

End the political deadlock, support group tells Beirut

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BEIRUT: The International Support Group for Lebanon (ISG) has voiced its dismay over delays in the formation of a government in the crisis-racked country and called on Lebanese authorities to implement urgent reforms. In a statement on Wednesday directed at Lebanon's leaders, the group warned that as the political stalemate in the country drags on, "the social and economic crisis is getting worse."

The ISG called on Hassan Diab's caretaker government to "fully implement its immediate responsibilities," adding that the "overriding need is for Lebanon's political leaders to agree to form a government with the capacity and will to implement necessary reforms without further delay."

Pragmatic legislative steps are needed to alleviate the "economic stress faced by Lebanese families and businesses," it said.

The ISG was launched in 2013, and includes the UN, along with China, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Britain and the US, the EU and the Arab League.

In its statement, the group welcomed France's plan to hold an international conference in support of the Lebanese people by the early December. The forum will be co-chaired by the UN.

However, the summit "did not detract from the urgent need for government formation and reforms," it said.

On Wednesday, Reuters quoted "an official source" who claimed that Lebanon's central bank is considering reducing the level of mandatory foreign exchange reserves in order to continue supporting basic imports next year, with the already low reserves dwindling.

According to the source, Riad Salameh, the central bank governor, met with ministers in the caretaker government on Tuesday to discuss cutting the mandatory reserve ratio from 15 percent to 12 percent or even 10 percent. Foreign exchange reserves are currently about \$17.9 billion, leaving only \$800 million to support imports of fuel, wheat and medicine until the end of the year.

Meanwhile, Lebanese political leaders are seeking to shift blame for the parliamentary deadlock in a dispute illustrated by the exchange of accusatory letters between Nabih Berri's parliamentary bloc and President Michel Aoun. Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, tweeted on Wednesday: "We are in a vicious circle under the slogan of conditions, counter-conditions, names and counter-names, electoral and presidential bids, and flimsy regional bets, amid a tremendous change in the region."

At a meeting of the joint parliamentary committees on Wednesday to discuss a draft law for the parliamentary elections, representatives of the Free Patriotic Movement and the Lebanese Forces party voiced their objections, claiming the project presented by the Berri-parliamentary bloc "fuels the

political, sectarian and doctrinal divide because it is based on the idea that Lebanon is one electoral constituency.”

Lebanese Forces MP George Adwan said that “what is being discussed today is a change in the political system, not just an electoral law.”

The Lebanese Parliament is due to hold a plenary session on Friday to discuss a letter sent by Aoun “to enable the state to conduct a forensic accounting audit of the Bank of Lebanon’s accounts.”

Alvarez & Marsal, which was carrying out a forensic audit of the central bank’s accounts, said last week it was halting the investigation because it was not being given the information needed to carry out the task.

The company’s decision came after the central bank invoked a banking secrecy law to prevent disclosure of information.

