

Deadly firefight in Lebanon sparks warnings of more sectarian trouble

Sat, 2020-08-29 01:19

BEIRUT: A deadly battle between two major Lebanese sectarian groups has prompted warnings of more violence as the country is pushed to the breaking point by a financial meltdown and political tensions.

Two people – a 13-year-old Lebanese Sunni boy and a Syrian man – were killed in the Khaldeh area south of the capital in the shootout on Thursday night. Machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades were used in the fighting, which witnesses said lasted four hours.

A Sunni Arab tribe to which the boy belonged accused members of the Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah of opening fire.

The Lebanese army, which was heavily deployed in the area on Friday, said the problem spiralled out of a row over a poster put up by Shiites.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun has set Aug. 31 as a date for binding parliamentary consultations to designate a new prime minister to succeed Hassan Diab's government.

Sources close to the former leaders told Arab News: "There is a decision not to give President Aoun political authority, and we have to wait to see who will respond to Aoun's invitation to the consultations on Monday in light of the significant political dispute with him."

Leader of the Progressive Socialist Party Walid Jumblatt said: "After a delay in calling for consultations and violating the Taif Agreement, it appears that some political forces are already examining a new constitution, and some are loudly calling for it."

FASTFACT

Former Prime Ministers Tammam Salam, Saad Hariri and Najib Mikati have shown no interest in heading the new government.

Aoun objected to Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri's proposal to nominate Hariri to head the next government, and Hezbollah objected to nominating Nawaf Salam, a judge on the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and Mohammed Baasiri, who was vice-governor of the Banque du Liban and the secretary of the Special Investigation Commission fighting money laundering.

Aoun's office released a schedule of the consultations that will begin Monday

morning and end in the afternoon. The person who gets the largest backing from parliamentary blocs and members will be asked by Aoun to form a new Cabinet.

French President Emmanuel Macron will next week meet iconic singer Fairuz and members of Lebanon's political leadership as he returns to the country in search of serious reform in the wake of the devastating Beirut port blast.

Macron will be in Lebanon on Monday and Tuesday for his second visit in less than a month.

Fairuz, 85, is one of the rare figures in Lebanon who is admired across the multi-confessional country.

Karim Emile Bitar, a political science professor in France and Lebanon, tweeted it was an "excellent decision" by Macron to meet Fairuz, describing her as "arguably the most iconic, dignified and consensual Lebanese figure."

An official in the French presidency said that Macron's visit to Beirut aims "to pressure Lebanon's political leaders to move forward in forming a government that can implement urgent reforms. The president will not give up."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon crisis](#)

[Hezbollah](#)

[Hassan Diab](#)

UN rights expert urges international help for Lebanon to 'avert hunger crisis'
Global aid for Lebanon depends on 'very serious' reforms: Canadian FM

Israel strikes Hamas in Gaza over rockets, fire balloons

Author:

Sat, 2020-08-29 00:55

GAZA: Israeli tanks and warplanes struck Hamas positions in Gaza on Friday and Hamas forces fired half-a-dozen rockets toward southern Israel, as a three-week-old flare-up showed no let-up despite international mediation efforts, the military said.

There were no reports of casualties on either side.

Warning sirens sounded before dawn in Israeli communities near the border as the pre-dawn airstrikes and shelling prompted Hamas to launch a salvo of six rockets in retaliation.

Hamas, which has controlled Gaza since 2007, said the rockets were a "direct response to the escalation by the Israeli occupier."

Israel's military said it struck underground infrastructure and a military post belonging to Hamas overnight in response to incendiary balloons launched from the Palestinian enclave that have burned Israeli farmland.

Gaza militants then fired six rockets toward Israel, the military said, drawing a second round of Israeli strikes which hit a Hamas armed training camp.

An Israeli military spokesman said he did not have any information on where the Gaza rockets landed, but that none of them were intercepted by its Iron Dome system.

Hamas has been trying to pressure Israel to ease its blockade of Gaza and allow more investment, in part by letting Palestinians launch dozens of helium balloons carrying incendiary material toward southern Israel in recent weeks. But so far Israel's response has been to tighten the blockade.

The Israelis are reported to have said they are willing to resume fuel deliveries for the power plant and ease their blockade if there is an end to the fire balloons.

FASTFACT

Israel has bombed Gaza almost daily since Aug. 6, for the past two weeks, saying it would not tolerate the balloons.

The fire bombs, crude devices fitted to balloons, inflated condoms or plastic bags, have triggered more than 400 blazes in southern Israel, according to fire brigade figures.

