

Lebanese take to the streets to mark protest anniversary

Sun, 2020-10-18 01:54

BEIRUT: Thousands of Lebanese protesters marked the one-year anniversary of nationwide demonstrations on Saturday by marching from Martyrs' Square in the heart of Beirut to the central bank and government offices where they renewed calls for an end to Lebanon's sectarian political system.

Activist groups from the southern cities of Sidon and Tyre, as well as Baalbeck, Bekaa and Tripoli in the north, joined the protest, which brought Martyrs' Square back to life after weeks of inactivity. Wearing masks, the protesters waved Lebanese flags and demanded the overthrow of the "criminal" ruling class.

The march continued to Beirut port, where protesters lit a "torch of the Oct. 17 revolution" to commemorate victims of the explosion that devastated large areas of the capital on Aug. 4.

Almost 180 people were killed and more than 6,500 injured in the blast, which left Lebanon reeling after a year of financial scandals and political stalemate.

In that time, the country has plunged into bankruptcy, the Lebanese lira has collapsed and the dollar exchange rate has skyrocketed on the black market. Tens of thousands of people have lost their jobs, and more than 20 percent of companies and institutions have closed their doors. Meanwhile, the poverty rate has soared from 28 percent to 55 percent, with some indicators predicting it will reach 75 percent.

The central bank's reserves have dropped from \$30 billion to \$17 billion and the gross domestic product from \$55 billion to \$31 billion. Inflation has reached 100 percent.

Amid mounting popular anger at the country's political class, Saad Hariri's government resigned, Hassan Diab's government quit after the Beirut blast and Mustafa Adib stepped down after failing to form a government in line with a French rescue initiative led by President Emmanuel Macron.

Hariri recently offered himself as a "natural candidate" to head the new government, but President Michel Aoun postponed parliamentary consultations after the Free Patriotic Movement objected to the appointment.

Amid these dramatic developments, protesters say they have no intention of backing down.

"Our positions have not changed," activist Mahmoud Faqih told Arab News.

"The recent developments have made it even clearer that the ruling class has lost legitimacy and must be removed from power. We have proven that we are the alternative power to heal the wounds of the people."

SPEEDREAD

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stalemate.

Faqih said the coronavirus pandemic has slowed the revolution's momentum, which has also been affected by "many active protesters deciding to leave Lebanon."

However, "during the past year, initiatives have taken place between revolutionary groups to increase coordination and establish an opposition front," he said.

Another activist, Ziad Abdel Samad, said: "This year has shown that our rulers are criminals who commit crimes against their own people. The ruling class has lost all legitimacy in their people's eyes."

He said that "frustration and desperation" had forced many activists to leave the country.

"Nothing has changed. The ruling class is still fighting over the quota system, even in light of the French initiative."

However, Abdel Samad said that the creation of opposing political blocs in the wake of the protests might lead to the "emergence of new alternative officials."

"The revolution has created a new equation on the political scene. On its one-year anniversary, the revolution is still getting foreign support."

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted: "One year ago today, the Lebanese people began taking to the streets demanding reforms, better governance and an end to the endemic corruption that has stifled Lebanon's tremendous potential. Their message remains clear and undeniable – business as usual is unacceptable."

The UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon, Jan Kubis, said that he "stood beside Lebanon and its people, and the necessary reforms that should be carried out by an effective government."

Kubis said that "the massive wave of protests brought to the streets hundreds of thousands, and even millions, of Lebanese across all the Lebanese regions and across political and sectarian divides to express their profound disappointment in the ruling class and the sectarian political and administrative system that has promoted corruption and nepotism in the country."



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Lebanon's biggest Christian party says won't back Hariri for PM

[Several charged for 'revenge'](#)

[mutilation of Jordan boy](#)

Sun, 2020-10-18 01:18

AMMAN: Jordan's public prosecutor has charged several people after a 16-year-old boy had his eyes gouged and hands partly sliced off in an apparent revenge act that has shocked the Arab kingdom.

The mutilation was carried out Tuesday in Zarqa, a center of Islamic conservatism northeast of the capital Amman, after a group kidnapped the boy, allegedly in retribution against the boy's father, who is in custody accused of murder. Judicial authorities have warned social media users against sharing a video of the assault. Outraged Jordanians have called for those responsible to face the death penalty, after security forces said this week they had arrested the main perpetrator along with five other suspects.

HIGHLIGHTS

Queen Rania termed the attack 'an unspeakable atrocity in every respect'. Outraged Jordanians have called for those responsible to face the death penalty.

Official news agency Petra reported Friday that the prosecutor has charged an unspecified number of defendants with kidnapping and attempted murder. King Abdullah II ordered the boy's transfer to Amman's King Hussein Medical Center, where he has reportedly undergone eye surgery and treatment to fit prosthetics, and called for the strongest legal measures against those responsible. Queen Rania termed the attack "an unspeakable atrocity in every respect."



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Jordanian boy suffers horrific injuries in revenge attack Jordan imposes 48-hour lockdown, but with exceptions

[24 million Egyptian students begin school year amid virus precautions](#)

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Sat, 2020-10-17 22:00

CAIRO: Amid measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, 24 million Egyptian students have started their academic year in 56,000 different schools.

School leaders spent the first day of school making announcements to students about essential hygiene and how to prevent the spread of COVID-19. There was generally a high turnout of students in most schools, despite rumors of classes being canceled.

The Ministry of Education and Technical Education circulated precautionary

measures for schools, such as following up on those who have been in contact with infected people to limit the transmission of infection, raising awareness among all groups participating in education, including students' families, and maintaining social distancing.

