

Lebanese spy chief tests positive for virus in US

Author:

Wed, 2020-10-21 01:28

BEIRUT: Lebanon's security chief has been forced to delay his return from an official visit to the US after testing positive for coronavirus following a series of White House meetings.

Maj. Gen. Abbas Ibrahim, director-general of the Lebanese Public Security, met with US officials, including David Hale, the undersecretary of state for political affairs; CIA director Gina Haspel; and national security adviser Robert O'Brien during his recent visit to Washington.

Hale, as well as several other employees from the State Department and other executive branch divisions, are now self-isolating for 14 days, US officials said.

Lebanon's General Directorate of Public Security said that Ibrahim is in "good health," but will postpone his return to Beirut following the PCR test.

The Lebanese intelligence chief also held talks with senior US security officials in Washington. He was scheduled to hold meetings in Paris before his return to Beirut.

In Lebanon, the number of coronavirus infections during October rose to more than 24,000, climbing past the September total of 22,000.

Since the outbreak began in February, more than 63,000 cases have been reported in the country, with 525 fatalities.

Firas Abyad, director of the Rafic Hariri University Hospital, said: "The situation is unacceptable. If we continue on this path, we will soon reach a point where the number of critical coronavirus cases outweighs the number of available intensive care beds. This will coincide with winter, when the demand for intensive care beds increases for pneumonia cases, for example."

Abyad told Arab News: "One of the most difficult cases that doctors can face is the death of a mother after giving birth, due to the repercussions of her infection with the coronavirus, and this happened a few days ago in Tripoli."

Abyad pointed to a "state of denial" among those infected with the virus, saying some "consider it as just a regular flu, and do not think about the consequences of the disease."

He added: "We have 215 cases that need intensive care in Lebanon. We are not fully occupied yet, but we may be shortly."

Almost 80 Lebanese towns have been placed in lockdown by the Ministry of Interior after recording high rates of infection.

The one-week lockdown decree issued on Tuesday included the southern Beirut neighborhoods of Ghobeiry, Haret Hreik, Burj Al-Brajneh, Tahwitet Al-Ghadeer and Al-Laylaki.

According to the Mount Lebanon Governorate, some suburbs “failed to abide by individual and collective preventive measures to limit the spread of active infection chains.”

The lockdown includes a ban on “social events, parties and gatherings of all kinds.”

Cafes, gaming lounges, amusement parks, sports clubs and public parks will also be closed under the restrictions.



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For Middle East children, pandemic adds to misery of displacement

Tue, 2020-10-20 22:00

DUBAI/ERBIL: Millions have been displaced by recent wars in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – a significant number of them children. Cut adrift in an unfamiliar world in search of safe harbor, the trauma of losing their homes is often compounded by the brutalizing experience of displacement.

According to the UN's World Migration Report 2020, there are an estimated 31 million child migrants worldwide. Roughly 13 million of them are refugees, 936,000 are asylum seekers, and 17 million have been forcibly displaced inside their own country.

Individual tragedies have occasionally drawn the attention of the international community. When photographs emerged of Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian toddler lying face down in the Mediterranean surf, the issue of child migration appeared, for a time, to take center stage.



Syrian children displaced by the war gather at a makeshift camp at Idlib football stadium on March 3, 2020 in the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria. (AFP/File Photo)

The world soon moved on, though, and initial pangs of sympathy and charity reverted to earlier anxieties about security. Now the coronavirus disease

(COVID-19) pandemic has left jealously guarded borders bolted tight.

Of course, it is not just war and terror that drives civilians from their homes. Political and cultural persecution, the loss of economic opportunities, and the ravages of climate change have also contributed to this vast nation of stateless people.

But it is the recent spate of conflicts in the Middle East that has specifically fed the phenomenon of child migration. As Ramzy Baroud, author and editor of the Palestine Chronicle, says, the cause of child migration in the Arab region is the direct result of “violent” conflict.



Displaced Syrian children attend a workshop aimed at spreading awareness about COVID-19 coronavirus disease and precautions for its prevention, at a camp near the Syrian town of Atme close to the border with Turkey in Idlib on March 16, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

“Unlike economic hardship, which often evolves over prolonged periods of time, war is decisive and often leaves people with no other option but to flee,” he told Arab News. “We have seen this trend taking place in the early months of upheaval in the Arab world, starting in 2011 in Libya and continuing in Syria as well.”

Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees in the MENA region, while Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita, according to the UN High Commission for Refugees’ (UNHCR) regional spokesperson, Rula Amin.

“The situation in Syria continues to drive the largest refugee crisis in the world. There remain over 5.5 million registered refugees from Syria in the

main hosting countries – Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt, and 2.6 million are children,” she told Arab News.

