

Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas swears in new government

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RAMALLAH, West Bank: Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Saturday swore in a new government headed by a loyalist from his dominant Fatah party, a move rejected by his rivals Hamas as a blow to unity efforts.

Mohammed Shtayyeh, an economist and longtime Abbas adviser, will serve as prime minister of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority (PA). Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki and Finance Minister Shukri Bishara will continue in their positions.

Shtayyeh was named Palestinian prime minister on March 10, replacing the independent university president Rami Al-Hamdallah. He will run the ministries of interior and religious affairs until new appointees are named for the two posts.

The rival Hamas group that runs Gaza called the move a blow to unity efforts that faltered since the two groups signed a new reconciliation deal in Cairo in October 2017, but disputes over power-sharing had blocked the implementation of the agreement.

"This is a separatist government, it has no national legitimacy and it will reinforce the chances of severing the West Bank from Gaza," said a statement issued by Hamas as the swearing ceremony in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank ended.

Two factions of Abbas's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) refused to take part in Shtayyeh's government.

Shtayyeh's immediate challenge is to shore up the cash-strapped PA, which exercises limited self-rule under interim peace accords with Israel.

The PA has been squeezed by steep US aid cuts, with the crisis exacerbated by a dispute with Israel over the withholding of some 5 percent of the monthly tax revenues it transfers to the Authority.

Israel said the sum it is holding back matches money used by the PA to pay stipends to families of militants in Israeli jails. The PA has refused to accept any tax transfers until those funds are restored. It scaled back wages paid to civil servants in February and March to weather the crisis.

Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is heading toward a fifth term in office after an election on April 9, said he would annex Israeli settlements in the West Bank if he is re-elected.

If implemented, the move would be a grave blow to Palestinian aspirations of a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders. The peace process has all but collapsed and Israel has expanded its settlements in East Jerusalem and the West bank despite international objections.

Palestinian leaders said Israel was being empowered by US President Donald Trump to "violate national and human rights of the people of Palestine".

Nickolay Maldenov, the U.N. special Middle East peace envoy welcomed the

announcement of a new government and promised to cooperate with it. "The United Nations remains fully committed to working with the Palestinian leadership and people in ending the occupation and advancing their legitimate national aspirations for statehood based on UN resolutions," said Mladenov said.

Mahmoud El-Aloul, the second in command in Abbas's Fatah movement, acknowledged the challenges facing Shtayyeh's government including the deal Trump is expected to announce in coming months or weeks.

"We will be steadfast against these challenges and we will defy them," Aloul told Reuters after the ceremony.

Shtayyeh, a former government minister, has been part of a number of Palestinian negotiating teams in the United States-brokered talks with Israel.



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'I wish that everybody could just tell the truth.' – Palestine's youngest journalist
Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas will refuse Israeli tax transfers

Eastern Libya parliament head says LNA forces will push Tripoli campaign

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2019-04-13 15:24

BENGAZI: Eastern Libyan forces will pursue their advance on the capital Tripoli, the head of the eastern parliament in the divided country said on Saturday, despite international calls for a halt in an offensive that risks causing many civilian casualties.

His comments came as more clashes rocked the southern outskirts of Tripoli, where eastern forces have been confronted by groups allied to Prime Minister Fayez Al-Serraj's internationally recognized government.

The European Union last week urged the eastern Libya National Army (LNA) to stop its attacks, having agreed on a statement after France and Italy sparred over how to handle the conflict.

But the eastern parliament head said they would press an offensive launched a week ago under military commander Khalifa Haftar, the latest outbreak of a cycle of conflict since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi.

"We need to get rid of militias and terrorist groups," Aguila Saleh, head of the House of Representatives allied to Haftar, said using a reference eastern officials often make to describe forces allied to the Tripoli government, which relies on support from several armed groups.

"We assure the residents of Tripoli that the campaign to liberate Tripoli will be limited and not violate any freedoms but restore security and fight terrorism," Saleh told lawmakers in a session in the main eastern city of Benghazi.

Forces loyal to Al-Serraj's government have so far kept the eastern offensive at bay. Fierce fighting has broken out around a disused former airport about 11 km (7 miles) from the center and an eastern military source said a warplane belonging to the LNA had struck a military camp in an eastern Tripoli suburb.

Saleh also said the United Nations mission to Libya and Serraj's government had been controlled by armed groups and had failed to expel them from the capital, and promised Libya would hold long-delayed elections after the Tripoli operation ends.

Haftar's offensive had surprised the United Nations, which had been planning to hold a national conference on April 14 to prepare Libya for elections. The latest battle had by Friday killed 75 people, mainly fighters but including 17 civilians, and wounded another 323, according to UN tallies. Some 13,625 people have been forced out of their homes.

As well as the humanitarian cost, the conflict threatens to disrupt oil supplies, boost migration to Europe, scupper a UN peace plan, and allow militants to exploit the chaos.

Haftar, 75, a former general in Qaddafi's army who later joined the revolt against him, moved his troops out of their eastern stronghold to take the

oil-rich desert south earlier this year, before sweeping up to Tripoli at the start of April.



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UN 'gravely concerned' over Tunisia detention of Libya expertAfrican, Syrian migrants in crosshairs of Libya's war

[Algeria activists fear tougher police tactics after Friday clashes](#)

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Sat, 2019-04-13 15:10

ALGIERS: Algerian civil society groups voiced concern Saturday about

toughening police tactics, a day after officers in riot gear clashed with protesters, and reaffirmed their commitment to peaceful pro-democracy rallies.

Friday's initially peaceful rally in central Algiers deteriorated into the worst street violence seen so far since marches began in mid-February demanding an end to the 20-year-rule of president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who finally resigned on April 2, and his regime.