Mediators from the UN, Egypt and Qatar have been working to restore calm. An Egyptian delegation has been shuttling between the two sides to try to broker a renewal of the truce.

Israel has bombed Gaza almost daily since Aug. 6, for the past two weeks, saying it would not tolerate the balloons.

With tension high, Israel has closed its only commercial crossing with Gaza, banned sea access and halted fuel imports into the coastal strip, leading to its only power plant shutting down last week.

Health officials have voiced concern that the power plant shutdown could aggravate a novel coronavirus outbreak in impoverished Gaza, which is home to 2 million Palestinians.

Financial aid for the impoverished territory from gas-rich Qatar has been a major component of the latest truce first agreed upon in November 2018 and renewed several times since.

But Israel also undertook other measures to alleviate unemployment of more than 50 percent in the territory of some 2 million people.

Disagreements over their implementation have fueled repeated flare-ups on the border.

Such flare-ups escalated into major conflicts in 2008, 2012 and 2014, and mediators have been striving to prevent a new war.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Israel](#)

[Palestine](#)

[Gaza](#)

Israel lists first commercial passenger flight to UAE Turkey-Israeli ties fragile under the shadow of Hamas

[Virus lockdown brings new misery to long-suffering Gaza](#)

Author:

Sat, 2020-08-29 00:49

GAZA CITY: Ahmed Eissa, a father of two living in the Gaza Strip, was already struggling to make ends meet on \$7 a day, dealing with frequent electricity cuts and worried that another war might break out.

Then the coronavirus found its way into the impoverished Palestinian territory, just as Israel was tightening its blockade in a standoff with Gaza's militant Hamas rulers, and a strict lockdown has confined everyone to their homes.

Now Eissa does not know how he will feed his family.

"I don't have savings and I don't have a job, so no one would lend me money," he said. "I won't beg from anyone."

The restrictions imposed by Hamas are aimed at averting what many fear would be an even bigger catastrophe: A wide-scale outbreak in a population of 2 million people confined to a territory where the health care system has been devastated by years of war and isolation.

The lockdown was triggered by the discovery earlier this week of the first locally spread cases, after months in which infections were confined to quarantine facilities where all returning travelers were forced to isolate for three weeks. Authorities have not yet determined how the virus made its way into the general population.

Targeting Hamas military infrastructure, Israel sealed off Gaza's fishing zone and closed its sole commercial crossing. That forced Gaza's only power plant to shut down for lack of fuel.

Most Gazans now get just four hours of electricity a day, leaving them without refrigeration, air conditioning or electric fans for hours on end as temperatures hover around 32 degrees Celsius.

Eissa's wife, Majda, says it's "unbearable." They struggle to sleep at night because of the heat and humidity. Her daughters sleep on the tile floor because it's cooler. They change rooms, they open and close windows, trying to catch the occasional breeze.

The water pump in their building runs on electricity, so the taps run dry when the power goes out.

"The dishes and laundry are piling up in the kitchen," she said. "Everything gets dirty, and I have to keep scrubbing and cleaning using a bottle of water. I can't bear to stay at home anymore."

Eissa used to buy from fishermen and then resell the fish in local markets, work that he says brought in around 25 shekels (\$7) a day. But the fishermen are marooned by the Israeli closures, and he's not allowed to leave home

because of the lockdown to look for other work.

On Thursday, his parents, who live downstairs, sent him a pot of stew for lunch.

"I don't know what or how we will eat tomorrow," he told The Associated Press by phone from his home in the Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza. He complained that he has not seen a serious government plan on how to cope with the crisis.

SPEEDREAD

The restrictions imposed are aimed at averting what many fear would be an even bigger calamity: A wide-scale outbreak in a population of 2 million people confined to a territory where the health care system has been devastated by years of war and isolation.

In recent days, authorities have detected 80 cases of local transmission and two people have died from COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Hamas has extended the lockdown until Sunday, forcing most businesses to close and setting up checkpoints to limit movement.

"We may have to shut down entire neighborhoods and lock up residents in their houses while providing them with what they need," Tawfiq Abu Naim, the head of Hamas' security services, told reporters.

Many Gazans live day-to-day on meager wages earned at markets, shops, restaurants and cafes, all of which are shuttered.

About two-thirds of Gaza's population are refugees whose families fled or were driven out during the 1948 war surrounding the creation of Israel. More than a million receive food aid from the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, but it has been forced to suspend food distribution due to the pandemic and is now providing only health care and basic sanitation.

