

US congressional delegation calls for end to political disagreements in Lebanon

Author:

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BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati stressed the government's commitment to implementing international resolutions and maintaining security and stability, as a US congressional delegation stressed the need to end political disagreements and focus on addressing the country's economic and social crises.

Mikati expressed his appreciation for the US standing by Lebanon's side and supporting the army. The delegation said it stood by Lebanon and supported the government.

President Michel Aoun told the visiting delegation that Lebanon had begun its journey out of the severe economic crisis by setting a program for negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and reforms of the financial and banking systems.

Mikati announced on Friday that he would soon call for a Cabinet session to discuss more than 100 items on the Cabinet's agenda.

Observers are counting on a meeting that will bring together Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and Mikati on the sidelines of Monday's Independence Day commemorations to make a breakthrough in the political crisis.

Labor Minister Mustafa Bayram said on Saturday: "There are positive signs that suggest that we are facing a real opportunity for an appropriate solution to hold Cabinet sessions again."

But he made it clear that he could not talk about Information Minister George Kordahi, who has angered Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, with his comments on the war in Yemen and his refusal to resign over them.

"We support any solution that preserves Lebanon's ties, interests and sovereignty," said Bayram. "We learned that Kordahi is ready to do what is in Lebanon's best interest, through dialogue."

Hezbollah has thwarted Mikati's many attempts to hold Cabinet sessions, which have been suspended since Oct. 12, and several Hezbollah officials have stressed that the party stands firm in its conditions.

The party is refusing to make any efforts to resolve Lebanon's diplomatic and economic fallout with the Gulf states and insists on dismissing Judge Tarek Bitar, who is leading the investigation into the Beirut port blast.

Zafer Nasser, secretary-general of the Progressive Socialist Party headed by

Walid Jumblatt, told Arab News: "The party has no information about a close political solution to the crises that Lebanon is experiencing. While we agree on the need to separate government and judiciary, it seems that the Shiite duo, i.e. Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, are insisting that the Cabinet should not convene before Bitar is removed, since Hezbollah believes the investigations are leading to implicate it in the Beirut port blast, regardless of whether or not this is true."

Nasser said regional solutions were required to bridge the rift between Lebanon and the Gulf states, but that regional understandings had not yet been fruitful.

In a statement on Friday evening, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general Sheikh Naim Qassem demanded finding a solution for the entire judicial system, meaning the removal of Judge Suhail Abboud as the head of the Supreme Judicial Council.

"The judicial scene in Lebanon is unhealthy," Qassem said. This has nothing to do with a certain incident or a specific judge. This is about an entire judicial system that overlaps in an unusual way, and it must be reconsidered – a solution must be found."

Sheikh Nabil Kaouk, head of Hezbollah's Executive Council, said Saturday there was a "real opportunity" to resolve the Cabinet impasse and that those concerned should not waste it.

Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdullah Bou Habib has traveled to Moscow where he plans to meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov on Monday.

The ministers are expected to discuss the issue of Syrian refugees and Russian aid, Russia's mediation to solve Lebanon's crises, and the possibility of employing Russian investments in the country.

Almarkazia news agency quoted a diplomatic source as saying: "Russia will consider the possibility of mediating between Lebanon and the Gulf states, but it would not like to take the issue upon itself and bear the consequences should its efforts fail."

Bou Habib will be receiving satellite images from the day of the Beirut port explosion, upon Lebanon's request. Russia's space agency Roscosmos sent the images to Lavrov so he could hand them over to Bou Habib.

Mikati is scheduled to head to the Vatican on Wednesday to meet Pope Francis.



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Lebanon needs to show that Hezbollah can change behavior, Bahrain minister says
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[UK demands immediate release of UN staff detained by Houthis](#)

Sat, 2021-11-20 21:26

LONDON: The British ambassador to Yemen called on the Houthis to immediately release two Yemeni UN employees who are being detained by the militia.

“The UK is alarmed by reports of detention of UN staff in Yemen,” Richard Oppenheim said on Saturday.

“Aid workers must be allowed to do their work for the people of Yemen,” the

ambassador said.

One of the Yemeni men detained by the Houthis works for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the other works for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They were detained on Nov. 7 and Nov. 5 respectively.

UN officials were given assurances by senior Houthi officials that the men would be released, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Wednesday. However, they are still being detained.

Oppenheim urged the Houthis to abide by international law and called the detention of the UN employees “unacceptable.”



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Yemeni troops reinforce Marib units to counter sharp Houthi offensive
Yemen calls for international pressure against Houthi recruitment of child soldiers

France warns Iran against 'sham' nuclear negotiating stance

Author:

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PARIS: France's Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian warned Iran on Friday not to come to the next round of talks on reviving the 2015 nuclear deal with a "sham" negotiating stance, a day after Paris urged the board of the UN atomic watchdog to send Iran a tough message.