Police used tear gas and water cannon and scuffled with demonstrators, who in turn hurled stones and bottles, set alight at least one police car and turned large dumpsters into barricades.

Injuries were reported on both sides, and activists raised fears that the standoff has entered a new phase.

"Friday's mobilization was different because of the scale of the repression," according to Said Salhi, vice president of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights.

Demonstrators have vowed to push on with rallies against the interim government of Abdelkader Bensalah and its plan for July 4 elections, arguing that leaders who emerged from the Bouteflika "system" cannot guarantee free and fair polls.

Salhi noted that the mood was different from early Friday outside the main post office in central Algiers that has become an emblematic protest site.

"It usually starts joyfully at the post office, but there was a desire on the part of the authorities to clear the area," he said.

Salhi said a turning point had come three days earlier when police had for the first time tried to disperse a student demonstration in Algiers with tear gas and water cannon.

Political scientist Cherif Driss said that, while the demonstrations have continued unabated, "the police are trying to refocus, and are beginning to reduce the public space for expression."

Driss added however that "the response remains moderate and professional, with mostly water cannons and tear gas. There is no brutal repression."

Police put Friday's violence down to "delinquents" infiltrating the crowds, and said 108 people had been arrested, while some protesters also blamed "troublemakers" for the clashes.

Driss said it was too early to tell whether Friday's clashes were the result of "a strategy to limit demonstrations or a reaction to groups infiltrating" the protests.

The General Directorate of National Security reported that 83 police had suffered injuries. It denied having resorted to repressive tactics and said it was merely maintaining public order.

Several protesters were also injured, and at least one was hit in the chest by what appeared to be a rubber bullet, said an AFP photographer.

Activist groups stressed their commitment to non-violence.

"The protesters are very committed to the continuation of the movement in its peaceful form," said Abdelwahab Ferfaoui of civic group the Youth Action Rally (RAJ-Algeria). "It's the key to success."

At Friday's clashes, some demonstrators had placed themselves between rioters and police, raising their hands and chanting "silmiya" (peaceful) until the situation calmed, AFP journalists witnessed.

"People did not respond despite the repression, we saw citizens defending police officers," said Salhi.

“But we want to move toward a political solution quickly to avoid desperation. Letting the situation deteriorate until the elections in three months is not a solution.”





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Algerian military to support transition period: army chief
Algeria protests keep up pressure on regime

[Syria Kurds return 25 Yazidis freed from IS to Iraq](#)

Sat, 2019-04-13 16:24

QAZLAJOKH, Syria: Syrian Kurds on Saturday repatriated 25 women and children from Iraq's Yazidi minority after freeing them during the final push against Daesh, a local official said.

The US-backed fighters say they rescued some 300 Yazidi women and children during the fight to take the militants' last scrap of territory in eastern Syria.

"Today, we will hand over 25 people – 10 women and 15 children – to the Yazidi council in Sinjar," said Ziyad Rustam, an official with the Kurdish-run group Yazidi House, which reunites rescued Yazidi children with surviving relatives.

"They will be sent to their families," he told AFP.

At the Yazidi House headquarters in a village near the northeastern Syrian city of Qamishli, women wearing colorful robes collected children scampering around the compound before boarding busses bound for Sinjar, the Yazidi heartland in Iraq.

"The fate of my three sisters remains unknown... I don't know anything about them," said 17-year-old Jamila Haidar.

"I hope we will be reunited soon."

Iraq's Yazidis are a symbol of the suffering caused by Daesh during its rein over vast swathes of Syria and Iraq.

The militants stormed through Iraq's northwest in 2014 slaughtering thousands of men and boys and abducting women and girls to be abused as sex slaves. But they have since lost all of the once-sprawling cross-border "caliphate" to multiple offensive.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces last month announced the defeat of the Daesh proto-state after tens of thousands of people streamed out of the militants' last patch of territory, around the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

Rustam said SDF had in total liberated 850 Yazidi women and children during its battles against Daesh since 2015.

But 3,040 Yazidis are still missing, he said, adding that the search for them was ongoing.

Rustam said the militants had "sold many of them to people inside Syria, in places like Idlib," most of which is held by a former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

Some of the Yazidis extracted from Daesh's last sliver of territory are being held at the Kurdish-run Al-Hol camp, which also houses militant family

members.



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Iraq begins exhuming mass Yazidi grave left by Daesh Hopes for missing Yazidis
dim as extremists' defeat looms

[Lebanon seizes 800,000 stimulant pills in major drug bust with help from Saudi authorities](#)

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's police said Saturday it has seized more than 800,000 pills of the amphetamine-type stimulant captagon worth around \$12 million in a bust coordinated with Saudi authorities.

Police stopped a refrigerated truck containing 142 kilogrammes (312 pounds) of the illicit drug on April 9, according to a statement.

Captagon is one of the most commonly used drugs in the Syrian war, where fighters who take it say it helps them stay awake for days and that it numbs their senses, allowing them to kill with abandon.

The bust came after Saudi Arabia's Directorate of Narcotics Control tipped off Lebanese authorities on a plan to smuggle a large captagon shipment to an unidentified "Arab country" by land, it said.

Captagon is classified by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime as an "amphetamine-type stimulant" and usually blends amphetamines, caffeine and other substances.

Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria are usually assumed to be transit or production territories for illicit captagon, according to the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

Lebanese authorities have been clamping down on exports of the psycho-stimulant, which is produced in swathes of Syrian and Lebanese territory where government oversight is lax or non-existent.



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Attempt to smuggle more than 560K Captagon pills into Saudi Arabia
thwartedUS-backed Syria rebels seize Captagon in Daesh drug bust: coalition