INNUMBERS

Children in the Pandemic

*** 31 million – Total child migrants worldwide.**

*** 48% – Total refugee children out of school.**

Syrians are by far the largest forcibly displaced population in the world – 13.2 million of them by late 2019, including 6.6 million refugees and more than six million internally displaced persons, according to the UNHCR.

Bombs and bullets no doubt drive the initial wave of displacement. But Baroud said the waves that follow are the result of the economic deterioration caused by conflict.

“This is important, because quite often war refugees and economic migrants are delinked, while in reality they are escaping the same threat, either that of war or its disastrous outcomes,” he said.

This can be seen in the case of Libyan and Syrian children, who fled the immediate danger with their families to become internally displaced persons – known in the humanitarian glossary as IDPs. It was predominantly the young and physically fit who dared to venture over land and sea to Europe.



Migrants, including women and children, in a dinghy, react as they approach the southern British coastline as they illegally cross the English Channel from France on September 11, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

However, as these conflicts dragged on, families with children increasingly lost hope in ever returning home and began contemplating far riskier options. As of January this year, Mediterranean crossings in rickety boats have killed at least 19,164 migrants since 2014, according to the International Organization for Migration.

“With time, whole families were escaping on long and arduous journeys together. In many cases, children were not even accompanied by adults, for their parents might have either been killed or separated from their children during the war,” Baroud said.

This trend was made clear in 2019, when UNICEF reported more than 33,000 child refugees crossed into Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Italy, Spain and Bulgaria, most of them from the Middle East and North Africa.

“These first countries of asylum often serve as a gateway to other destinations in Europe, where refugees hope to reach a different country, which might be Germany, Sweden, or any other,” said Baroud.



Syrian children displaced by the war stand at a makeshift camp at Idlib football stadium on March 3, 2020 in the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria. (AFP/File Photo)

“So quite often, once a refugee arrives in Greece, for example, where he or she is granted some kind of refugee identification, they hope to continue with their journeys past Greece to somewhere else where they can permanently settle.”

Keeping families together is a “concern and a priority” for aid agencies, says Amin. Key to this is obtaining civil documentation, such as birth, marriage and death certificates. With these, refugees and IDPs are able to access services, move freely and have their rights respected.

The COVID-19 has complicated matters. According to the UNHCR, lockdown measures have pushed displaced populations even deeper into poverty and uncertainty, with children bearing the brunt.

“Refugees have lost their incomes and livelihoods, they are suffering from serious historic disruption to the education of their children, deteriorating economies in their host countries add to their challenges and expose them to increased risks of child labor, early marriage and school drop-out,” Amin said.



Children sit on the ground in the burnt camp of Moria on the island of Lesbos after a major fire broke out, on September 9, 2020. (AFP/File Photo)

In fact, 50 percent of refugee girls worldwide are at risk of dropping out of school entirely because of COVID-19. With classes moving online, many displaced children simply don't have access to computers, consistent internet, or a stable learning environment.

"The pandemic is threatening to erase years of progress made to ensure that refugee children get a proper education," Baroud said.

"Today, 48 percent of all refugee children globally are out of school, 77 percent are enrolled in elementary education, 31 percent are enrolled in schools at secondary education, and only 3 percent get a chance to enroll for higher education."

And the longer these children are out of school, the harder it will be to go back. Baroud added the economic realities of displacement effectively rob them of their childhoods, pushing them into the world of work.

"Families have to make a choice between turning their children into providers or having them enlist in long-term education," he said.

"They often choose the former."

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Palestinian refugee agency warns of instability amid crisis

[UAE, Bahrain welcome decision to remove Sudan from US terror list](#)

Tue, 2020-10-20 21:26

DUBAI: The UAE and Bahrain both welcomed on Tuesday the US removing Sudan from a list of state sponsors of terrorism. Donald Trump said a day earlier he would remove Sudan from the list after the country agreed to pay compensation to US victims of terror attacks. The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation said it

supported all efforts to remove Sudan from the list.

The ministry added it that it supported everything that “contributes to strengthening Sudan’s security, stability and prosperity.”

The Bahraini foreign ministry also said it welcomed the decision, calling it a positive step.

Sudan’s central bank said on Tuesday it had transferred \$335 million in compensation to the US.

The money is for victims of the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which were conducted by Al-Qaeda while Osama bin Laden was based in Sudan.

Sudan is ruled by a transitional government installed after the downfall of President Omar Al-Bashir last year.

The removal from the terror list will allow Sudan to access international loans and aid to revive its economy.



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Donald Trump says Sudan will be removed from terrorism list Sudan’s premier backs demands for justice as ICC prosecutor visits

Kuwait's new emir calls for national unity ahead of elections

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Tue, 2020-10-20 09:30

KUWAIT: Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah called on Tuesday for national unity to meet challenges facing the Gulf state, in a speech to lawmakers ahead of elections on Dec. 5.

