

Lebanon's Maronite patriarch calls for all parties to adopt 'active neutrality'

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-17 23:24

BEIRUT: In an exclusive interview with Arab News on Wednesday, the head of Lebanon's Maronite church, Bechara Al-Rai, called for all of the many political factions in the country – which has just marked its centenary – to support his call to adopt 'active neutrality,' describing it as "part of the Lebanese identity."

"Lebanon has (historically) been neutral," the patriarch said. "But since 1975, we have lost our neutrality – first when the Cairo Agreement allowed the Palestinians to carry out military operations against Israel from Lebanese territory, then with the civil war, which led to the emergence of different militias. So, active neutrality is a return to our roots, to our own identity."

With the exception of Hezbollah, which he said has not expressed a position yet, Al-Rai claimed that no party in Lebanon opposes neutrality, but that "probably a few take advantage of the current situation and are just sitting on the fence."

Al-Rai disagrees with Hezbollah's claim that neutrality would encourage Israeli aggression, or mean that Lebanon could not defend itself.

"Neutrality comprises three inseparable and complementary elements," he said. The first is that Lebanon, because of its size, "has no interest in being part of the conflicts and wars in the region." The second is that the country's "mission" is to be a place "where all nations can come together and get along." And the third that a Lebanon not "fragmented into several republics" could establish "a strong state, with an army and institutions that can exercise its sovereignty within its territory ... and defend itself from any aggression."

He added: "Hezbollah has its own vested interests that are not necessarily aligned with those of Lebanon."

The need for unity is urgent, Al-Rai continued. "Today, we are committing suicide. We cannot sacrifice Lebanon for the sake of a person or party, whether it is Hezbollah or others."

A policy of active neutrality would allow Lebanon to build on the good relations it already has with many countries, Al-Rai believes, but also to forge new international relations.

While he welcomed the recent decisions by the UAE and Bahrain to normalize

relations with Israel, he stressed: "I am not saying that (Lebanon) should normalize relations with Israel today," but added that the roots of the recent deals could be found in an initiative launched at the Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002.

Al-Rai also took the opportunity to thank the many countries to have provided support to Lebanon since the devastating explosion in Beirut's port on August 4. "This shows that Lebanon, this small country, is well-cherished."

But, he added, "Lebanon must live up to this vision of the international and Arab community. It needs to form a government, and its politicians must no longer care about their personal interests, but must put those of Lebanon first."

He said Lebanon's politicians should feel "ashamed" that French President Emmanuel Macron "rushed to Lebanon in the aftermath of the double explosion, while no Lebanese politician dared to go to the bedside of the people."

"Our politicians are now declaring themselves innocent of their responsibilities," Al-Rai said. "It is as if it was the duty of France or any state to come and help Lebanon ward off the negligence of its political leaders."

More must be done, Al-Rai said, to ensure that the Lebanese people are able not just to survive in their country, but thrive – and to dissuade so many Lebanese from leaving the country.

"Words are not enough. We use words, principles, patriotism, but this is not enough. They need to eat, to work, to be able to build their future and achieve their dreams. The responsibility falls on politicians. Economic conditions in the country need to be improved. The Lebanese must be able to live with dignity and find a job. We must also ensure their safety. It is not okay to have all these guns all over the place in people's hands, shooting and killing for whatever reason. Life has value," he said.

"Therefore, we need a neutral state, a strong state imposing its sovereignty throughout the country, ensuring the security of all its citizens, providing them a normal economic and social life," he continued. "This is the neutral state that we are advocating – the state as it was before it tumbled."

ENDS



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[No peace deal in Yemen in sight despite prisoner swap talks](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-17 23:42

AL-MUKALLA: For the first time since February, the Yemeni government and Houthi representatives will be meeting in Geneva on Friday or Saturday to discuss final touches to the prisoner swap deal.

The direct talks revived hopes that the trust-building discussions would not only see hundreds of prisoners released, but pave the way for a new round of peace talks between the warring sides that could end the war.

Majed Fadhail, deputy minister of human rights and a member of the government delegation, told Arab News that the discussions would be built on previous

talks in Amman in February when both sides agreed to swap hundreds of prisoners.

“The first stage will see 1,420 prisoners released,” he said, adding that all prisoners, including senior government military and civilian figures and other detainees in Houthi prisoners, would be released in later stages.

