

Hezbollah, Amal end boycott of Lebanon's cabinet amid economic crisis

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BEIRUT: Powerful Lebanese groups Hezbollah and Amal said on Saturday they would end a boycott of cabinet sessions, opening the way for ministers to meet after a three-month gap that has seen the economic crisis deepen and currency collapse further.

The groups, which back several ministers in a government made up of members from across the political and sectarian spectrum, said the decision was driven by a desire to approve the 2022 budget and to discuss an economic recovery.

The groups had been refusing to attend cabinet sessions in a dispute over the handling of an investigation into the huge Beirut port blast in 2020.

The failure to hold cabinet meetings has delayed talks on a recovery plan with the International Monetary Fund, seen as vital to unlocking international support to lift the country out of a crisis that has driven swathes of the nation into poverty.

Hezbollah, an Iran-backed group that has a well-armed militia, and Amal, another Muslim Shiite group, have sought the removal of a judge who has been overseeing the blast probe.

They have accused Judge Tarek Bitar of bias after he sought to question two senior Amal figures charged over the blast.

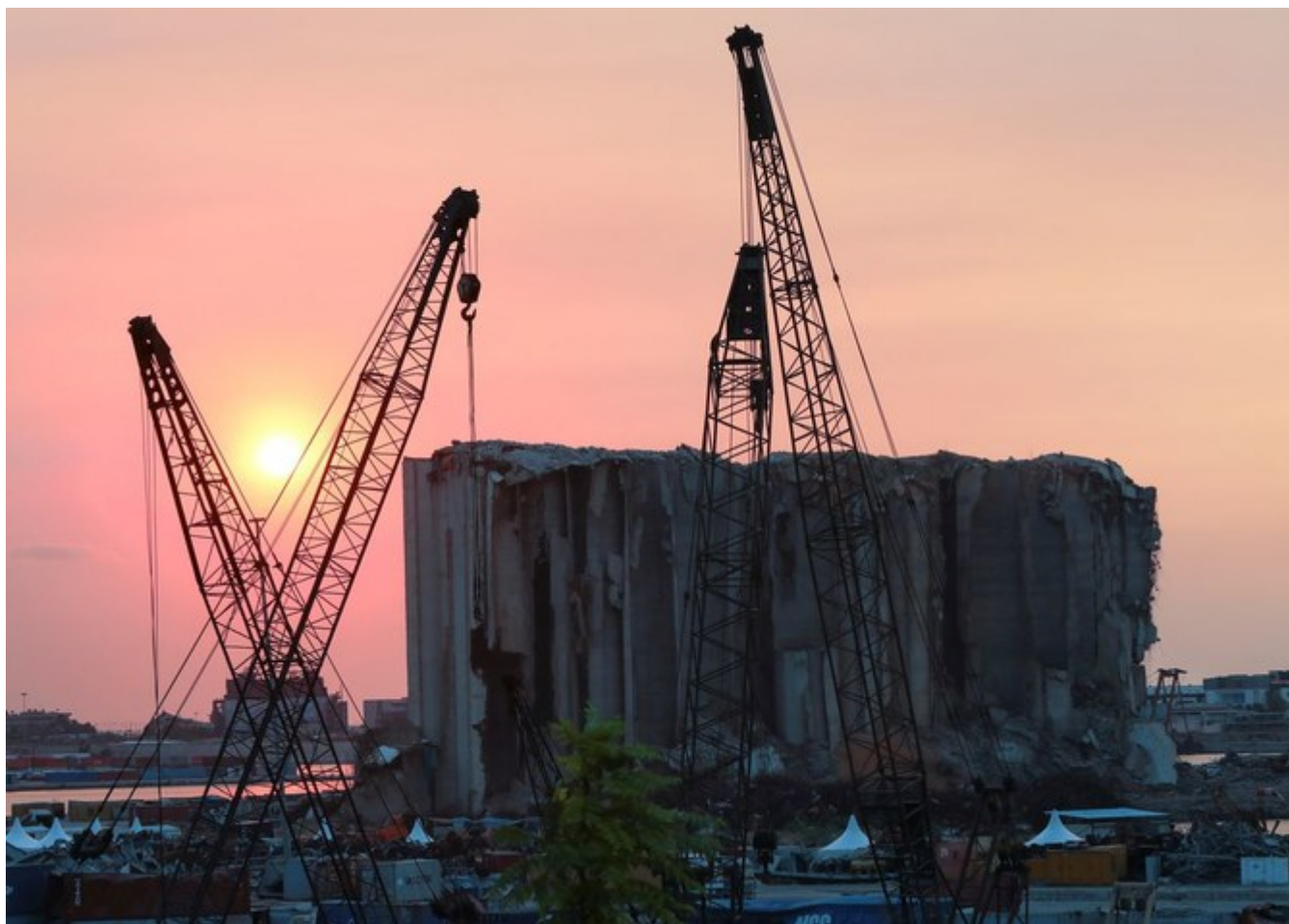
Bitar, who does not make public statements, has been quoted by the families of blast victims as saying he would press on with his investigation that has repeatedly been stalled by a slew of lawsuits filed by powerful suspects in the case.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati, whose post is held by a Sunni Muslim under Lebanon's sectarian political system, said in a statement he welcomed the decision to end the boycott and would call for a cabinet meeting as soon as he received a draft 2022 budget from the Finance Ministry.

