

Hariri warns of budget failure cost to Lebanon's economy

Author:

Reuters

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BEIRUT: Prime Minister Saad Hariri said on Monday Lebanon was far from bankruptcy but failure to pass a "realistic" budget that brings down the state deficit would be tantamount to a "suicide operation" against the economy.

Hariri also said once the new budget is approved, financial institutions would raise Lebanon's sovereign ratings, and criticised "preemptive" strikes by public sector workers who fear their salaries and benefits will be cut. He was speaking in televised comments after a meeting with President Michel Aoun and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. The government is debating the draft budget.



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Syrian Kurds reshape region with books and schools

Author:

Mon, 2019-05-06 21:03

QAMISHLI: When Eyub Mohamad was a boy, security forces beat his father into paralysis. His offense was typing leaflets in Kurdish, banned under Syria's ruling Baath party.

Mohamad, with his family, fed and bathed his father for years. Wary of the typewriter that landed his father in interrogation rooms, he avoided learning to read his own language.

"I never saw my dad walking," he said. "Till his last day, he believed he would get up for this cause."

Mohamad's father died in 2011, the year Syria's conflict began. He did not see Kurdish fighters carve out autonomous rule across north and east Syria. He did not see his son, now 34, become a teacher at a Kurdish school in the city of Qamishli on the border with Turkey. Kurdish leaders now hold about a quarter of Syria, the biggest chunk outside state hands. But their grip on power – in a region rich in oil, farmland and water – remains vulnerable: The Bashar Assad regime wants all of Syria, Turkey threatens to crush them and US support is wavering.

The changes reshaping swathes of Syria have alarmed neighboring states that fear separatism within their own Kurdish communities. In Qamishli, these changes were once unimaginable.

A law student who was tortured for carrying a Kurdish book now owns a bookstore. A woman who once secretly huddled with friends at night to learn Kurdish is now a de facto education minister.

Kurdish activists who could not protest without risking arrest now have printing presses, festivals and television channels.

The shift is glaring in school hallways where, for eight years, a generation has grown up not only learning Kurdish but also learning to believe that Kurds deserve the rights they were denied for decades and must hold on to them.

"We never imagined this. This was a dream," said Semira Hajj Ali, who co-chairs the education board in the northeast. "Of course, we will not go back

to before 2011. We will not turn back.”

Syrian Kurdish leaders say they do not seek independence but want to cement autonomy that has evolved to include security forces and what amounts to a government.

Yet the sandbags and trenches around some schools or the armed men guarding printing presses show their fate still hangs in the balance.

On one side, there is the Turkish army, which has swept across the border twice to roll back the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria.

On another, there is Assad, now holding most of Syria with Russia and Iran’s help. Damascus has pledged to reclaim YPG territory though the two have kept channels open.

Their main ally, the US, helped Kurdish-led forces seize vast territory from Daesh. But it opposes their autonomy plans and has promised nothing.

President Donald Trump’s plan last year to withdraw all US troops from Syria threw Kurdish officials into crisis.

Washington later changed course, and intends to leave some troops, along with forces from European allies, preserving for now the security umbrella that helped Kurdish leaders deepen their autonomy.

In the early days of Syria’s conflict, when Hajj Ali and other activists tried introducing a Kurdish class, the government shut down the schools.



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For Syrians, 8 years of war leaves stories of loss and hope
Syrian Kurds boost fight against Daesh in east after setback

Millions hungry as drought grips Somalia

Author:

Mon, 2019-05-06 20:54

NAIROBI: Drought has left nearly two million Somalis in desperate need of food, a humanitarian agency warned Monday, as poor rainfall pushes communities to the brink across East Africa.

The Norwegian Refugee Council said hundreds of thousands of children were already suffering malnutrition in Somalia and millions had abandoned their homes in search of food in the arid, conflict-torn nation.

“The humanitarian situation has deteriorated at an alarming rate as a result of the drought,” Victor Moses, the council’s country director in Somalia, said in a statement.

The failure of the so-called long rains that usually sweep East Africa between March and May has caused widespread crop failures and heaped immense pressure on livestock-dependent communities in the greater region.

Somalia is enduring its third-driest long rains season since 1981.

The UN estimates that 1.7 million people are going hungry, with that figure expected to grow by another half a million come July.

Last week, the UN said 44,000 Somalis had left their homes in rural areas for urban centers just this year – joining the estimated 2.6 million internally-displaced people across the country.

Close to a million children will need treatment for malnutrition in 2019.

“The deterioration has come much earlier than seen over the last decades and before affected communities could recover from the most recent drought,” the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

But the hunger crisis could extend well beyond Somalia, with the entire Horn of Africa region at risk from drought and extreme weather exacerbated by climate change.

Almost 80 percent of the population in the Horn depend on farming for a living, said the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization.

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network said in April that if rains did not materialize in May "the season will have failed and the impact on food security outcomes would be more severe than currently anticipated."

The US-funded network warned more than 42 million people in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and nearby Yemen were currently facing crisis levels of food insecurity.

