

Algeria's ex-police chief to face graft probe

Author:

Sun, 2019-04-28 23:02

ALGIERS: A former Algerian police chief once considered a pillar of the regime of ousted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been summoned for questioning about allegations of corruption, state media said on Sunday.

Since Bouteflika resigned in early April after weeks of mass protests against his rule, several regime officials and businessmen who were close to him have been sacked or detained over alleged graft.

Gen. Abdelghani Hamel, the former police chief once tipped as Bouteflika's successor before he was fired by the veteran leader in June 2018, is due to appear in court Monday with one of his sons, state radio said.

They are expected to be questioned as part of a judicial inquiry into "illegal activity, bribery, embezzlement of funds and abuse of power," according to state television.

Since Bouteflika's ouster investigators have cracked down on alleged graft, zeroing in on the activities of prominent politicians and businessmen as they try to clear away two decades of cronyism under the former president.

High-profile figures who were targeted over the past week include the North African country's richest man, Issad Rebrab, who was detained on Monday on allegations of false customs declarations.

The head of the vast state oil firm Sonatrach, Abdelmoumen Ould Kaddour, was fired and replaced on the orders of interim President Abdelkader Bensalah.

Four brothers from the influential Kouninef family, close to Bouteflika's brother Said, were also arrested last Sunday over alleged non-compliance with state contracts, according to state media.

A magistrate has also summoned for questioning Finance Minister Mohamed Loukal and former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia in connection with alleged misuse of public funds.

Late last month top Algerian businessman and Bouteflika backer Ali Haddad was arrested as he tried to cross the border into Tunisia with two passports and undeclared currency.



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Author:

Sun, 2019-04-28 22:55

AMMAN: It was only when his children began to starve that Abdullah Al-Amour decided time had come to leave the sanctuary of Rukban camp with his family to face an uncertain fate back under Syria's Bashar Assad.

The cattle trader from Palmyra fled to Rukban on the Syrian border with Jordan and Iraq more than three years ago after his home was destroyed in Russian airstrikes targeting areas that were held at the time by Daesh.

Conditions at Rukban are tough, but it offers one big advantage to the 36,000 people sheltering there: Protection from Russian airstrikes and pro-Assad forces thanks to its location near a US base.

But in recent weeks life in the camp has gone from bad to near impossible. Food shortages have got a lot worse as a result of a siege by regime and Russian forces that want to see Rukban dismantled and US forces out of Syria, according to people living in the camp and diplomats.

"Today you eat. Tomorrow there is nothing to eat," said Amour, 46, speaking to Reuters by phone from the camp. Amour says his son Hamza, three, has become frail from being fed sugared water instead of powdered milk. Gravel and dirt are being added to dough to make flour supplies go further.

"No one is leaving out of their own will. I can no longer sleep with my children hungry," he said.

Local sources say Russian and Syrian regime forces have choked off supplies to Rukban since mid-February, blocking access for smugglers who used to bribe their way through army checkpoints, and firing on some vehicles.

On Thursday, Washington urged Damascus and Moscow to allow international aid deliveries to Rukban and stop blocking commercial routes into the camp to "avert further suffering."

As shortages have hit, a steady stream of people have crossed out of Rukban into regime territory.

OCHA, the UN humanitarian agency, said around 7,000 had left in the last month or so. Some were in shelters in Homs city where some of the men were settling their status with the authorities, and others had gone to their areas of origin in Homs governorate. Relatives say the Homs city shelters amount to internment centers for many of the men.

Power struggle

Rukban camp is at the heart of a struggle between Russia and the US for control of southeastern Syria and with it a land route to Iraq and Assad's major regional ally, Iran.

Russia, whose military has helped Assad claw back control of much of Syria, views Rukban as a US pretext for maintaining its "illegal occupation in the south" and as a last pocket of anti-Assad rebels in southern Syria who must be wiped out.

The camp's evacuation seems unlikely to lead the US to abandon its nearby garrison at Tanf and the surrounding "deconfliction zone" that envelops Rukban: Tanf is seen as useful to US aims of countering Iran.

But Russia is still determined to see Rukban gone. This would represent a gain for Moscow in Syria as its military advances have ground to a halt in other parts of the country, and would assert its influence over a US-controlled area.

Moscow and Damascus have accused Washington of holding the people of Rukban

hostage and Russia has even compared its conditions to the concentration camps of the second world war.

The US has said it is not preventing anyone from leaving Rukban, while calling for a process of “safe, voluntary and dignified departures” from the camp.

The Russian defense ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

With routes to the camp controlled by Damascus, Rukban has rarely received UN aid deliveries. Following a delivery in November, the US said it recognized Russia had played a role in persuading Damascus to authorize it. The last time a UN aid convoy reached Rukban was early February.

Many at Rukban fear returning to Assad’s Syria, saying they could be detained or forced to join the army. This concern is widely held among refugees, who are unconvinced by Russian assurances they face no threat.

Over the years, the camp has taken on some features of permanence including houses built of mud bricks, schools and markets. Ibrahim Al-Nasser ran a grocery at Rukban until he was forced to close it for lack of goods.

Speaking to Reuters as he was about to leave Rukban, he said he no longer cared about his own fate and only wanted to save his children from starving.

“People are gripped with fear of being arrested,” said Nasser. “But I am forced to leave even if I might face death or prison so that my children live,” he said.

Green buses

Abu Ahmad al Dirbas Khalidi, the head of an opposition-run civil council in the camp, said dwindling food supplies gave people at Rukban no choice but to leave.

“The regime and the Russians have succeeded in their siege, and with hunger and poverty people are leaving,” he said.

The camp’s only bakery stopped production this month. A bag of flour – if available – now costs 40,000 Syrian pounds (\$70) – eight times its price in regime territory.