If the talks succeed in freeing the prisoners it could smooth the way for more trust-building steps brokered by the UN Yemen Envoy Martin Griffiths, Yemen experts say. Griffiths has said many times that his priority is convincing the warring sides in Yemen to accept his proposal for a cease-fire deal that would stop hostilities on battlefields and open humanitarian corridors across the country.

However, some Yemeni experts are pessimistic about peace prospects in Yemen given the continued intensive military operations on the ground.

Saleh Al-Baydani, a Yemeni political analyst, told Arab News on Thursday that the prisoner talks could face the fate of previous negotiations that faltered when the Iran-backed Houthis refused to release senior commanders and government officials.

The Houthis insisted on swapping their fighters with ordinary people they had abducted in Sanaa and other areas under their control.

“The main reason for the failure of the (previous) prisoner exchange agreement, although it is the least complex file, is because of the Houthis’ insistence on handing over civilian detainees who were kidnapped from homes in exchange for the government of Yemen releasing their PoW fighters who can return to the battlefield the next day,” Al-Baydani said. He added that there should be strong guarantees from the UN that the Houthis would stop detaining people if the prisoner swap succeeded.

Citing an escalation in fighting, a worsening humanitarian crisis and the coronavirus pandemic, the UN Yemen envoy said during his last briefing to the UN Security Council that the country was moving away from peace.

“Earlier this year, I warned that Yemen was at a critical juncture. I said either the guns would fall silent and the political process would resume, or Yemen would slip back away from that road to peace, and alas, this is exactly what seems to be happening,” the UN Yemen envoy said.

Al-Baydani agreed with the UN envoy’s statement, saying that the time was not ripe for peace talks because of the Houthi determination to seize control of new areas in northern Yemen, including the strategic city of Marib.

“I do not think the atmosphere is ready for any political settlement. It seems that accelerating military transformations will impose themselves in the final solution in Yemen,” he said.

Despite local and international calls for stopping their offensive against the densely populated city of Marib, the Houthis renewed their pledges to capture the city. On Wednesday, Gen. Jalal Al-Rowaishan, a Houthi minister,

told a local affiliate newspaper that the movement was determined to expel government forces from Marib despite coming under huge international pressure.

The UN envoy has previously warned that fighting in Marib would pose a grave threat to tens of thousands of people who sought refuge in the city, adding that it would be impossible to reach a compressive agreement in Yemen if the Houthis seized control of Marib.

“If Marib falls, simply put, this would undermine prospects of convening an inclusive political process that brings about a transition based on partnership and plurality,” Griffiths said. Analysts believe that the mood of the Houthis is not for peace and that they are racing against time to secure Marib before international pressure increases.

“The attack on Marib is an attempt to control the last bastion of the legitimate government in northern Yemen, preempt any international pressure to stop the war in Yemen and a comprehensive settlement initiative proposed by Griffiths,” Al-Baydani said.



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Pandemic threatens livelihood of Turkish musicians, driving many to suicide

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-17 23:27

ANKARA: Around 100 musicians in Turkey have committed suicide since the country introduced preventive measures against the COVID-19 pandemic in March, according to statistics released by the Turkish Musicians and Performers Union (Muzik-Sen) early this month.

There are roughly 1 million registered musicians in Turkey, many of whom work without insurance and so have been unable to claim state benefits since events, including weddings, were cancelled or restricted to curb the spread of the virus.

Outside of the country's large entertainment venues – which have been shut down in the pandemic – many musicians rely on wedding bookings to make money, but dancing and music at weddings has been banned, with ceremonies limited to one hour, as the summer wedding season was seen as responsible for an uptick in COVID-19 case numbers.

Representatives of the entertainment industry have urged the government to introduce comprehensive aid packages for the sector in order to prevent a wave of social unrest and further suicides.

“State authorities haven't protected musicians under these harsh conditions,” Muzik-Sen's Hasan Aldemir told Arab News. “But when cultural and artistic works are under threat in a country, society cannot make any progress and will inevitably turn towards degeneration.”

According to Aldemir, the government must take “urgent steps” to offer social security to musicians who have already turned to the informal economy.

“These insecure conditions are already killing musicians even when they are alive,” he said.

Veteran musician Niyazi Buluet, one of 20,000 Roma residents in Turkey's southeastern Gaziantep province, said more than 2,000 musicians in the region have been seriously affected by the measures introduced to curb the pandemic.

