

Iraqi protesters block commercial ports, split capital

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1574186582535120800

Tue, 2019-11-19 17:31

BAGHDAD: Anti-government protesters blocked access to a second major commercial port in southern Iraq on Tuesday, as bridge closures effectively split the capital in half, causing citizens to rely on boats for transport to reach the other side of the city.

Since anti-government protests began Oct. 1, at least 320 people have been killed and thousands wounded in Baghdad and the mostly Shiite southern provinces. Demonstrators have taken to the streets in the tens of thousands over what they say is widespread corruption, lack of job opportunities and poor basic services, despite the country's oil wealth.

Security forces have used live ammunition, tear gas and stun guns to repel protesters, tactics that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday would be punished with sanctions.

"We will not stand idle while the corrupt officials make the Iraqi people suffer. Today, I am affirming the United States will use our legal authorities to sanction corrupt individuals that are stealing Iraqis' wealth and those killing and wounding peaceful protesters," he said in remarks to reporters in Washington.

"Like the Iraqi people taking to the streets today, our sanctions will not discriminate between religious sect or ethnicity," he added. "They will simply target those who do wrong to the Iraqi people, no matter who they are."

Over a dozen protesters blocked the main entrance to Khor Al-Zubair port, halting trade activity as oil tankers and other trucks carrying goods were unable to enter or exit. The port imports commercial goods and materials as well as refined oil products.

Crude from Qayara oil field in Ninewa province, in northern Iraq, is also exported from the port.

Khor Al-Zubair is the second largest port in the country. Protesters had burned tires and cut access to the main Gulf commercial port in Umm Qasr on Monday and continued to block roads Tuesday.

Iraqi civilians are increasingly relying on boats to ferry them across the Tigris River as ongoing standoffs between demonstrators and Iraqi security forces on three key bridges has shut main thoroughfares connecting east and west Baghdad.

The Jumhuriya, Sinak and Ahrar bridges, which have been partially occupied by protesters following days of deadly clashes, connect both sides of the city by passing over the Tigris River. The blockages have left Iraqis who must make the daily commute for work, school and other day-to-day activities with no choice but to rely on river boats.

"After the bridges were cut, all the pressure is on us here," said Hasan

Lilo, a boat owner in the capital. "We offer a reasonable transportation means that helps the people."



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Iraqi grand ayatollah: I support the people, and they want change

[Algerian court jails protesters over election](#)

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1574170146253501400

Tue, 2019-11-19 13:15

ALGIERS: An Algerian court has jailed four protesters for 18 months for

disrupting a candidate's campaign for the Dec. 12 presidential election which is opposed by a mass protest movement.

The court sentenced the four on Monday after protests on Sunday in the western city of Tlemcen, where one of the five candidates, Ali Benflis, was campaigning. No details were available on what their exact actions were. Algeria's authorities are trying to quell a protest movement that erupted in February to demand the departure of the country's ruling hierarchy, an end to corruption and the army's withdrawal from politics.

The army, which has emerged as the most powerful institution in the country, has pushed for next month's election as a means to end the protests and restore normality. The former president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, quit in April. The judgment comes a week after a series of other prison sentences were handed down to protesters who had raised flags with Berber symbols during earlier demonstrations.

Several opposition leaders have also been held during the protests, and charged with contributing to damaging army morale.

However, the authorities have also detained numerous current and former senior officials on corruption charges, and have jailed some of them including the once untouchable former intelligence chief.

The protesters have rejected any presidential election carried out now, saying the continued presence of Bouteflika allies in the upper echelons of the government mean it cannot be free or fair.

Human Rights Watch said last week that the arrest of scores of protesters looked like "part of a pattern of trying to weaken opposition to Algeria's interim rulers and their determination to hold presidential elections."



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Algeria kicks off presidential campaign, 5 candidates to run
Iconic Algerian raï singer Cheikha Rimitti gets square named after her in Paris

[US declares Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian land 'consistent' with international law](#)

Mon, 2019-11-18 22:37

WASHINGTON: The United States on Monday backed Israel's right to build Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank by abandoning its four-decade position that they were "inconsistent with international law."

The announcement by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sparked anger among Palestinians who say the settlements are the main barrier to their future state.

The shift in US policy follows the Trump administration's decision to relocate the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem last year, a move seen as undermining Palestinian claims to the eastern half of the city as a future capital.

Pompeo said US statements about the settlements on the West Bank – which Israel captured during a 1967 war – had been inconsistent, saying Democrat President Jimmy Carter in 1978 found they were not consistent with international law and Republican President Ronald Reagan in 1981 said he did not view them as inherently illegal.

"The establishment of Israeli civilian settlements is not, per se, inconsistent with international law," Pompeo told reporters at the State Department, drawing criticism from a senior Palestinian figure even before his announcement.

"Another blow to international law, justice & peace," Hanan Ashrawi, a veteran Palestinian negotiator and member of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee, said on Twitter ahead of Pompeo's statement.

The announcement marked the third major instance in which the Trump administration has sided with Israel and against stances taken by the

Palestinians and Arab states even before unveiling its long-delayed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

In 2017 Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel before opening the embassy in the city. US policy had previously been that the status of Jerusalem was to be decided by the parties to the conflict.

In March, Trump recognized Israel's 1981 annexation of the Golan Heights in a boost for Netanyahu that prompted a sharp response from Syria, which once held the strategic land.

Trump's move might have been designed to help Netanyahu as he struggles to stay in power. Israeli politics is deadlocked after two inconclusive elections this year. Former military chief Benny Gantz's centrist Blue and White party emerged neck and neck with Netanyahu following a September vote, and both leaders have struggled to put together a ruling coalition.

