

Pro-vote Algerians march against 'foreign interference'

Author:

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ALGIERS: Several hundred Algerians marched on Saturday in support of a presidential election rejected by a mass protest movement that has rocked the North African country since February.

The march was organized by the UGTA trades union group which is close to the National Liberation Front of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who quit in April under pressure from the street. The UGTA supported Bouteflika during his 20 years at the helm in Algeria.

Pro-regime "spontaneous" rallies have been held across the country as the Dec. 12 polling day nears, but Saturday's was the first staged by a group close to the regime.

"No to foreign interference!" read one placard in response to a European Parliament resolution on Thursday.

The resolution condemned "the arbitrary and unlawful arrest and detainment of, attacks on and intimidations of journalists, trade unionists, lawyers, students, human rights defenders and civil society and all peaceful protesters" in Algeria.

Algiers denounced what it called "flagrant interference in its internal affairs" and a "disregard" for its institutions.

Marchers on Saturday also voiced their support for the military, whose chief Gen. Ahmed Gaid Salah has been Algeria's de facto ruler since Bouteflika stepped down.

"The Dec. 12 vote will go ahead," demonstrators chanted as they also railed against former colonial power France, telling its "children" – anti-vote protesters – to "get out."

Despite protests being banned in the capital since 2001, police escorted the marchers and arrested several onlookers who shouted anti-poll slogans or insulted demonstrators.

The authorities have tolerated massive weekly demonstrations that been kept up despite Bouteflika's departure, but they have also begun to disperse protesters in Algiers in recent weeks.

Anti-vote protesters fear the poll will cement in power politicians close to Bouteflika. The five candidates standing all either supported him or took part in his government.



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[US-Russia tensions 'complicate' UN peace efforts for Libya](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 22:51

TUNIS: For the UN's Libya envoy, US-Russia tensions top a list of "complications" in efforts to heal international divisions on the North African state's conflict, he told AFP in an interview.

Ghassan Salame said: "The road is (still) full of obstacles and complications" toward convening inter-Libyan peace talks that could be held in Geneva "probably in the first half of January."

"We've recently had many complications, primarily of course concerning this Russian-American tension on the possible presence (in Libya) of Russian

security firms,” said Salame.

Washington has repeatedly voiced concern over alleged Russian meddling in the conflict that is being exploited by several outside powers for a proxy war.

Russia is suspected of providing military support to eastern Libya’s eastern commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, whose forces on April 4 launched a now stalled assault on the Tripoli base of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

In early November, Russia denied media reports of Russian mercenaries backing up Haftar’s forces, who already have the support of the UAE, Jordan and Egypt.

The GNA, for its part, is propped up by Turkish military aid.

Under an action plan adopted by the UN Security Council in July, Salame has been working to organize an international conference in Berlin aimed primarily at ending foreign interference in Libya, which is in theory under a UN arms embargo.

“Arms are coming in from everywhere,” the UN envoy told AFP at his office in Tunis.

Four preparatory meetings have been held in the German capital and a final session is scheduled to take place on Dec. 10, he said.

Apart from the Security Council’s five permanent member states, Germany, Italy, Egypt, the UAE and Turkey have also taken part.

“If all goes well, we’ll be able to set a date ... for the political meeting that should take place most probably in the first days of 2020,” in which other countries could also join, said the UN envoy, to be followed by the inter-Libyan talks.

On the Russian mercenaries, Salame said he was not in a position to confirm their presence in Libya that appeared to have motivated “a growing American interest” in the North African country.

Previously, “the Americans had practically limited their interest to two fundamental questions: The fight against terrorism and the normal flow of oil production,” he said.

Senior US officials met with Haftar earlier this month to discuss steps toward ending his offensive on Tripoli, and accused Russia of exploiting the conflict, the State Department said.

Despite apparent initial support for Haftar on the part of US President Donald Trump, Washington has called for a halt to the offensive in the wake of a visit to the US capital by a GNA delegation earlier this year.

Salame termed the renewed US interest in Libya “a novelty” and said the UN, “like the Libyans, are waiting for clarity on what the Americans think they

can do” in the country.

The UN envoy also said a military deal signed by Turkey and the GNA following a meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul had added to international tensions.