“We need state support, especially these days,” he said, adding that many young musicians are “taking drugs to endure this economic hardship” while others are begging on the street, or have turned to prostitution in order to make some money. As poverty worsens in the country, the unemployment rate among those aged 15-24 has climbed to 26.1 percent.

“People are extremely hungry and they don't have any other option, because all they know is performing music to bring bread to their houses,” he told

Arab News.

Like many of his fellow musicians, Deniz Arslan, who plays the traditional Turkish baglama, has had to sell his instrument and equipment in order to get some cash, and has had to search for work outside of music since the pandemic began.

“My three brothers, who are also musicians, couldn’t pay their rent because they (have not been able to find) work in other places,” Arslan, who lives in the southeastern province of Sanliurfa, told Arab News. “Aren’t we also children of this country?”



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[Direct Cairo-Moscow flights resume after pandemic suspension](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-09-17 22:54

CAIRO: EgyptAir resumed flights to Russia on Thursday with its first flight

to Moscow after months of suspension due to the novel coronavirus.

The Russian airline Aeroflot resumed flights to Egypt last week.

Airline sources said the flag carrier's flight took off with 106 passengers on board.

The sources added that 102 passengers were booked for the first return flight of the Airbus 220/300 from Moscow.

EgyptAir will run three flights weekly between Cairo and Moscow, on Thursdays, Saturdays and Tuesdays.

All the COVID-19 precautionary measures are applied on passengers as soon as they arrive at the Cairo International Airport.

Among other health measures, EgyptAir required its passengers travelling to Moscow to have a medical statement written in English or Russian proving negative PCR test for COVID-19 from one of the accredited labs in Egypt.

A day earlier, EgyptAir announced that it would resume work "at full production capacity" after easing restrictions imposed to counter the spread of COVID-19.

"It has been decided that the Holding Company for EgyptAir and all its subsidiaries will resume working at full production capacity, as of Sunday, Sept. 20," Roshdy Zakaria, head of the EgyptAir Holding Company, said.

Zakaria stressed that the company's focus throughout the pandemic had been to "adhere to the precautionary measures and to practice social distancing in order to preserve the health of workers and limit the spread the virus" and added that work would be resumed will still following all the necessary safety precautions "while ensuring the regularity of work and raising performance rates."



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[Egypt to resume exports of anti-virus products as infection rate falls](#)

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Thu, 2020-09-17 22:56

CAIRO: Egypt is to resume exporting alcohol products, facemasks, and other anti-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) medical supplies following a fall in the country's infection rate.

A decision to ban sales of the items used in fighting the virus pandemic was made in mid-March as the number of COVID-19 cases in Egypt surged.

But with new cases on the decline the Egyptian Ministry of Trade and Industry has announced a lifting of the exports block.

A ministry statement said that Egypt's trade minister, Nevine Gamea, had given the green light for exports of the products to resume following comprehensive checks with the relevant authorities that the country had sufficient stocks of the items to cover its internal needs.

Gamea pointed out that the government was keen to ensure it had all the necessary supplies in place to continue dealing with the health crisis while also maintaining exports of Egyptian goods such as alcohol and its by-

products, medical items, and facemasks.

She said the state's decision was aimed at preserving the health and safety of citizens while enhancing national economic growth.

Companies producing anti-COVID-19 medical supplies including N95 masks, all types of alcohol and related by-products, facemasks, protective suits, latex gloves, and face shields and glasses, could now start selling abroad again, the minister added.

Immunology consultant, Dr. Amgad El-Haddad, said a high turnover of alcohol products and facemasks earlier in the year had declined in line with the drop in the number of COVID-19 cases in Egypt (which currently stands at 101,500), leaving a supply surplus.

He added that the fall in the infection rate suggested the virus was gradually getting weaker, which was the nature of any pandemic, but he said Egyptians should continue to follow social distancing rules when out and about and wear facemasks.

Dr. Sherif Ezzat, head of the Chamber of Engineering Industries' medical supplies unit, said Egypt's production of anti-coronavirus products had been stepped up with 750,000 facemasks being made every day in contrast to 250,000 before the pandemic, and a similar trend applied to alcohol products.

In order to help get infections down to zero, he added that it was important for people to still adhere to precautionary measures.

Egypt has been recording around 150 new cases of COVID-19 a day with the recovery rate and the number of patients being discharged from hospitals on the rise.



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