A government source told Reuters there was not expected to be cabinet session in the coming week as budget preparations were still under way and figures for a financial recovery plan were being drawn up.

Mikati has said his government was seeking to sign a preliminary agreement for an IMF support program in February.

An IMF spokesperson told Reuters that virtual talks would be held with Lebanese authorities in the last week of January.



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US has told Lebanon not to fear sanction law over energy supply plans, says PM's office
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[Negotiators head home as Iran talks hit critical stage](#)

Sat, 2022-01-15 19:14

VIENNA: Chief negotiators from Iran and Europe returned home for consultations as talks to revive the 2015 nuclear deal reached a critical stage, state media in the Islamic republic said Saturday.

"The negotiators will return to Vienna in two days" but expert-level discussions at the eighth round of talks would continue on Saturday and

Sunday, IRNA news agency said.

The talks between Tehran and world powers resumed in late November after they were suspended for around five months as Iran elected a new, ultraconservative government.

Iran agreed the nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States.

It offered the Islamic republic sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

But former US president Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the agreement in 2018 and imposed crippling sanctions, prompting Iran to begin rolling back its commitments.

"We are now at a stage of the negotiations where we are discussing difficult issues and how we can translate the subjects that we agreed upon in principle into words and enter them into a document," IRNA quoted an anonymous source as saying.

"We are discussing the details," the source said, adding that "this is one of the most tedious, long and difficult parts of the negotiations, but is absolutely essential for achieving our goal."

The main aims of the negotiations are to get the US to return to the deal and lift sanctions, and for Iran to resume full compliance with the accord.

Tehran is seeking verification of the sanctions easing, as well as guarantees that Washington will not withdraw from the deal again.

"Regarding the three subjects (lifting of sanctions, nuclear commitments and implementation, sequencing and verification), there are still open issues and some of them are tough," the source said.

The return of the negotiators to their capitals came as EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Friday that a deal with Iran remained "possible," and that the talks were advancing in a "better atmosphere" than before Christmas.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh on Monday said the efforts by "all parties" to revive the nuclear agreement had resulted in "good progress."

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian recently noted progress in the talks, but said it was "too slow."

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday that only "a few weeks" were left to save the 2015 deal, and that Washington would consider "other options" if the negotiations fail.



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Iran ups the ante in search of Vienna nuclear negotiations advantage Israel open to 'good' Iran nuclear deal, but wants tougher Vienna terms

[Attacks on Iraq political party's HQ, Green Zone raise security fears](#)

Sat, 2022-01-15 01:05

BAGHDAD: An explosion from a hand grenade hit the headquarters of Iraqi parliament speaker Mohammed Halbousi's Taqaddum party in Baghdad early on Friday wounding two guards, police sources said.