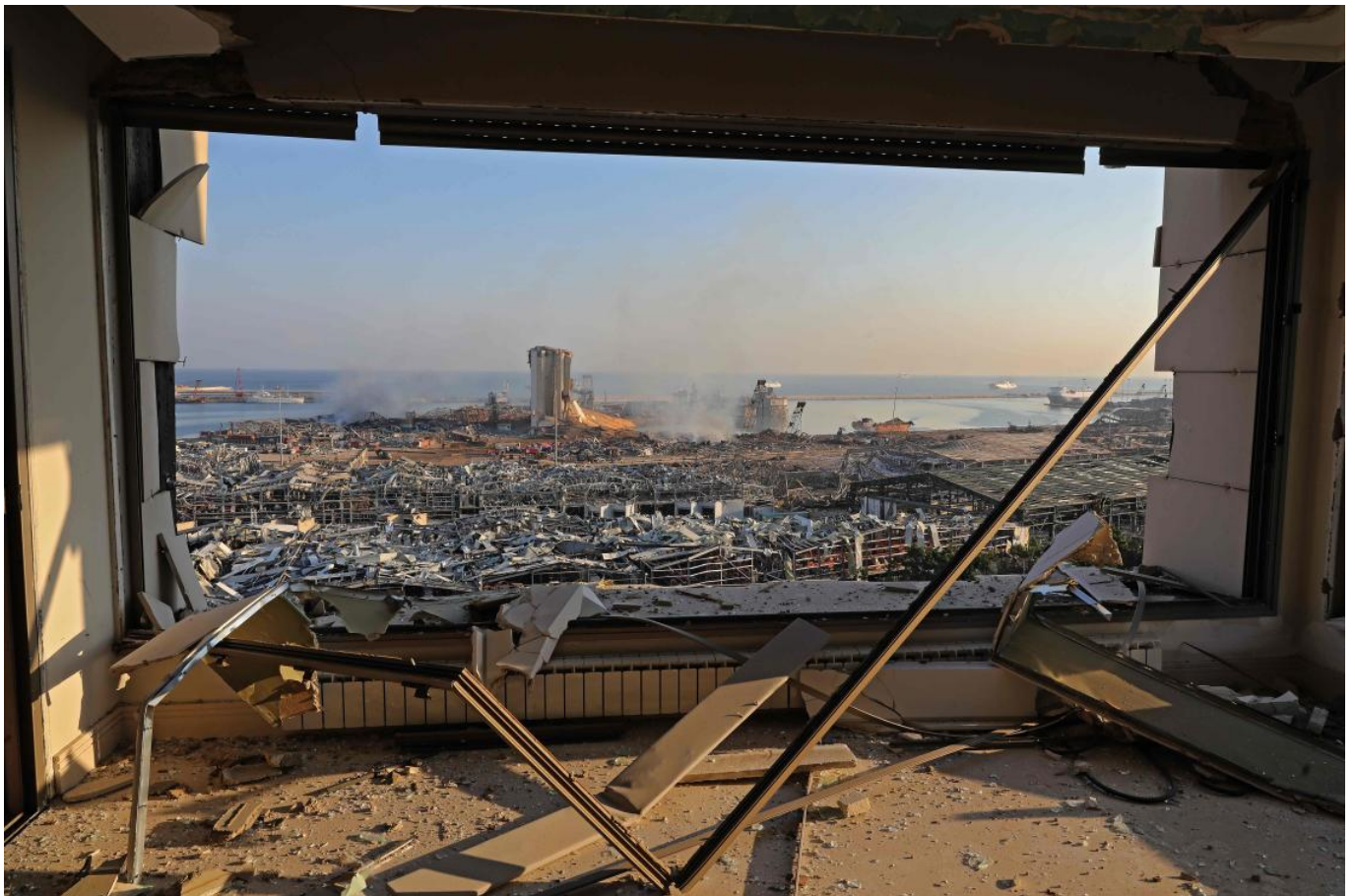
Aoun had insisted on the forensic audit “so that Lebanon is not seen as a rogue or failed state in the eyes of the international community.”

Families of the victims of the Aug. 4 Beirut port explosion staging a sit-in near the parliament building demanded “a decree equating our martyrs with the martyrs of the army.”

Bereaved mothers, some carrying pictures of children killed in the blast, accused former and current heads of state of being responsible for the explosion.

Mohammed Choucair, head of the Lebanese Economic Organizations, said that Lebanese authorities “are dealing with this devastating event as if it were a normal accident.”

He said that “the only way to save Lebanon and rebuild Beirut is to form a capable and productive government that responds to the aspirations of the citizens.”



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Charges filed against customs officials over Lebanon port blast
Lebanon on borrowed time not addressing Hezbollah's weapons

[Political cracks in Turkish govt. deepen in nationalist's favor](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-25 22:46

ANKARA: Senior Turkish officials close to the presidency have criticized decisions by the ruling AKP party amid the growing power of two breakaway parties, DEVA and Future.