Their agreements on security and military cooperation, as well as maritime jurisdictions, have raised heckles among Egypt, Greece and Cyprus, he pointed out.

On the humanitarian front, Salame said that the deadlocked fighting south of Tripoli between pro-GNA and Haftar’s forces had caused “a lot of destruction” on top of a civilian casualty toll of at least 200 killed and 300 injured.

Among the combatants, the UN estimates more than 2,000 dead or wounded, he said.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which Salame heads, has registered more than 146,000 displaced by the fighting launched almost eight months ago.

The envoy said the actual figure for the displaced was much higher, with more than 100,000 believed to have taken refuge across the border in Tunisia.



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[Iranian politician compares Khamenei to Shah Reza](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:58

DUBAI: A long-detained opposition leader in Iran on Saturday compared a bloody crackdown on those protesting government-set gasoline prices rising under its supreme leader to soldiers of the shah gunning down demonstrators in an event that led to the Islamic revolution.

The comments published by a foreign website represent some of the harshest yet attributed to Mir Hossein Mousavi, a 77-year-old politician whose own disputed election loss in 2009 led to the widespread Green Movement protests that security forces also put down.

Mousavi's remarks not only compare Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the toppled monarch whom Khamenei to this day refers to as a tyrant. It also suggests the opposition leader views the demonstrations that began Nov. 15 and the crackdown that followed as a potentially similar last-straw moment for Iran's Shiite theocracy as the 1978 killings represented for the shah.

"It shows people's frustration with the country's situation. It has a complete resemblance to the brutal killing of people on the bloody date Sept. 8, 1978," Mousavi said, according to the statement published by the Kaleme website long associated with him. "The assassins of the year of 1978 were representatives of a non-religious regime, but the agents and shooters in November 2019 were representatives of a religious government."

There was no immediate response from Iranian officials nor state media, which has been barred from showing Mousavi's image for years.

The protests that struck some 100 cities and towns across Iran beginning Nov. 15 came after Iran raised minimum gasoline prices by 50 percent. The subsidy cuts, which the government said would help fund cash handouts to the poor, come as Iran's economy suffers under crushing US sanctions following President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers.

Mousavi and his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, remain under house arrest in their home near Khamenei's official residence in Tehran.

However, the Kaleme website occasionally publishes statements from Mousavi, who earlier served as Iran's prime minister before the position was

eliminated in 1989.

Iranians immediately began demonstrating and protests quickly turned violent, seeing gas stations and banks attacked. Online videos purport to show Iranian security forces shooting at demonstrators.

The scale of the gasoline price demonstrations remains unclear even today as Iran so far has not offered nationwide statistics for the number of people arrested, injured or killed in the protests. Amnesty International believes the protests and the security crackdown killed at least 161 people.

One Iranian lawmaker said he thought that over 7,000 people had been arrested, though Iran's top prosecutor disputed the figure without offering his own. The country's interior minister said as many as 200,000 people took part in the demonstrations. Iran blocked access to the wider Internet for a week, further shielding its response from the world's view.

The statement Saturday saw Mousavi compare November's crackdown to "Black Friday," a seminal moment in Iran's revolution. That September day in 1978, soldiers opened fire on demonstrators in Jaleh Square.

How many the shooting killed remains in dispute today, with figures running anywhere from 86 to 4,000. However, historians mark the day as the point of no return for the fatally ill shah. Mass protests and strikes followed. The shah fled Iran in January 1979 and by the next month, the revolution took hold.

In his statement, Mousavi offered his condolences to those slain in the November crackdown and warned "this wound on the nation's body and soul" would not heal until there are public trials of their killers.

"The bullying and talking about how we are in the middle of a world war are not a convincing answer for the people and it would not heal the people's wounds," Mousavi said, referring to tensions with the US "It would be enough that the system just think about the consequences of the Jaleh Square assassinations."

Mousavi is not the only one to compare the November crackdown to the time of the shah, however. Days earlier, lawmaker Mohammad Golmoradi at the Iranian parliament got pulled away after some news websites reported he criticized President Hassan Rouhani over the crackdown.

Golmoradi's area, Mahshar in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province, saw security forces violently put down protests, activists say.

"What did you do that the shah didn't?" Golmoradi reportedly asked.