Mahmoud El-Fouly, a representative of the Education and Technical Education Directorate in Giza Governorate, said that the student attendance on the first day of school was 100 percent. He said that he addressed the students in the morning to reassure them about the pandemic.

"Egypt is free of the coronavirus, but prevention is better than treatment," he said.

He called for maintaining personal hygiene and the constant ventilation of classrooms and places where students gather inside schools.

Official sources said that at the beginning of term the ministry will follow up the attendance of students and any problems that might appear. Schools have instructions on how to deal with any cases of sickness quickly.

The Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education denied reports that the start of studies in universities for the academic year 2020-2021 would be postponed. It said that the academic year began in all universities nationwide on the announced date, Saturday.

The first semester of the academic year in Egypt will last for 14 weeks, ending on Thursday, Jan. 21, 2021, with the first semester exams taking place from Jan. 23 until Feb. 4, 2021.

The mid-year break runs from Feb. 6 until Feb. 18, 2021. The second semester starts on Feb. 20, 2021 and continues for sixteen weeks until July 10, 2021. The end-of-semester exams will be conducted during June and July 2021.





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[UN Security Council demands 'unconditional' access to decaying Yemen tanker](#)

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Sat, 2020-10-17 21:11

AL-MUKALLA: Members of the Security Council on Friday called on the Iran-backed Houthis to immediately give access to UN experts to the decaying Safer tanker in the Red Sea.

"The members of the Security Council recognized the grave threat posed by the Safer oil tanker, whose dire and dilapidated condition risks an environmental, economic and humanitarian catastrophe to Yemen and the region, and they called on the Houthis to urgently facilitate unconditional and safe access for UN experts to conduct an assessment and repair mission," the members said in a joint statement.

"They welcomed the recent contributions made by Saudi Arabia, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands and France, and the mobilization of the Peace Support Facility," the statement said thanking the countries that pledged to fund the maintenance mission.

Recent images showing water leaking into the decaying Safer tanker off the Yemeni western city of Hodeidah have triggered international uproar as environmentalists and diplomats warned that the tanker's cargo of more than 1 million barrels of crude oil would cause a major disaster in the Red Sea if the tanker collapsed. Other experts say that a stray shell from nearby battlefields would cause an explosion more powerful than the one that rocked Beirut in August.

The Houthis have blocked vital maintenance of the tanker since 2015 and insisted on including experts from countries that did not back the Arab coalition's military operation in the committee that could inspect the tanker.

The US has called on the Houthis to smooth the way for the UN experts to visit the tanker. "We also call for unconditional access for the UN experts to assess and repair the Safer tanker, which threatens the Red Sea and people of Yemen with catastrophic consequences, including environmental and economic

damage and a severe reduction of food and aid imports," Kelly Craft, US ambassador to the UN, said at a UN Security Council briefing on the situation in Yemen.

Yemen's government promised to facilitate the mission of the UN experts, urging the international community to mount more pressure on the Houthis not to politicize the oil tanker. "With regard to the Safer oil tanker, the government of Yemen calls on the Security Council to assume its responsibilities and pressure the Houthis to stop politicizing the issue and immediately allow the UN teams access to the tanker to undertake assessment and repair works to avert an imminent catastrophe," Abdullah Al-Saadi, Yemen's permanent representative at the UN said.

The Security Council expressed its "steadfast" support for the UN Yemen envoy Martin Griffiths and called upon warring factions in Yemen to accept the UN-initiated Joint Declaration.

Inspired by the latest successful prisoner swap between the legitimate government and the Houthis, veteran former diplomats and current government officials believe that only direct talks will lead to a truce and address thorny issues.

"Prisoner swap talks succeeded only because Yemenis engaged in direct talks. They quarrelled at the beginning of the talks, but they reached a consensus by the end of the day," a senior government official said. "So I suggest calling for direct talks before anything else."

Majed Fadhail, deputy minister of human rights and a member of the government delegation in the prisoner swap talks in Switzerland, agreed that talks succeeded when they and the Houthis met face to face.

Abu Bakr Al-Qirbi, Yemen's former foreign minister, said that recent prisoner swap has rekindled hopes for a comprehensive agreement that would end the war. "The (UN) envoy should immediately call the parties to direct negotiations on the Joint Declaration document, as it is the most effective and shortest way to consensus," he tweeted.

The conflict in Yemen began in late 2014 when the Houthis seized control of the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, and subsequently expanded across Yemen. The war has killed more than 100,000 people and caused the world's worst humanitarian crisis, according to the UN.



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352 Yemenis released on second day of prisoner swap
Yemen government, Houthis swap hundreds of prisoners

[Morocco says seized almost 5 tons of cannabis resin](#)

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Sat, 2020-10-17 15:39

RABAT: Moroccan authorities have seized almost five tons of cannabis resin from a vehicle near Casablanca and arrested the driver, the national security service said in a statement Saturday.

The DGSN said a man transporting 4.96 tons of the resin in a utility vehicle was arrested on Friday evening at the entrance to the port city of Mohammedia after a surveillance operation.

An investigation is underway to identify those involved in "the criminal network and determine its national and international ramifications," the statement said.

Earlier this month, authorities announced they had seized over 11 tons of cannabis resin in the northern port city of Tangier.

Morocco is one of the world's top cannabis producers, although the authorities say they are cracking down and seized nearly 180 tons of the drug last year.

The DGSN also announced a separate drug seizure in an operation Saturday morning in the central city of Meknes.

Three people aged between 20 and 22, suspected of transporting the drugs on an inter-city coach, were arrested, it said.

The security agency said the operation led to the seizure of 2,543 pills of ecstasy and the drug Rivotril, along with cocaine, bladed weapons, mobile phones and cash.



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