

Don't ruin summer, Lebanon tourism minister pleads after shootout

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's tourism minister urged politicians on Tuesday not to wreck the country's best tourist season in years, after a deadly shooting in a popular mountain region stirred fears of strife.

Avedis Guidanian said more tourists came to Lebanon in the first half of this year than in the same period any year since 2010. But he warned the president in a meeting that the summer forecast would take a hit if political tensions persisted.

"I told him, in case this incident cannot be contained, there are fears. There are many questions from people planning to come," the minister told a press conference at the presidential palace.

He added that there were no big cancelations so far.

"His excellency (President Michel Aoun) assured me that things are on the right track. God willing, soon, we will have really overcome this."

The government has vowed to restore security after the shootout on July 1 killed two aides of a minister in the Chouf mountains, one of the bloodiest theaters of Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war.

The tourism industry, once a mainstay of Lebanon's now-battered economy, has been in the doldrums since 2011 – the year conflict erupted in neighboring Syria.

Political paralysis in Lebanon and travel warnings from Gulf Arab states also added to the sector's woes.

The slump in tourism has played a part in years of weak economic growth and a hike in the huge public debt, which the government now pledges tough reforms to bring under control.

As relations with Gulf Arab states and security improved, officials including Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri have predicted a promising summer for tourism this year.

"The numbers of people traveling to Lebanon in first six months of 2019 are very encouraging," Guidanian said on Tuesday.

More people were arriving from Europe and Gulf states including Saudi Arabia, which lifted its travel warning against citizens going to Lebanon this year, the minister said.

Guidanian said the expected rise in tourists would bring in big revenues which Lebanon direly needed. "Imagine if we stopped shooting ourselves in the foot – the politicians I mean."



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[As waters warm, lionfish invasion strains Lebanon's seas](#)

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SARAFAND: Lebanese fisherman Hassan Younes has been diving the same waters off his coastal hometown for three decades but has never seen anything like this year as native species disappear and invasive lionfish take their place. Gone are the days when he used to boast an abundant catch of red lobster, sea urchin and red mullet. Now he counts himself lucky if he catches a sea bass. What is abundant, however, are lionfish: a predatory venomous fish native to

the Red Sea, and Indo-Pacific region that eat smaller fish, crustaceans and even each other.

Environmentalists and marine biologists say because of the 2015 expansion and deepening of the Suez Canal, which connects the Red Sea and the Mediterranean, and warming waters resulting from global climate change, lionfish have made a new home for themselves in the Mediterranean.

The rapid expansion of the lionfish is also being felt more widely, threatening coral reefs and fish stocks.

The United States' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), said their populations have swelled dramatically in the past 15 years, partly as a result of people releasing unwanted fish from home aquariums, and they are harming native coral reefs in the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. "This sea is not the sea we grew up with," Younes said on a recent morning out on his boat.

"Many times, we go out to sea and come back emptyhanded. We don't even make enough to cover the price of diesel," he said.

The fish, with venomous wing-like fins and spines, was first sighted in the Mediterranean in 1991, then not again until 2012 off the coast of southern Lebanon. Since 2015 it has steadily spread across the region, said marine biologist Jason Hall-Spencer.

"LIKE GENOCIDE"

Fisherman Atallah Siblani, who specializes in spearhunting, said he started seeing the fish three years ago but it was rare.

"Now it is like 30 to 50 of them in one place. They started to scare away the other fish including sea bass which we depend on and they eat everything."

"It is like genocide."

Environmentalists in Lebanon say the livelihoods of the fishermen and the survival of the marine ecosystem maybe depend on people eating lionfish. The spread of the fish has been especially hard on Lebanon's marine ecosystem already weakened by decades of overfishing, pollution and urbanization

"It eats a lot and breeds all year long so it is very easy for it to disturb the ecological balance," said Jina Talj, an environmentalist.

"But luckily for us, it is also one of the tastiest types of fish," added Talj, who runs a campaign to encourage people to eat lionfish, which tastes like sea bass. So far, it is mainly the fishermen who have heeded the call but Talj hopes her campaign can help.

Her NGO, Diaries of the Ocean, has government recognition but receives no funding and relies on volunteers.

"The biggest problem we face is lack of knowledge among the public about the sea. So how can we save it if we don't know what we have?" she said.

The invasive fish spawn every four days and can lay up to two million eggs every year capable of surviving ocean drifts.

Hall-Spencer says the spread this year has been in "plague-like proportions" across the Eastern Mediterranean including Greece, Turkey, Israel and Cyprus which has just launched a cull.

To curb the problem in the long term, he would like to see the construction of a salt water lock in the Suez Canal – an area of very salty water which would stop species moving from one sea to the other.

But until then, the best thing to do is to catch the lionfish "and also celebrate the fact that they are good to eat," he said.