The parliamentary elections come at a time when the wealthy OPEC member is facing a liquidity crisis caused by low oil prices and the coronavirus pandemic against the backdrop of continued tensions between larger neighbors Saudi Arabia and Iran.

"National unity has proven to be our strongest weapon in facing challenges, dangers and crises," said the emir, who assumed power last month on the death of the previous ruler.

Frequent clashes between the cabinet and parliament have led to successive government reshuffles and dissolutions of parliament, hindering investment and reform efforts. The outspoken assembly, the Gulf's oldest legislature, can block bills and question ministers.

Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, also addressing the opening of a supplementary legislative session, called for greater efforts to "diversify revenue sources and rationalize spending and consumption ... without detriment to citizens" in the cradle-to-grave welfare state.

He said the government was seeking more sustainable tools to finance the budget, in which public sector salaries and subsidies accounted for 71% of spending for the 2020-2021 fiscal year.

The nearly \$140 billion economy is facing a yawning deficit of \$46 billion this year. A priority will be overcoming legislative gridlock on a bill that would allow Kuwait to tap international debt markets.

Lawmakers opposed to the debt law have called for clarity on government plans to reduce reliance on oil exports, which accounted for 89% of revenues in the last fiscal year.

The emir is expected to maintain oil and investment policy and a balanced foreign policy that strove for Arab unity.

In his speech, the premier said Kuwait would continue mediation efforts to end a Gulf dispute that has seen Saudi Arabia and its allies boycott Qatar since mid-2017. He reiterated his country's support for Palestinians' rights.





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Kuwait Cabinet approves decree for parliamentary elections to be held Dec. 5

[Female domestic workers regularly abused in Qatar: Report](#)

Tue, 2020-10-20 18:52

LONDON: Female migrant workers in Qatar regularly suffer extreme abuse and are frequently overworked, according to a report published on Tuesday by Amnesty International.

The report, which surveyed the experiences of 105 female migrant domestic workers in the Gulf state, said some were forced to work excessive hours, were not paid properly, were denied food, and suffered severe physical mistreatment at the hands of employers, including sexual assault.

It documented instances of regular beatings suffered by 15 of the women, with 40 saying they had been slapped, spat at or had their hair pulled. Most were frequently insulted; one said she had been treated “like a dog” by her employer.

Another said her employer had threatened to cut out her tongue and kill her. “I am only a (maid), I cannot do anything,” she told Amnesty.

Eighty-seven of the 105 said their passports had been confiscated by their employers, preventing them from returning home, and they were offered no protection by Qatari authorities.

Ninety of the women interviewed said they worked for over 14 hours per day, and half said 18-hour days were normal – double the standard hours stipulated in their contracts. Many had never received days off.

Five of the women surveyed by Amnesty said they have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of employers or their family members, with one adding that she had witnessed the son of her employer raping another domestic worker.

She and her colleague were offered money by the employer to keep quiet. When they went to the police instead, she said, they were accused of making the story up.

Qatar is thought to have around 173,000 migrant domestic workers and as many as 2.7 foreign workers overall, making up nearly 90 percent of the country’s population, with most coming from India, Nepal, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Qatar has been dogged by allegations of systematic mistreatment of such workers, including denying them the right to set up unions, or to return home without their employer’s permission for years.

International focus has been drawn to the way the country has treated migrant laborers since Qatar was awarded the right to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup.

Problems persist, including late or non-payment of wages, inadequate housing and exploitative behavior by employers.

Despite moves to bring in such functions as a minimum wage and the 2017 Domestic Workers Law, which ostensibly guaranteed rights on issues such as working hours, breaks, days off and holidays, most measures are not enforced and migrant domestic workers in particular have been left behind, Amnesty said.

“The women we spoke to were resilient and independent – they had left their homes and traveled halfway across the world. Instead of being isolated and silenced, these women should be given a voice so they can advocate for their rights,” said Steve Cockburn, Amnesty’s head of economic and social justice.

“Domestic workers told us they were working an average of 16 hours a day, every day of the week, far more than the law allows. Almost all had their passport confiscated by their employers, and others described not getting

their salaries and being subjected to vicious insults and assaults,” he added.

“The overall picture is of a system which continues to allow employers to treat domestic workers not as human beings, but as possessions. Despite efforts to reform labor laws, Qatar is still failing the most vulnerable women in the country.”

A Qatari government statement said allegations raised by the report will be investigated to ensure “all guilty parties” are held to account.

“If proven to be true, the allegations made by the individuals interviewed ... constitute serious violations of Qatari law and must be dealt with accordingly,” the statement added.



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Qatar workers face old problems despite reform promises