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Iran 'deliberately' suppressing death, arrest tolls: Rights group
Violent protests grip major Iranian cities over gas price rise

[Relic from Jesus' manger arrives at Bethlehem new home](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:49

BETHLEHEM, WEST BANK: A tiny wooden relic believed to have been part of Jesus' manger has returned to its permanent home in the biblical city of Bethlehem 1,400 years after it was sent to Rome as a gift to the pope.

Sheathed in an ornate case, cheerful crowds greeted the relic on Saturday with much fanfare before it entered the Franciscan Church of St. Catherine next to the Church of the Nativity, the West Bank holy site where tradition says Jesus was born.

The return of the relic by the Vatican coincides with Advent, a four-week period leading up to Christmas.

The Palestinians welcomed the relic as a spirit-lifting occasion as Bethlehem braced for Christmas, where pilgrims from around the world flock to the city in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

The wood piece, just a few centimeters long, was once kept in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. It was handed over earlier this week to the custodian of the Bethlehem church, who said it brought "great honor to believers and pilgrims in the area."

The provenance of ancient relics is often questionable. Still, they are revered by the Christian faithful, among them the coachloads of pilgrims who squeeze through a narrow sandstone entrance in the Church of the Nativity to visit the birth grotto that is its centerpiece.

According to the Custos of the Holy Land for the Catholic church, Francesco Patton, the relic dates back more than 2,000 years and was sent to the Vatican in the 7th century.

Encased in a silver-colored ornamental table-top stand, the relic was unveiled to the public on Friday at the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Center, before it was taken to Bethlehem on Saturday.

A procession of marching bands greeted the relic as it arrived in Bethlehem. It was placed in Saint Catherine's Church, at the Church of the Nativity compound in Manger Square.

"We are proud that part of the manger is back in Bethlehem because we feel that the soul of God is with us more than before," said Chris Gacaman, 53, a Bethlehem homemaker, as she stood outside the church.

Others were a little let down.

"It's a small piece, we thought it would be a bigger piece," said Sandy Shahin Hijazeen, 32. "When we heard that the manger is coming back we thought it would be the whole manger, but then we saw it."

Bethlehem, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, is usually particularly busy ahead of Christmas on Dec. 25, with tourists and pilgrims flocking to the Biblical city. Christians make up around 1 percent of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem.



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Bethlehem church extends hours amid pilgrim surge
Christmas is about keeping hope alive, says Bethlehem mayor

[Air pollution forces Iran to shut schools and universities](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 21:42

TEHRAN: Air pollution forced the closure of schools and universities in parts of Iran on Saturday, including Tehran, which was cloaked by a cloud of toxic smog, state media reported.

The decision to shut schools and universities in the capital was announced late Friday by Deputy Governor Mohammad Taghizadeh, after a meeting of an

emergency committee for air pollution.

“Due to increased air pollution, kindergartens, preschools and schools, universities and higher education institutes of Tehran province will be closed,” he said, quoted by state news agency IRNA.

An odd-even traffic scheme was imposed to restrict the number of private vehicles on roads of the capital city and trucks were banned outright in Tehran province, IRNA reported.

The young and elderly and people with respiratory illnesses were warned to stay indoors and sporting activities were suspended on Saturday, the start of the working week in the Islamic republic.

Schools were also closed on Saturday in the northern province of Alborz and in the central province of Esfahan, IRNA reported, citing officials.

Other areas where schools were shut included the northeastern city of Mashhad, Orumiyeh city in northwestern Iran and Qom, south of Tehran.

In Tehran, average concentrations of hazardous airborne particles reached 146 micrograms per cubic meter on Saturday, according to air.tehran.ir, a government-linked website.

The pall of pollution has shrouded the sprawling city of 8 million for days and is only expected to dissipate on Monday when rain is forecast.

Air pollution was the cause of nearly 30,000 deaths per year in Iranian cities, state media reported earlier this year, citing a health ministry official.

The problem worsens in Tehran during winter, when a lack of wind and the cold air traps hazardous smog over the city for days on end – a phenomenon known as thermal inversion.

Most of the city’s pollution is caused by heavy-duty vehicles, motorbikes, refineries and power plants, according to a World Bank report released last year.



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Iran protests point to turmoil in the futureIran disputes 'exaggerated' protest death tolls