On Tuesday, Bulent Arinc, Presidential High Advisory Board member and former deputy prime minister, resigned following a dispute with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan over recent remarks in which Arinc criticized the imprisonment of Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas and prominent businessperson and dissident civil society figure Osman Kavala.

"Turkey's judiciary, economy and other areas evidently need reforms. There is a need for our country to relax and to find a solution to our nation's troubles. I decided that it would be more appropriate for me to leave my position as a member of the High Advisory Board," he said on Twitter.

The move followed the resignation of Berat Albayrak, the finance minister and son-in-law of Erdogan, this time with a bombshell Instagram post on Sunday night.

In a televised interview on Nov. 20, just days after Erdogan pledged a new reform wave for Turkey's judiciary, Arinc defended the releases of Kavala and Demirtas. His suggestion was harshly criticized by Erdogan, whose remarks "offended" Arinc.

Demirtas, former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, was jailed in November 2016 over allegations of supporting terrorism. He faces up to 142 years in jail despite an immediate release plea by the European Court of Human Rights.

Saying that the "arrest should not be turned into a punishment," Arinc also urged people to read Demirtas' storybook "Devran," authored in jail "to understand the Kurds and their suffering."

Kavala has been imprisoned since 2017 although he was never convicted of a crime.

“Arinc will go down as another big name within the AKP being pushed aside by a more irrational guard within the party that is more interested in rousing its small but vocal army of trolls, than it is listening to criticism within the party,” Louis Fishman, a Turkey expert from Brooklyn College, told Arab News.

“For Erdogan, this move could undermine his call for judicial reforms, motivated by his wish to fix the state’s image abroad,” he added.

However, there are several rumors about cracks within the People’s Alliance, formed between the AKP and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), although MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli dismissed them on Tuesday.

“Cowards, plotters and swindlers are targeting the People’s Alliance,” he said. The latest remarks by Arinc, an AKP co-founder, are said to have angered Bahçeli, who flexed his muscles following the comments and pushed his ouster.

The recent operation against 101 Kurdish lawyers and activists in the southeastern province of Diyarbakir were reportedly conducted to please the alliance with the nationalistic party.

Fishman said that Arinc’s resignation will have sent a strong message to Europe and the incoming Biden administration in the US that Turkey is “not really ready” to take serious steps in judicial reform.

“The AKP is now stuck between a rock and a hard place. It’s hard to imagine that reforms can actually strengthen its weakening status, and thus it runs the risk of losing its MHP support. However, without the reforms, it also faces continued strife within the international realm. We will need to wait and see what path it takes in the near future,” he said.

Berk Esen, a political scientist from Sabanci University in Istanbul, said the ruling alliance has been hit hard by the economic crisis that recently worsened following the COVID-19 outbreak in Turkey.

“The super-presidential system, which was introduced in 2018, has only worsened Turkey’s governance record in domestic politics and the international arena. Faced with economic troubles, the government does not have sufficient resources to address growing popular unrest, especially in major urban centers,” he told Arab News.

Esen said that Joe Biden’s recent election win added to Erdogan’s fear that his government could soon come under growing international pressure.

“Therefore, he may have been compelled to take some cosmetic measures to appease Turkey’s former allies by taking half steps, such as releasing Kavala and Demirtas. This turn away from the party’s nationalist course was also arguably supported by former AKP heavyweights like Arinc,” he said.

But the honeymoon didn't continue for too long due to backlash coming from the MHP.

In his speech to the parliamentary group on Wednesday, Erdogan said that "the ruling AK Party's coalition with the ultranationalist MHP was drawn with blood during the July 15 coup attempt against the putschists."

Refuting the criticism voiced by Arinc and extending an olive branch to nationalistic sensitivities, Erdogan also said "there is no longer a Kurdish question in Turkey" and "Demirtas is a terrorist whose hands are covered by blood."