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[Tunisia presidential candidate charged with money laundering](#)

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TUNIS: Tunisian media magnate and would-be presidential candidate Nabil Karoui has been charged with money laundering, had his assets frozen and slapped with a travel ban, a judicial source said Monday. Karoui and his brother, Ghazi Karoui, have been under investigation since 2017 after anti-corruption watchdog I-Watch submitted a dossier accusing him of tax fraud, said Sofiene Sliti, spokesman for the judiciary department for financial cases.

"After an inquiry into the complaint filed by I-Watch and having summoned and heard the two men... the judge decided 10 days ago to charge Nabil Karoui and Ghazi Karoui with money laundering," he told AFP.

The judge also decided to freeze their assets and ban them from traveling

abroad.

The brothers in 2002 launched Karoui & Karoui, an international media and advertising company.

Nabil Karoui was an active supporter of President Beji Caid Essebsi's election in 2014 but has become a fierce opponent of Prime Minister Youssef Chahed.

In May, Karoui, who has also founded a major private television channel, Nessma, said he would run for the presidency in November polls to succeed Essebsi.

But amendments to the electoral law passed the following month would rule out his candidacy.



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[Middle-East](#)

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Tunisian president Essebsi leaves hospital Tunisia rallies after a "black day," president's health improves

[Pence says US action has cut off Iran's ability to support terrorism](#)

Mon, 2019-07-08 18:49

WASHINGTON: The United States will not waver from its course of maximum

pressure against Iran, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday, as tensions rise and the US-brokered nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers appears to be unraveling with the Trump administration's pullout.

Pence's assertion to a pro-Israel Christian organization that the US "will never allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon" came on the same day that Iran began enriching uranium to 4.5 percent, breaking the limit set in the 2015 agreement sealed under President Barack Obama.

The speech, amplified in later remarks to the group by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and national security adviser John Bolton, also comes as the other partners in the agreement must decide how to respond to Iran's announcement. President Donald Trump discussed the issue by phone Monday with French President Emmanuel Macron.

Echoing comments made repeatedly by Trump, Pence said the international accord simply delayed Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon by "roughly a decade" and gave away billions in economic relief that Iran could then use to wage terrorist attacks.

Since Trump withdrew from that deal more than a year ago, his administration has reimposed crippling sanctions on Tehran and designated its Revolutionary Guard a foreign terrorist group.

"Iran must choose between caring for its people and continuing to fund its proxies who spread violence and terrorism throughout the region and breathe out murderous hatred against Israel," Pence said.

Pence said the US's actions have succeeded in "cutting off" Iran's ability to support terrorism in the Middle East, but he also charged that Iran had increased its "malign activity and violence in the region" over the past several months.

Tensions in the region have risen in recent weeks after oil tankers were attacked near the Strait of Hormuz and Iran downed an unmanned US military surveillance drone. The downing of the drone nearly led to a US military strike against Iran; it was called off at the last minute by Trump.

Instead, the US military's cyberforces launched a retaliatory strike against Iranian military computer systems that controlled the country's rocket and missile launchers.

The US has sent thousands of troops, an aircraft carrier, nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and advanced fighter jets to the Middle East.

"Let me be clear," Pence said. "Iran should not confuse American restraint with a lack of American resolve."

Iran has long maintained it was enriching uranium for peaceful reasons. While enriched uranium at the 3.67 percent level is enough for peaceful pursuits, it isn't close to the weapons-grade levels of 90 percent. At 4.5 percent, the enriched uranium is enough to help power Iran's Bushehr reactor, the country's only nuclear power plant.

Iran has been trying to gain European help in bypassing US sanctions, which have targeted oil sales and top officials, including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The remaining signatories to the deal include Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia.

"We hope for the best, but the United States of America and our military are prepared to protect our interests and to protect our personnel and citizens in the region," Pence said.

Later Monday, Bolton, the White House national security adviser and a longtime advocate of tough measures against Iran, devoted a large portion of

his speech at the same summit to Iran, noting that the that the administration has expanded sanctions to cover metals and the petrochemical sector.

“As we pressure the Iranian regime, we will also continue to stand with the long-suffering Iranian people, who as President Trump has said, are the “rightful heirs to a rich culture and an ancient land,” Bolton said.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US has implemented the “strongest pressure campaign in history against the Iranian regime,” before adding “and we are not done.”



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Morocco seizes 'record' 27.3 tons of cannabis resin

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RABAT: Moroccan police seized a "record" 27.3 tons of cannabis resin hidden in trucks bound for Europe, the country's security service said Monday. The drugs were discovered Sunday evening at the vast Tanger Med port in three vehicles "believed to be transporting industrial equipment," the General Directorate for National Security said in a statement.

The "record" quantity of resin was found "divided among 16 containers in the trailers of the three trucks," the statement added.

The drivers and their three assistants, all Moroccan, were arrested and taken into police custody.

Tanger Med in northern Morocco is one of Africa's largest ports and is within sight of the Spanish coast.

Morocco is one of the main global producers and exporters of cannabis resin, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Production is concentrated in the north of the country, where some 47,000 hectares of agricultural land were used for cannabis cultivation, according to UNODC statistics from 2016.

Moroccan police seized 52 tons of cannabis resin last year, according to official figures.



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