one should take this storm lightly," Edwards said on Twitter. NHC Director Ken Graham warned of the potential for inland flooding: "It's not just a coastal event."

For many, the large storm swirling in the Gulf of Mexico and the potential for large-scale flooding in coastal and river areas has brought with it unpleasant memories of 2005's deadly Hurricane Katrina. Thousands have packed up and left their homes as floodwaters hit low-lying areas like Plaquemines Parish, where road closures left some communities isolated. Some nevertheless hunkered down to ride out the storm, despite mandatory evacuation orders. "We've stayed for some pretty strong storms and we shouldn't have," admitted Keith Delahoussaye, a 60-year-old mechanic, at his trailer home in Port Sulphur. He was keeping a close eye on the nearby Mississippi River. "If we see the water rising here, we'll leave," he said.

In New Orleans, residents and business owners were laying down sandbags and boarding up windows while city officials set up shelters for residents. But local revelers and tourists drank "hurricane" cocktails and sang arm in arm as they walked down Bourbon Street late Friday. Yesterday, Mayor LaToya Cantrell again urged caution, saying: "A lot of the rain won't happen until after landfall."

Louisiana is facing an extraordinarily dangerous

confluence of conditions, experts say. The level of the Mississippi River, already swollen from historic rains and flooding upstream, was at nearly 17 feet (5.2 m) in New Orleans - just below flood stage. River levels are expected to peak at just over 17 feet, according to yesterday's forecast by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

US Senator Bill Cassidy said officials with the Army Corps of Engineers told him they were "confident" that the 20-foot-high levee system protecting New Orleans, a city of 400,000, would hold. "There's still going to be two to three feet between the top of the levee and the top of the floodwaters," Cassidy told Fox News. Storm surges of up to six feet are projected, and 25 to 50 cm of rain are forecast.

Mike Yenni, president of Jefferson Parish near New Orleans, said the community had taken the "unprecedented" step of closing hundreds of flood gates, largely due to the high levels of the Mississippi. Authorities closed highways in several locations along the coast as floodwaters began creeping in. In St John's Parish next to New Orleans, some communities were already under two or more feet of water, local television footage showed.

In 2005, Katrina - the costliest and deadliest hurricane in recent US history - submerged about 80 percent of New Orleans, causing some 1,800 deaths and more than \$150 billion in damage. The city's main sports arena, the Superdome, was turned into an emergency shelter during Katrina. The facility was due to host a concert by the Rolling Stones today, but it was postponed by a day due to Barry. "We're here with you - we'll get through this together," the band said in a statement. — AFP

Turkey ignores US warnings on...

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across party lines called for the United States to terminate Turkey's participation in the F-35 program and to slap sanctions on Turks involved in the deal with Russia. "President Erdogan was given a very clear choice. Unfortunately, he has clearly made the wrong one," said Eliot Engel and Michael McFaul, the top Democrat and Republican respectively on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "That a NATO ally would choose to side with Russia and Vladimir Putin over the alliance and closer cooperation with the United States is hard to fathom," they said in a joint statement.

The US State Department has said Turkish officials are fully aware of legislation - the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act - which mandates sanctions for any "significant" purchases of weapons from Russia. Washington has given Ankara until July 31 to cancel the S-400 purchase or have its pilots kicked off its F-35 training course and expelled from the US. Trump's pick for Pentagon chief, Mark Esper, confronted the Turkish defense minister, Hulusi Akar, about the deal on the sidelines of a NATO meeting last month.

Akar told Esper in a phone call late Friday that Turkey was under "serious threat" and its acquisition of S-400s was "not a choice but an obligation", the Turkish defense ministry said in a statement. He also

said Turkey was obliged to take measures against "intensive attacks" from the Syrian border as it is a priority for Ankara to protect its borders. He said the Turkish army was the only competent force to create a "safe zone" in northern Syria, and the two men agreed a US delegation would visit Ankara next week to discuss the details. The Pentagon confirmed that the call had taken place.

The first parts of the Russian missile system arrived on three planes at Ankara's Murted air base, which was aired live on Turkish broadcasters. It arrived three days before the anniversary of a failed 2016 coup attempt. Turkey has repeatedly refused to back down from the agreement with Russia, despite US threats. "We say this each time. This is a done deal. The process continues. We are coordinating this work, whether permission for planes, personnel," Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told reporters in Ankara on Friday.

US support for Kurdish militia in Syria deemed as "terrorists" by Ankara is one of the major stumbling blocks in relations between the two countries, as well as Washington's refusal to extradite Muslim preacher Fethullah Gulen blamed for the coup bid. Nick Heras, of the Center for a New American Security, said the S-400 system would be a "game changer" for Turkey's air defense strategy in a region surrounded by actors with well-developed air forces. "It is no secret that Erdogan is positioning Turkey to be a 'Eurasian' power, which means that Turkey needs to balance its relationship with China and Russia as much as it does with the United States and NATO," he told AFP. "Turkey is not guaranteed to be in the American camp forever." — Agencies