The blast caused damage to the building's doors and windows, police said. No group claimed responsibility and there was no comment from Halbousi or the Iraqi government immediately for the incident.

A similar incident hours later targeted the Baghdad headquarters of the Azm party of another Sunni politician, Khamis Al-Khanjar, police said, but caused only light damage.

There was no claim of responsibility for the second incident.

Iraq's parliament, newly elected after an Oct. 10 general election in which the populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr was the biggest winner, voted to reinstate Halbousi for his second term as speaker on Sunday.

Shiite parties aligned with Iran and which rival Al-Sadr, opposed the selection of Halbousi.

On Thursday, Iraq's Federal Supreme Court, the country's highest tribunal, provisionally suspended Halbousi, after two fellow deputies lodged a complaint claiming his re-election was unconstitutional.

This will affect the work of parliament whose first task is to elect the country's president, who then must name a prime minister tasked with forming a new government following October elections.

But the court said suspending the speaker should not affect a 30-day deadline to elect Iraq's new president.

HIGHLIGHT

Iraq's post-election period has been marred by high tensions, violence and allegations of vote fraud.

Separately, three people including two children were wounded in rocket attacks on Thursday in Baghdad's Green Zone, with one hitting a school and two smashing into the US Embassy grounds, Iraqi security sources said.

"Three rockets were fired toward the Green Zone," a high-ranking Iraqi official said, preferring anonymity. "Two of those fell on the grounds of the American Embassy, and the other on a school nearby, injuring a woman, a girl and a young boy."

In recent months, dozens of rocket assaults or drone bomb attacks have targeted American troops and interests in Iraq.

The attacks are rarely claimed, but are routinely pinned on pro-Iran factions.

These factions in Iraq are calling for the departure of all US forces stationed in the country.

Another security source who did not wish to be identified said on Thursday there were no injuries or damage inside the US Embassy compound.

The embassy is located in the ultra-secure Green Zone of Baghdad, which also houses parliament and other government offices.

The US Embassy condemned the attack in a statement on Facebook, attributing it to "terrorist groups attempting to undermine Iraq's security, sovereignty, and international relations."



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Three wounded in Iraq rocket attack targeting US embassy in Baghdad
Iraq takes back 111 Daesh-linked families from Syria

[Concern as mental health patients in Lebanon struggle to obtain medications](#)

Author:

Fri, 2022-01-14 23:30

BEIRUT: As the people of Lebanon continue to struggle with the effects of the financial crisis in the country, the political turmoil and the aftermath of the devastating explosion at Beirut's port, concern is growing about the toll these crises are taking on mental health.

While no accurate statistics are available for the number of people who take sedatives, psychiatrists report that the number of patients visiting their clinics in the past year exceeded 12 a day.

Meanwhile, pharmacists estimate that people wishing to buy psychotropics – drugs that affect a person’s mental state, including antidepressants, anti-anxiety medication and mood stabilizers – constitute 30 to 35 percent of their customers.

According to some medical estimates, one in five people in Lebanon feels anxiety, sadness or depression as a result of the economic and social conditions in the country but medicine and healthcare are not readily available to many.

The Lebanese pound has plummeted in value against the dollar and soaring prices are exhausting incomes and salaries. The Beirut explosion on Aug. 4, 2020, and the armed clashes in the city’s Tayouneh neighborhood last October further fueled the sense hopelessness among many people.

“Since the end of 2019, following the escalating economic and social collapse, the levels of mental disorders rose dramatically,” said Hiba Dandachli, communications director of Embrace, an organization that provides mental health services.



Hiba Dandachli, communications director of Embrace, presenting the case of Lebanon’s mental health patients during a TV talk show. (Twitter photo)

In 2021, she said, 20,000 people called the Embrace Lifeline, more than in any previous year. She said that a high proportion of the callers, mostly young people and teenagers, were suffering from conditions such as anxiety, depression and insomnia as result of the effects of the declining economic and social conditions and unemployment.