Tehran had earlier responded to Paris by saying the International Atomic Energy Agency, which verifies Tehran's compliance with the 2015 deal with world powers limiting Tehran's nuclear program, must be "free of any political conduct."

The statements highlighted rising tension before the US, Iran and world powers resume indirect negotiations on reviving the deal on Nov. 29, five days after a meeting of the IAEA's board of governors.

Western diplomats say time is running low to resurrect the pact, which then-US President Donald Trump abandoned in 2018, dismaying the other world powers involved – Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia.

Six rounds of indirect talks were held between April and June. The negotiations were interrupted after the election of a new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who has said Iran will not back down in the talks.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Paris warned Tehran over what US and European diplomats view as unrealistic demands, including a call for all US and EU sanctions imposed since 2017 to be dropped.

The foreign minister told Le Monde newspaper Paris wanted first to establish whether talks would resume where they ended in June.

"If this discussion is a sham, then we will have to consider the JCPoA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) empty," he said, referring to the 2015 deal.

"The United States is ready to return to the negotiations where they left off in June, so that they can be concluded quickly. We will assess from the 29th and in the following days whether this is also the Iranian will."

France said on Thursday a strong message should be sent to Iran over its nuclear activities and a lack of cooperation.

The US envoy for Iran warned that Tehran was approaching the point of no

return for reviving a nuclear deal after it boosted its stocks of enriched uranium before talks resume this month.

Robert Malley said Iran risked making it “impossible” to gain any benefit from resuming the agreement, which has been on hold since then president Donald Trump walked away in 2018.

Tehran said the IAEA must not be politicized.



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Time shrinking for Iran nuclear deal, US envoy warns
US and European powers discuss Iran threat with Gulf countries in Riyadh

[After years of war, Libya's Benghazi a chaotic urban sprawl](#)

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Fri, 2021-11-19 23:33

BENGHAZI: Over a decade of war in Libya the second city Benghazi has mushroomed to twice its size, creating an unplanned and chaotic urban sprawl. The fighting has displaced countless families, forcing many to build new homes without permits in a jumble of unplanned neighborhoods that often lack infrastructure, from proper roads to schools or sewerage systems.

As the country tries to stabilize and rebuild, authorities are scrambling to address the legacy of years without urban planning.

"We had to leave our homes in the city center because of the war," said one Benghazi resident, Jalal Al-Gotrani, a Health Ministry employee in the northeastern coastal city.

"When the fighting stopped, we found our houses destroyed and uninhabitable. We couldn't afford to pay rent, so we had to build a little house in an unplanned neighborhood."

Benghazi was the epicenter of the 2011 revolt that overthrew dictator Muammar Qaddafi, sparking years of lawless chaos in Libya.

The city was the site of the 2012 extremist attack that killed the US Ambassador Christopher Stevens, and it saw more heavy fighting between 2014 and 2017 that pulverized large districts.

Al-Gotrani, who supports a family with six children on a salary of just \$130 a month, said that so far "there has been no state plan and no help to rebuild the areas that were destroyed."

As a result, entire informal neighborhoods have sprung up in outlying areas zoned for farming, with no building permits and no master plan.

"Stop building and contact the planning department!" reads a notice on the fence of one unauthorized building site on the outskirts of Benghazi.

The state faces a surge in unregulated building that "it can't keep up with," said Abu Bakr Al-Ghawi, housing minister in Libya's unity government, which took power in March.

Municipal planning chief Osama Al-Kazza warns the phenomenon is creating districts that lack roads, green spaces and schools and are unconnected to vital water and sewerage networks.

The eastern city has swelled from 32,000 hectares to 64,000 hectares since the last urban master plan in 2009, largely due to unlicensed buildings which now make up half the city, he said.

"More than 50,000 housing units are outside the public plan" – half of the city's buildings – Al-Kazza said. "Development is running ahead of planning."

Libya's capital Tripoli, some 1,000 km to the west, has also seen entire districts emerge without a single building permit, for similar reasons.

A year-long battle between eastern-based Gen. Khalifa Haftar and Tripoli-based armed groups caused massive damage to the outskirts of the capital, displacing thousands and creating a housing crisis.

A year of relative peace since an October 2020 ceasefire, with UN-led efforts underway to bring a more permanent peace, has focused minds on the massive job of reconstruction.

Ghawi said the government is working with Libyan and foreign consultants to lay out a new nationwide urban development strategy, the third in the country's history.

The last one, in 2009, was never implemented because of the war and the years of lawlessness that followed the overthrow of Qaddafi.

But a scramble to enforce planning laws without providing alternative housing has had human consequences.

In recent weeks, authorities in Tripoli have demolished a string of structures built since Qaddafi's fall, including cafes and restaurants – but also homes.

Yet by demolishing unlicensed buildings without providing their occupants with alternatives, authorities risk making some families, already displaced by war, homeless for a second time.