Reports in Syrian state-run media have shown people leaving Rukban on green buses like those used to evacuate civilians and rebel fighters from other parts of Syria recaptured from insurgents, such as eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta.

In an interview with the state news agency SANA, one man leaving Rukban accused militant groups “led by America of putting us under pressure, denying us food and water, just so that we join them.”

But sources in Rukban said men leaving had been detained for weeks at internment camps in Homs before being jailed, released or drafted into the army.

Mahmoud Al-Humeili, a camp official, said he had received reports that two dozen men had been arrested.

Shukri Shihab, a relief worker in the camp, said: "Death in the camp is better than dying behind prison bars."



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Sun, 2019-04-28 23:10

LONDON: British tourists are being told to be vigilant if traveling to Turkey after security officials warned of "terror nests" in bordering countries posing a significant threat to holidaymakers, Anadolu News Agency reported on Sunday,

The Anadolu statement said that cells in Afrin "pose a threat to Turkey." The warning comes as more Europeans – especially tourists from the UK – travel to Turkey for their summer holidays. UK nationals made up 2.3 million of annual visits to the country in 2018.

Despite Daesh militants attacking foreigners and Turkish citizens in recent years, the Turkish government has said Kurdish militia are to blame for the unrest.

Anadolu tweeted: "There are currently 8,000-10,000 terrorists in the Afrin region near Aleppo, near the Turkish-Syrian border, which has been besieged by the PYD/PKK.

"Terrorists are now hiding in shelters and pits in residential areas in Afrin after Turkey pointed out the region was a nest for terrorists

"No US soldiers are currently in Afrin while around 100 Russian military police are located in Tel Rifat, Tel Acar and Kefer Cenne areas."

86 people were killed in a bomb blast in the capital Ankara in 2015, while a further 45 were killed during an attack on Ataturk Airport a year later.

Meanwhile, in 2017, 39 revellers were killed in Istanbul as they welcomed the new year.

The UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as of April 28, is telling British citizens to avoid all travel within 10 kilometers of the Syrian border, with a warning that states: "Terrorists are very likely to try to carry out attacks in Turkey. Terrorist groups, including Kurdish groups, Daesh (formerly referred to as ISIL) and far left organizations, continue to plan and carry out attacks."

Speaking to the UK's Daily Star last year, Michael McCabe, CEO of risk awareness experts Intelligence Fusion, said the country faces a number of new crises, which could put holidaymakers at risk.

"President Erdogan's government faces a range of diverse internal and external threats," he said.

"The conflicts in Iraq and Syria on its border, separatist Kurdish groups, and significant opposition to the government."



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[Abu Dhabi fund to deposit \\$250m into Sudan's central bank](#)

Sun, 2019-04-28 14:53

LONDON: The Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD) is to deposit \$250 million into Sudan's central bank as part of a previously-announced grant.

The move aims to secure increased liquidity and strengthen the financial position of Sudan, the UAE state news agency WAM said on Sunday, following the toppling of President Omar Al-Bashir.

Mohammed Saif Al-Suwaidi, director-general of the state-funded ADFD, said the UAE aims to support the Sudanese people and economy.

"ADFD and the government of Sudan have enjoyed strong and longstanding ties

dating back to 1976. The fund's development projects have significantly contributed to improving socio-economic conditions and driving sustainable growth," he said.

The deposit is part of a \$3 billion grant to Sudan announced by Saudi Arabia and the UAE earlier this month.

The grant includes a \$500 million deposit into Sudan's central bank, evenly split between the two countries.

The rest will be in the form of food, medicine and petroleum products.

In recent years Sudan has been hit by an acute lack of dollars, a key factor behind the nationwide protests that led to the toppling of Al-Bashir by the army earlier this month.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE called for "stability" and a "peaceful transition" in the days following the removal of Al-Bashir.

To date, ADFD has financed 17 development projects in Sudan with a total value of approximately 2 billion dirhams (\$545 million), WAM reported.

In 2017, the fund granted almost 1.5 billion dirhams to support liquidity and foreign currency reserves at Sudan's central bank.



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Sun, 2019-04-28 11:05

TEHRAN: Iran's top general warned on Sunday Tehran could close the strategic Strait of Hormuz shipping route if it faces more "hostility," news agency ISNA said, as the US tightens up sanctions.

A day earlier, US Central Command chief Gen. Kenneth McKenzie said the US would deploy the necessary resources to counter any dangerous actions by Iran, Sky News Arabia reported.

"We're gonna continue to reach out to our partners and friends in the region to ensure that we make common cause against the threat of Iran," McKenzie, on an official visit to the Gulf region, was quoted as saying by Sky News Arabia.

"I believe we'll have the resources necessary to deter Iran from taking actions that will be dangerous," he said, according to a transcript released by the Abu Dhabi-based channel. "We will be able to respond effectively."

Strait of Hormuz

Iranian armed forces chief of staff Mohammad Bagheri told semi-official ISNA: "We are not after closing the Strait of Hormuz but if the hostility of enemies increase, we will be able to do so,"

"Also if our oil does not go through the strait, other countries' oil will certainly not cross the strait, too," he added.

The statement came after Washington said on April 22 it would start imposing sanctions on countries such as India, China and Turkey that buy Iranian oil.

Eight countries were initially given six-month reprieves after the US

reimposed sanctions on Iran in November, following US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from a 2015 nuclear accord.

Iranian officials have repeatedly warned the Islamic republic could shut down the strait, a vital shipping lane for international oil supplies, should it find its national interests or security threatened.

"We believe Iran will continue to sell its oil ... (and) use the Strait of Hormuz. But if the United States takes the crazy measure of trying to prevent us from doing that, then it should be prepared for the consequences," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Wednesday.



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