Erdogan also called on the judiciary to act against those who asked for the releases of Demirtas and Kavala, because the demands "violate the constitution's article 138, which bans issuing orders to the courts."

According to Esen, the political crisis has weakened Erdogan's hold on power.

"It increased his dependence on MHP leader Bahceli, who remains a key actor in the ruling coalition and provides Erdogan with nationalist ammunition to deal with opponents," he added.



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Houthis give green light for UN team to access decaying oil tanker

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-25 22:34

AL-MUKALLA: The Iran-backed Houthis had finally given the green light for an international inspection team to board the decaying FS0 Safer oil tanker moored off Yemen's Red Sea coast, the UN said on Tuesday.

UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the Houthis on Saturday sent an official letter to the UN confirming their approval for experts to access the stranded vessel to carry out vital maintenance checks.

The 45-year-old ship has been anchored about 60 km north of Hodeidah since the start of Yemen's civil war five years ago and is loaded with more than 1 million barrels of crude oil. Officials have warned that the rotting tanker posed "grave risks" to the environment and maritime navigation if left unattended any longer.

Although it appeared that the Houthis had at last bowed to local and international pressure, some Yemeni experts and officials remained skeptical as to whether the group would deliver on the promise.

"The objective of the UN-led expert mission is to assess the vessel and undertake initial light maintenance as well as to formulate recommendations on what further action is required to neutralize the risk of an oil spill," Dujarric added.

During a press briefing in New York, he said that the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS) would handle picking members of the mission and equipment required for assessing and repairing damage to the Safer.

"I think if everything comes together, we would expect the mission staff and the equipment to arrive on site by late January or early February."

The tanker has been gradually decaying due to lack of regular maintenance since the Houthis seized control of the province of Hodeidah.

The UN, diplomats, and environmentalists have been pressuring the Houthis to allow international experts to repair the ship following reports that rust has eroded the tanker's structures, allowing water to enter into its rooms.

Local and international experts have warned that an oil spill would cause a major environmental disaster in the Red Sea that would destroy marine life and disrupt international commercial shipping.

In July, the Houthis agreed to grant the UN access to the tanker before

changing their mind, requiring that the team included experts from countries that did not back Saudi-led military operations in Yemen.

Dujarric said that the approval from the Houthis in July was like a "broad statement. It was ... if I recall correctly, it had been a broad permission ... broad statement of saying, yes, you can come and do what you need to do on the tanker, but we need to figure out the technical modalities.

This time, he added, the Houthis were more serious. "This is a further step in the right direction."

Western diplomats who have long marshaled pressure on the Houthi group to allow the maintenance of the tanker expressed their optimism with the step, hoping it would help to avert a potential environmental catastrophe.

"The agreement to allow access to the Safer tanker is welcome (and overdue). Making it safe as soon as possible will prevent a potentially huge environmental disaster," the British Ambassador to Yemen Michael Aron said on Twitter on Wednesday.

But Yemeni political analysts and activists have treated the positive media reports with skepticism, citing the rebels' long track record of unfulfilled promises.

"There is no deal. The Houthis are playing you and us like a table tennis. The difference is that we know they're playing us, while you're still in denial," Baraa Shiban, a Yemeni activist, said on Twitter on Wednesday.

In a tweet on Wednesday, Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a Yemeni conflict analyst, said: "I will believe it when I see it. Houthis are just trying to buy time to come up with a more convincing lie. It works every time with an international community that base decisions on wishful thinking, not reality. Thanks to the Stockholm agreement, they hold Safer a hostage."

Meanwhile, Yemen's Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Mohammed Ali Al-Maqdashi said on Tuesday that dozens of rebel forces, including several field commanders, had been killed in intense fighting outside the central city of Marib and in contested locations in the northern province of Juf during the last couple of days.

During his visit to flashpoints in Marib on Tuesday, Al-Maqdashi vowed to defeat the Houthis and push them out of areas under their control.