“The Lebanese took to the streets in 2019 to express their anger,” Dandachli said. “However, they feel despair due to the escalating crises.

“Without social justice and securing the fundamental right of stability, our services are limited to helping people, not providing solutions. We are sedatives.”

Joelle, 33, who works at an insurance company, said that she sought help from a psychiatrist because she was suffering from anxiety as a result the dire economic situation and the fear of being unable to provide for her the family.

"I started suffocating at night and experiencing panic attacks," she said. The treatment that was prescribed requires medicine that is either unavailable in pharmacies or very expensive, she added.

A study published in December by the Lebanese American University indicated that "16.17 percent of young people, between 18 and 24 years old, suffer from severe depression since the Aug. 4 explosion, and 40.95 percent of women suffer post-traumatic stress disorder."

"We mainly witness mood disorder cases at our clinic," said Dr. Hanaa Azar, a psychiatrist who works with adults and children.

She believes that "between 70 and 80 percent of people in Lebanon take sedatives as a result of sleep disorders, stomach spasm, tachycardia, eczema, phobias, body pains and other physical symptoms that are symptoms of mental disorders."

She added: "All generations suffer in one way or another from these disorders as a result of insecurity, especially children. As everyone returned to school and work, behavioral and academic disorders have emerged and obsessive-compulsive disorder cases have increased among adults."

Doctors and psychiatrists are particularly worried about the shortage of medicines, especially since most are no longer subsidized by the state and the rest are only partly subsidized. Only cancer medications are still fully subsidized. Subsidies on drugs for neurological conditions depend on the price of the particular medicine.



Embrace volunteer health workers providing a lifeline service to residents of Lebanon who are psychologically affected by the worsening economic crisis. (Twitter photo)

“A very large number of Lebanese take a sedative drug, the price of which has risen from 25,000 Lebanese pounds to 420,000 within just two months.” The official exchange rate remains 1,500 pounds to the dollar, but this is unavailable and the currency currently trades on the informal black market at more than 30,000 pounds to the dollar.

Pharmacist Samer Soubra said he cannot understand why there are still medicine shortages even though prices have been increased to take account of the soaring exchange rate.

“Medicine distributors were reluctant to distribute to pharmacies in light of the high exchange rate,” he said. “Today, subsidies have been lifted on many medicines and they are now priced according to the exchange rate on the black market, yet some are still missing, including infant formula.”

Thousands of people in Lebanon resort to obtaining the medicines they need, especially psychotropics, from relatives in other countries or people who bring them from Turkey, Cyprus, Greece and Jordan, or from donations made by Lebanese expatriates in France.

Still, many are going without. "Some people have stopped taking their medication and have experienced health setbacks," said Azar.

Psychiatrist Dr. Yara Chamoun said that many Lebanese who previously showed no signs of mental disorders have begun to suffer from them amid the economic crisis, especially young people.

"In addition to cases of depression and anxiety, we find cases of alcohol and drug abuse," she said. "Patients say that they became addicted to them because they help them sleep or forget about the harsh reality."

Psychiatrists find themselves at an impasse in efforts to treat patients when the required medication is not readily available, Chamoun said.

"Some alternative psychotropics might not work well enough on the patient, while others may be too expensive for them to afford," she explained.

Amal Moukarzel, a Lebanese expatriate in France, founded Les Amis du Liban de Colombes (Friends of Lebanon in Colombes) with her husband and friends to collect donations of medicines and send them to Lebanon.

"We now send around 120kg of medicines from time to time, obtained from hospitals and sent in cooperation with Middle East Airlines to local associations in Lebanon to be distributed to needy patients," she said.

Despite the logistical issues she faces, Moukarzel said she insists on sending "more of these much-needed medicines, most of which are for diabetes and blood pressure, as well as psychotropics."



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General Labor Union president warns against 'certain catastrophe' in Lebanon amid economic crises
Rise of US dollar shakes Lebanese food and fuel security

[US has told Lebanon not to fear sanction law over energy supply plans, says PM's office](#)

Fri, 2022-01-14 23:22

BEIRUT: The US has told Lebanon it should not fear a sanctions law over its plans to receive energy supplies from the region, according to a statement from Prime Minister Najib Mikati's office on Friday.