In Kenya, considered the most dynamic economy in the region, the World Bank in April cited the impact of drought when trimming its growth forecast for the country in 2019.



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5 million in Somalia don't get enough food, UN report says
US military, aid group at odds over Somalia civilian deaths

Fighting kills 43 in Syria's northwest: monitor

Mon, 2019-05-06 19:27

BEIRUT: Clashes between Syrian government forces and militants on Monday killed 43 fighters in the country's northwest, where the regime and its Russian ally have stepped up bombardment in the past few days, a monitor said.

Militants also fired rockets at a Russian air base in the region but were repelled with the attack causing no casualties or damage, the Russian defense ministry said in a statement.

Twenty-two pro-government fighters were among those killed in fierce fighting in the northern countryside of Hama province, said the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Twenty-one militants, including members of Al-Qaeda's former Syrian branch, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), and its ally the Turkistan Islamic Party, were also killed, the war monitor said.

The fighting came as regime forces advanced on two villages and a strategic hilltop in the region, it said.

State news agency SANA said Syrian troops launched "intensive operations," targeting supply lines and areas where armed groups operate in northern Hama and neighboring Idlib.

The region held by HTS has faced intensifying bombardment in the past month, prompting a new wave of displacement.

Earlier Monday, five civilians were killed in shelling and air strikes on Idlib and neighboring areas by Syrian government forces and their Russian allies, said the Observatory.

An AFP photographer in Idlib saw several houses completely destroyed by recent attacks.

One man who lost his wife, his daughter-in-law, and his two grandchildren during shelling overnight prepared a pickup truck to relocate surviving members of his family.

"I don't know where I'm going," he told AFP.

More than 140,000 civilians have been forced to flee attacks since February, Refugees International said on Monday.

"It is difficult to overstate the urgency of this looming humanitarian disaster if nothing is done to protect these people," the non-governmental organization said in a statement.

Escalated attacks have hit schools and medical facilities, according to the UN.

Since 28 April, at least seven health care facilities have reportedly been struck, including four in Hama and three in Idlib, said David Swanson of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Russia and rebel-backer Turkey in September inked a buffer zone deal to prevent a massive regime offensive on the Idlib region, near the Turkish border.

But the region of some three million people has come under increasing bombardment since HTS took full control of it in January.

A statement by the Russian defense ministry said that the Hmeimim air base in Latakia province neighboring Idlib was the target Monday of rocket fire. "Altogether there were 36 rockets fired," during two separate attacks which were "repelled by air defense systems," it said. The civil war in Syria has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it began with the bloody repression of anti-government protests in 2011.



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Warplanes strike hospital in Syria's rebel-held Idlib
Lebanon may be forced to work with Syria on refugee issue: Aoun

[Turkey's high election board rules in favor of re-run of Istanbul election](#)

Mon, 2019-05-06 19:31

ANKARA: Turkey's High Election Board on Monday scrapped Istanbul election results showing a painful defeat for President Tayyip Erdogan, responding to his AK Party's calls for a re-run of the vote in a decision that hit the lira and raised charges of conflicts of interest.

While the board, known as YSK, had not yet made a statement, the decision was announced by state-run Anadolu agency and a representative of the ruling AK Party (AKP), Recep Ozel, who said a second vote would take place on June 23. Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which in the initial vote on March 31 narrowly won the mayoralty in the country's largest city, called the ruling a "plain dictatorship."

The AKP had appealed for an election re-run after initial results and a series of recounts showed it had lost control of Istanbul for the first time in 25 years.

It was a shock loss for Erdogan who in the 1990s served as the city's mayor and had campaigned hard ahead of the nationwide local vote, his first electoral test since last year's sharp currency crisis tipped the Turkish economy into recession.

The Turkish lira weakened after Ozel, the AKP's representative on the YSK, tweeted the decision, and it was at 6.1075 against the dollar at 1730 GMT and on track for its worst day in more than a month.

The lira has tumbled some 10 percent since a week before the initial election. Suspense over the ruling had left investors worried that weeks of additional campaigning would divert funds and attention from addressing economic reforms.

It was unclear how the CHP and its supporters would respond to a re-run given suspicions over the YSK's political independence from the AKP, which in recent years has centralized power in the presidency away from the central bank, courts and other institutions.

"It is illegal to win against the AK Party," CHP Deputy Chairman Onursal Adiguzel said on Twitter. "This system that overrules the will of the people and disregards the law is neither democratic, nor legitimate. This is plain dictatorship."

The AKP also lost the mayor's office in the capital Ankara. With its nationalist MHP allies, it wanted the Istanbul results annulled and cited irregularities that affected the outcome, which put it some 13,000 votes behind CHP.

On Saturday Erdogan said "it's clear" the vote was marred by controversy and urged the YSK to "clear its name" with a re-run.

Istanbul's new CHP mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, officially took office last month after a smattering of partial and full recounts were completed across the city. Since then, prosecutors launched probes into the alleged irregularities and called 100 polling station workers in for questioning as suspects.



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Turkey's Erdogan calls for Istanbul vote to be re-run
Erdogan's AKP challenges Istanbul results in Turkey election