*With Reuters



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Court says EU states must label Israeli settlement products
Israeli PM vows to annex 'all the settlements' in West Bank

Iran's heavy water stock exceeds authorised limit: IAEA

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1574102026426520800

Mon, 2019-11-18 18:16

VIENNA: The UN's nuclear watchdog said Monday that Iran's stock of heavy water for reactors has surpassed the limit set under its agreement with world powers.

The International Atomic Energy Agency said in a statement that Iran's heavy water production plant was in operation and that its stock of heavy water reserves was 131.5 tonnes, above the 130-tonne limit.

In Vienna, an IAEA spokesperson said: "On 17 November, the Agency verified that the Heavy Water Production Plant (HWPP) was in operation and that Iran's stock of heavy water was 131.5 metric tonnes."

Heavy water is not itself radioactive but is used in nuclear reactors to absorb neutrons from nuclear fission.

Heavy water reactors can be used to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons as an alternative to enriched uranium.

It was the first time the agency has recorded a volume greater than the level agreed upon as part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached in 2015 with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United States and the European Union.

The US unilaterally withdrew from it last year, after which Iran began reducing its commitments in a bid to win concessions from those still party to the accord.

In Washington Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US will lift sanctions waivers on Iran's Fordow nuclear plant, citing the resumption of uranium enrichment activities at the site already announced by Tehran.

"The United States will terminate the sanctions waiver related to the nuclear facility at Fordow effective December 15, 2019," Pompeo told a news conference.

Earlier this month, the IAEA said that uranium particles had been detected at an undeclared site in Iran.

The report also confirmed that Iran has ramped up uranium enrichment in breach of the 2015 deal, feeding uranium hexafluoride gas into previously mothballed enrichment centrifuges at Fordow, an underground plant south of Tehran.

That allows for the production of the most fissile isotope, Uranium 235.

Since September, Iran has also been producing enriched uranium at a facility in Natanz.

It has exceeded a 300 kilogramme limit on stocks of enriched uranium and has breached a uranium enrichment cap of 3.67 percent.

Iran has always insisted that its nuclear programme is exclusively peaceful

and that acquiring nuclear weapons would be contrary to Islamic principles.



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Amnesty investigates 'dozens of deaths' in Iran protests as regime's Guards give ominous warning Iran spy agency leaks reveal Tehran's 'horrifying' grip on Iraq

[Lebanon is a sinking ship, parliament speaker warns](#)

Author:

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1574093894305980200

Mon, 2019-11-18 15:11

BEIRUT: The speaker of parliament on Monday described Lebanon as a sinking ship at risk going under completely, underlining the depth of crisis in a country hamstrung by political deadlock and facing the worst economic strains

since the 1975-90 civil war.

Banks, which have been seeking to prevent capital flight, were set to reopen on Tuesday as staff ended a one-week strike over security concerns posed by clients demanding their cash and protests at branches.

Struggling with a massive public debt and economic stagnation, Lebanon has sunk deeper into trouble since protests erupted against its ruling elite a month ago, leading Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri to quit on Oct. 29.

Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri told his visitors Lebanon was like a ship that was "sinking little by little," the newspaper Al-Joumhouria reported.

"If we don't take the necessary steps, it will sink entirely," he said.

An-Nahar newspaper quoted him as likening Lebanon to the Titanic.

Berri, an ally of the powerful Shiite group Hezbollah, also said that efforts to form a new government were "completely frozen" and awaiting developments at any moment, Al-Joumhouria reported.

Efforts to form a new government, needed to enact urgent reforms, hit a setback at the weekend when former finance minister Mohammad Safadi withdrew his candidacy for the post of prime minister, drawing bitter recriminations. Safadi had emerged as a candidate after Hariri, who is aligned with Western and Gulf Arab states, had been unable to agree with the Iran-backed Hezbollah and its allies on the type of government that should replace the outgoing cabinet.

Hariri had said that he would only return as prime minister of a cabinet of specialist ministers capable of securing international aid and saving Lebanon from crisis.

Hezbollah, which is heavily armed and listed as a terrorist group by the United States, and its allies have insisted that the government include politicians.

Hezbollah's deputy leader, in comments to Iranian media, said "political understandings" would take place between "the parties and even with leaders of the protest movement" to form a new government, without giving further details.

Sheikh Naim Kassem also said the new government's agenda would help to calm down the streets.

Both Hezbollah and Berri have said their preference is for Hariri to return again as prime minister – a post reserved for a Sunni Muslim in Lebanon's power-sharing system.

The nationwide protests have been fueled by the mismanagement and perceived corruption of the ruling elite.

Lebanon's economic problems have been compounded by a slowdown of capital inflows, leading to a scarcity of US dollars and spawning a hard currency black market.

Dollars were being offered at 1,820 pounds, around Friday's level, dealers said, but still some 20% weaker than the official rate of 1,507.5 pounds. On Sunday, banks, which have mostly been closed since the protests began, announced temporary measures including a weekly cap of \$1,000 on cash withdrawals and restricting transfers abroad to cover urgent personal spending only.

A union representing bank staff said banks would be operating as normal on Tuesday after a decision to end the strike. It cited an interior ministry security plan and the newly declared measures announced by the banking association as the reason for the decision to go back to work.

“Tomorrow the banking sector will no longer be on strike. Tomorrow is a normal working day in all banks and all branches,” George Al-Hajj, President of the Federation of Syndicates of Bank Employees, said.



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Independents dominate lawyers' body elections in Lebanon
Hariri and Aoun trade blame as PM candidate's withdrawal plunges Lebanon further into crisis