US ambassador to Lebanon, Dorothy Shea, handed Mikati a letter from the US Treasury to answer Lebanese authorities' concerns about regional energy

agreements that the US had helped to facilitate with Jordan and Egypt.

The diplomat said: "There will be no fears from the US sanctions law. This message represents forward momentum and an important milestone as we continue to make progress to achieve cleaner and more sustainable energy, to help address the energy crisis."

Lebanon is grappling with a deep financial crisis and a weak local currency that is piling pressure on the population.

On Friday, the dollar exchange rate on the black market dropped by more than LBP5,000 at once to reach LBP27,500.

Money exchange shops tried to limit their sales of dollars after people rushed to buy or sell them.

The Central Bank issued a circular on Dec. 27 and followed it up with amendments. The circular removed a ceiling related to bank purchases of dollars using the official Sayrafa exchange rate platform.

It allowed depositors and account holders of Lebanese pounds to withdraw their deposits and salaries in dollars based on the rate set by Sayrafa.

The move pumped dollars into the Lebanese market by replacing withdrawals from pounds with fresh dollars.

A new clause was introduced allowing the banks to increase the quota in dollars, by buying dollar bills from the Central Bank at the rate set by Sayrafa using the pounds owned by these banks or their clients with no specific ceiling. This was aimed at meeting the demand for dollar withdrawals.

Financial experts said these measures would reduce the dollar exchange rate on the parallel market as a result of supply and demand and take back the pounds "stashed by citizens in their homes," bringing down the inflation.

It also allowed the reassessment of the Central Bank's role in the issue of controlling the dollar exchange rate, the experts added.

This role had recently faded as a result of speculation and the Central Bank's focus on subsidizing commodities, fuel and medicines, they pointed out.

The main focus should have been on controlling the dollar rate as it was the starting point to control other prices, said the experts.

The crisis of confidence in the banking sector has been escalating since late 2017, leading to a decrease in the flow of capital to Lebanon, while a parallel market became prominent in Sept. 2019. The political authorities at the time did not – and still have not – agreed to approve the introduction of capital controls.

Black market money changers have been flooded with Lebanese pounds. Audio

recordings of them expressing their confusion and concern about the latest developments have been shared on social media.

A banking expert told Arab News: "The Central Bank began a test procedure on Dec. 27. People exchanged their salaries at banks from Lebanese pounds to dollars based on the Sayrafa exchange rate.

"Money exchange shops are now left with huge amounts of dollars, for people are no longer willing to buy dollars from them because of the high exchange rate, which led to a decrease in the exchange rate of the dollar on the black market.

"The Central Bank is thus trying to maintain the dollar exchange rate within a certain range. It is possible to say that, with this measure, the Central Bank is restoring its role in the currency market."

However, the banking expert feared a surge in the dollar exchange rate during the weekend, with banks closing their doors and the attempt of Syrian dealers in the Bekaa to buy dollars from the region's money changers.

He also expected the exchange rate to drop again at the beginning of the week with the banks resuming their work.

Economist Dr. Louis Hobeika told Arab News: "These are superficial declines, as the political situation is further deteriorating and nothing suggests the emergence of solutions any time soon.

"If this measure is not accompanied by the resumption of the Cabinet's meetings and the launch of a recovery plan that includes implementing reforms and restoring confidence in the banking sector, these measures will be nothing but unreliable tactics. The issue is not monetary, but political and economic. What the Central Bank is trying to do is fine tuning."

When asked if the measure may lead to the unification of the dollar exchange rate, which is one of the International Monetary Fund's demands, Hobeika replied: "I think that the rate of the Sayrafa platform is the most reasonable one in Lebanon."

But Hobeika said the matter had "nothing to do" with the IMF.

The IMF delegation, which was scheduled to arrive in Lebanon this month, has postponed its visit until February.



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