"We are aware that food is even more critical during such a period, and are working hard on finding a modality that will allow us to resume this massive food operation in the very near future in a safe way," said Matthias Schmale, the UNRWA director in Gaza.

UNRWA launched a program to deliver food to people's homes in March, at the start of the global pandemic, but ended it when an initial lockdown was lifted.

The electricity crisis also poses challenges, Schmale said.

"If we're not able to run our generators this would be a major challenge for continuing essential services, and in particular, health," he said.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[gaza city](#)

Israel lists first commercial passenger flight to UAE
Germany, Israel agree continued Iran arms embargo important

[Iranian musician faces jail over women dancers and singers](#)

Sat, 2020-08-29 00:44

AMMAN: Iranian musician Mehdi Rajabian said he is under house arrest as he awaits trial for working with female dancers and singers, in the country's latest move to stop women artists performing.

Rajabian, 30, said he was arrested on Aug. 10 following media reports that his latest project will include women singing and the publication of a video of a woman dancing to his music – both of which can be deemed immoral under Iranian law.

Iran's Justice Ministry and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance did not respond to requests for comment.

"Even if I go to prison hundreds of times, I need female singing in my project, I need female dance," said Rajabian, who has been jailed twice before over his music.

"Whenever I feel the need to produce this music, I will definitely produce

it. I do not censor myself," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation via text message from the northern city of Sari where he is currently out on bail. Iran has long censored art and music and arrested hundreds of performers under vaguely defined morality laws that target women and sexual minorities, according to Human Rights Watch.

There are no laws banning women in music but religious decisions issued under Iran's Islamic rulers, who came to power in the 1979 revolution, have been used arbitrarily, said Hadi Ghaemi, executive director of Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Even if I go to prison hundreds of times, I need female singing in my project, I need female dance.

Mehdi Rajabian, Iranian musician

"The government would like to propagate ... a traditional attitude toward women's presence in public in general," he said. "It doesn't have to be about performance."

Hunger strike

The legitimacy of the Islamic republic's rulers was challenged by nationwide protests last year, sparked by fuel price hikes, which were met with a violent crackdown.

Many young Iranians are disillusioned with laws that limit women's freedom, with fines and jail terms for having their hair uncovered or for wearing clothes deemed immodest. Thousands have protested by removing their hijabs in public in online videos.

The video which led to Rajabian's latest arrest features Iranian dancer Helia Bandeh, who lives outside Iran, performing to a track from his 2019 peace album "Middle Eastern" by Sony Music, which features about 100 artists. Rajabian spent three months in solitary confinement in 2013 for propaganda against the state and in 2015 he served 2 years behind bars until he was released after a 40-day hunger strike.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Mehdi Rajabian](#)

Iranian jailed for 9 years for beheading daughter
Detained Colombia businessman was negotiating with Iran for Venezuela, lawyers say

[Lebanon coronavirus cases top 15,000](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1598639673616571000

Fri, 2020-08-28 18:08

BEIRUT: Lebanon passed the 15,000 mark for coronavirus cases on Friday, the health ministry said, as the country eased lockdown measures just a week after re-imposing them following pressure from businesses.

The ministry announced 676 new infections and two deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing the total number of novel coronavirus cases registered since February to 15,613, including 148 deaths.

Daily infection rates have spiked since a massive explosion at Beirut's port on August 4 that killed more than 180 people, wounded thousands and ravaged large parts of the capital.

Some 5,855 cases, or more than a third of the total, have been registered in the past 10 days alone.

Authorities on August 21 imposed a lockdown in all parts of the country except those ravaged by the blast, as well as a night-time curfew from 6 p.m. (1500 GMT) to 6 am (0300 GMT).

But they eased the restrictions on Friday after protest from the private sector, including the owners of service and tourism businesses already reeling from the country's worst economic downturn in decades.

The start of the curfew was pushed back to 10 p.m. (1900 GMT), while malls, restaurants, coffee shops and gyms were allowed to re-open.

Caretaker health minister Hamad Hassan warned on August 17 that hospitals were reaching maximum capacity to treat coronavirus patients after the blast overwhelmed health centers already stretched by the virus.

The head of a major public hospital battling coronavirus, Firass Abiad, was unimpressed by Friday's easing of preventive measures.

With a record 24-hour tally of 689 positive tests recorded a day earlier, "it is clear the objectives of the lockdown had not been reached," he said on Twitter.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Coronavirus](#)

[Lebanon](#)

Macron to meet iconic singer Fairuz in push for Lebanon reform
Global aid for Lebanon depends on 'very serious' reforms: Canadian FM