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[Yazidi family abandons EU dream, reluctantly returns to Iraq](#)

Author:

By SAMYA KULLAB | AP

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Fri, 2021-11-19 23:25

DOHUK, Iraq: Khari Hasan Kalo peered out of the window of the repatriation flight as it touched down in northern Iraq.

It's a place he and his family had hoped never to see again after they left for Belarus two months ago, driven by dreams of a new life in Europe.

Kalo, 35, had begged for loans and spent his savings on the ill-fated journey to the Belarusian capital of Minsk, the first stop on a journey to the West. His wife, 30-year-old Zena, had sold her few belongings on the gamble that left the family of six stranded for days in a cold forest on the border of Belarus and Poland. In the end, they returned home, fearing they were endangering the life of Kalo's ailing 80-year-old mother.

Yet they say they would do it all again to escape their hopeless life, spent in a camp for displaced persons for the past seven years. The Kalos are Yazidis, a religious minority that was brutalized by Daesh militants when they overran northern Iraq in 2014.

Years after their lives were torn apart, Yazidis are still unable to return home or locate hundreds of women and children who had been snatched by the extremists. The Kalos' home lies in ruins.

"If it wasn't for my children and my mother, I would never have returned, I would have stayed in that forest at all costs rather than return to this tent," Kalo said Friday, speaking to AP from the Karbato camp in Dohuk province in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region.

His mother, looking frail, slept throughout the interview.

The Kalos, including three children ages 5, 7, and 9, had returned from Belarus a day earlier.

"It's not even our tent; it's his sister's," his wife interjected. "It's no place to raise children, have a life."

The region is considered the most stable part of conflict-scarred Iraq, yet Iraqi Kurds made up a large group among thousands of migrants from the Middle East who had flown to Belarus since the summer. Even in Iraq's more prosperous north, growing unemployment and corruption is fueling migration, and the Yazidi community has endured particular hardship.

On Thursday, hundreds of Iraqis returned home from Belarus after abandoning their hopes of reaching the European Union. The repatriation came after thousands of migrants became stuck at the Poland-Belarus border amid rising tensions between the two countries.

Kalo's family was among 430 people who flew from Minsk back to Iraq, where 390 got off at Irbil International Airport before the flight continued to Baghdad.

The West has accused Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko of using the migrants as pawns to destabilize the EU in retaliation for its sanctions imposed on his authoritarian regime following a harsh crackdown on internal dissent. Belarus denies engineering the crisis, which has seen migrants entering the country since summer, lured by easy tourist visas, and then trying to cross into Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, all EU members.

Kalo didn't mind if a geopolitical game was being played at his expense if it got his family out of Iraq.

"So what if I was a pawn in someone's hands if it gets me to Germany?" he said.

Since being displaced, the family had gotten increasingly desperate. Their tent burned down in an accidental fire in June that ravaged the Sharia camp, also in Dohuk. They tried to return to their original home in Sinjar but found their house uninhabitable.

He heard from friends about Kurds finding their way to Germany after Belarus eased visa requirements last spring. He begged his brother in Australia to wire him \$9,000 to pay the smugglers' asking price for his wife, three young

children and mother.

He also had saved money from his time as a policeman – cash that was hard-won because he endured discrimination as a Yazidi.

“What good is a job if it’s still not enough to feed your family?” he said of his decision to quit.

The Kalos took the land route to Istanbul in September, and boarded flights to Minsk the following month. There, they headed straight to the Polish border. With two other Iraqi families, the Kalos dug under the border fence, reaching the other side in darkness.

They walked for four days in search of a GPS point where they were promised a car would meet them and take them straight to Germany.

But that never happened.

Instead, on the fourth day, Kalo’s family ran out of food as temperatures dropped in the dense and soggy forest.

Polish authorities found them and sent them back across the border. They were greeted by an encampment of hundreds of migrants. Belarusian authorities were handing out wire cutters and pushing the migrants back through the razor wire.

Polish authorities used water cannons to repel them. But this did not deter Belarusian authorities, who beat and threatened them, Kalo said. He said they shouted: “Go (to) Poland!”

Still, husband and wife fought to stay, agreeing that anything was better than their life in a tent.

But with his mother struggling to survive as conditions grew increasingly squalid, Kalo sought the pity of the Belarusian authorities. They allowed them to return to Minsk to seek medical help.

Kalo heard the Iraqi government had agreed to repatriate citizens free of charge. He turned to his wife and they considered their choices: Return to their desperate lives in Iraq, or bear the responsibility if his mother died. Reluctantly, they put their names on the list.

But their hope is not lost, Kalo said, as his 5-year old daughter, Katarin, dug her face into his chest at the Karbato camp.

“I have two priorities now,” he said. “The first (is) to get a tent of our own. The second, to get back on my feet and leave this country. I will make it this time.”

He added: “If it was my last day on this Earth, I will spend it trying to leave.”



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Iraqi migrants caught in border tensions in Belarus fly home Poland detains 100 migrants at border, accuses Belarus