"The Yemeni people and their armed forces are determined to win the battle to end the (Houthi) coup and rebellion and restore state institutions," official media reported him as saying.



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Yemen government backs US move to 'blacklist' Houthis
Yemeni bank reopened after Houthis raid in Sanaa

[Egyptian presidency: Spread of COVID-19 will be higher in second wave](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-11-25 22:27

CAIRO: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi revealed the approximate date for the availability of a vaccine for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), as well as that of contracting to obtain the necessary share of vaccinations.

During a speech, President El-Sisi said the vaccine would not be available before the middle of next year, explaining that during the coming days, a contract would be made to obtain Egypt's share of the vaccine.

He said Egypt has had a specialized scientific committee that has been managing the crisis since December of last year and that would now be

dedicated to studying the most appropriate vaccines.

Egypt has taken many measures at the economic level, including an EGP100 billion (\$6.4 billion) initiative to confront the first wave of the virus.

El-Sisi said that during the management of the first wave, the state was forced to take measures that should not be repeated again.

“This will only happen with your cooperation and eagerness and by taking the matter seriously. We had to partially isolate and close universities, schools, restaurants and tourist facilities during the first wave, and we do not want to repeat this,” he said.

He urged citizens to avoid sitting in closed spaces, to respect social distancing and to wear face masks to reduce the chances of contracting the virus. He also called on companies, factories and public transportation companies to continue to enforce the use of face masks, also calling on the prime minister to provide greater quantities of face masks in schools and universities.

Bassam Rady, spokesman for the Egyptian presidency, confirmed that the president’s speech came as a result of the increased number of new COVID-19 cases.

“During today’s meeting, it became clear that COVID-19 infections have increased all around the world, especially with the approach of December, which confirms that the second wave will be different from the first, as the symptoms differ with a wider spread of the disease,” Rady said.

Egyptian Minister of Higher Education Khaled Abdel Ghaffar said that the occupancy rate of intensive-care beds in university hospitals is at 38 percent and that the virus is still under control. The government is expecting an increase in the number of cases during the months of December and January.

COVID-19 cases in Egypt continue to rise, as 361 new cases and 13 deaths were recorded on Tuesday night.



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Egyptian authorities confirm second wave of COVID-19
Egypt sets shop opening hours as second coronavirus wave approaches

[Turkey announces asymptomatic coronavirus case numbers for first time since July](#)

Author:

Reuters

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ISTANBUL: Turkey recorded 28,351 new coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours, including 6,814 with symptoms, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said on Wednesday, the first time since July Ankara has included asymptomatic cases in the total.

The total was by far the highest reported by the government since the outbreak began. The previous daily high, which only included symptomatic

cases, was 7,381, recorded on Tuesday.

Ankara had only been reporting symptomatic cases since the summer, which critics said masked the true scale of the outbreak.

During a news conference on Wednesday, Koca unexpectedly said Ankara would begin announcing the total numbers.

“In line with requests from our people, we plan on including positive cases that do not show symptoms in the daily table,” he said, adding that around 80% of people who test positive were asymptomatic or lightly symptomatic. Health Ministry data on Wednesday showed 168 people had died due to COVID-19 in the last 24 hours, the most since the beginning of the outbreak, raising the death toll to 12,840.

Symptomatic patients totaled 467,730 as of Wednesday, data at the ministry’s website showed. While the case total was not announced, Koca said it would be included in the table in coming days.

Separately, he said Turkey had signed a contract to buy 50 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine from China’s Sinovac Biotech Ltd.

“The important thing here for us to start using vaccines which are known to be effective and reliable. ... I think the vaccination calendar could start on Dec. 11,” Koca said.

Sinovac’s experimental COVID-19 vaccine CoronaVac triggered a quick immune response, but the level of antibodies produced was lower than in people who had recovered, preliminary trial results showed.



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Debate rages over Turkey's surging pandemic numbers