

'God help this country:' Lebanon in limbo as PM-designate Hariri quits

Thu, 2021-07-15 16:31

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri stepped down on Thursday, citing "key differences" with President Michel Aoun after nine months of political wrangling that failed to form a government for the crisis-ridden country.

Following his second meeting with the president in the past 24 hours, Hariri announced that "Aoun's position has not changed."

The two men held their 19th meeting on Wednesday, with Hariri presenting a lineup for a 24-member cabinet.

"God help this country," Hariri said. "Aoun requested fundamental changes to the cabinet lineup I had presented to him on Wednesday, related to the naming of Christian ministers. He told me that we would not be able to reach an agreement."

Aoun's office hit back in a statement, saying that Hariri "was not ready to discuss amendments of any kind."

The president said he would set a date for binding parliamentary consultations as soon as possible to assign an alternative figure to take over the task of forming a government.

Following Hariri's move, the Lebanese pound hit a new low and was selling for higher than LBP20,000 to the dollar on the black market.

The resignation and the sharp rise in the price of the dollar sparked angry protests that spread in Beirut, Sidon, Tripoli and Baalbek.

Opinion

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

Protesters destroyed restaurants and cafes and expelled customers from these establishments in the southern city of Tyre.

In Beirut, streets were blocked and there were clashes with soldiers in the vicinity of Beirut Arab University, leaving some injured.

In Tripoli, there were repeated calls through loudspeakers for people to take to the streets.

Relations between Aoun and Hariri were under great strain because of the

political differences and disputes between the president and his political party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), on one side and Hariri's Future Movement on the other.

Dr. Harith Suleiman, an academic and political writer, said he was not shocked to see Lebanon reach this impasse as Aoun had been "hindering all attempts" to form a rescue government for the past nine months.

"Aoun does not want Hariri to head the government and is insisting on giving the blocking third to himself and his political party to be able to sack the government whenever he feels like it," he told Arab News. "He wants the blocking third to be solely given for his party, without Hezbollah, because he does want Hezbollah to be able to apply pressure in case it was to support a presidential candidate other than the FPM's candidate, Gebran Bassil.

"It is not easy now to name a well-respected Sunni figure who would resist Aoun and his son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, to form a government that would stop the collapse. Bassil wants a premier who would be willing to work for him and take his orders."

Regarding the failure of foreign pressure to reach a solution in Lebanon, Suleiman added: "We will remain hostages until the conclusion of the American-Iranian talks in Vienna. How can foreign countries ask us to save ourselves while we are hostages? Can the kidnapped rebel against their kidnapers?"

Former lawmaker Fares Souaid said Aoun was still in the presidential palace "only because of Hezbollah."

"In the confrontation of political forces, the public opinion and the Arab and international decision-making bodies, the situation is worse than dangerous," he added.

The US State Department said that Secretary of State Antony Blinken would discuss with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian the efforts exerted to address the situation in Lebanon, adding that "Lebanon's leaders must form a government able to carry out reforms to end the crisis."

On Thursday, the US ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea and her French counterpart Anne Grillo handed a joint letter to Aoun from Blinken and Le Drian in which they stressed "their countries' interest in the Lebanese situation" and "the need to form a government soon to address the critical situation that Lebanon is facing."

France on Thursday reiterated its commitment to supporting the Lebanese while sources said that French presidential envoy Patrick Durel met Mohamed Raad, head of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, on Wednesday night.

During a celebration on France's national day, Grillo addressed the Lebanese and said: "This celebration is held this year in the context of the solidarity that we have been expressing to you for several months, and especially after Aug. 4, 2020, the day of the Beirut port explosion.

“Once again today, I am reiterating to you that France, the French people, and the French residents in Lebanon will always support you. The situation today is urgent and pressing. France has always sought to gather support for Lebanon. At the initiative of the French president and with the support of the UN, a third international conference to support the Lebanese people will be held on Aug. 4. This date will constitute a new milestone ... following the two previous conferences that helped raise €250 million (\$295.07 million) for Lebanon, including €80 million from France.”





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Hariri presents cabinet lineup in final attempt to end Lebanon's political crisis
Egypt's El-Sisi offers support as Lebanon's Hariri visits Cairo

[Italian FM denies funding Libyan coast guard accused of human rights abuses](#)

Thu, 2021-07-15 15:20

ROME: Italy's foreign minister has denied funding Libyan coast guard operations in the Mediterranean following claims by charity groups of human rights abuses of migrants and refugees.

During a session of the Italian Chamber of Deputies on Wednesday, Luigi Di Maio said Rome "had not, and would not" provide funds for such activities.

The minister's assurances came in the wake of a plea by several NGOs for Italy to restrain from financing Libyan authorities.

In the parliamentary hearing on Italian military missions abroad, including the country's presence in Libya, Di Maio added: "Strengthening of the Libyan authorities' capacity to conduct search and rescue operations in their own areas of responsibility, respecting international norms, is one of the lines pursued by the (Italian) government."

Italy recently donated a number of its former patrol vessels for use by the Libyan coast guard and has helped with the training of personnel.

Addressing deputies, Di Maio said: "It fits into the framework of initiatives to encourage a management (of migrant flows) that is more respectful of international standards on irregular flows (by Libya), and to combat the trafficking of human beings."

He pointed out that he and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi had attended several meetings over recent months with Libyan authorities during which the issues were discussed.

More than 100 associations joined a protest outside the building where the parliamentary session was being held.

Erasmus Palazzotto, an MP from the Italian left-wing LeU party supporting Draghi's Cabinet, told Arab News: "We denounce the responsibility of Italian authorities in the constant massacre of migrant people in the central Mediterranean and in the cycle of violence, exploitation, and violation of human rights systematically endured by migrants and refugees in Libya."

The NGOs have demanded "absolute guarantees" on the respect of human rights.

"Any cooperation with Libyan authorities must be stopped unless concrete guarantees on the protection of human rights of migrants and refugees are granted; we say no to support and cooperation with the Libyan coast guard aimed at forced pushbacks in Libya," Palazzotto said.

He called for "a plan providing for the immediate evacuation of people held in Libyan detention centers and the extension of regular entry channels for migrant people and refugees," along with, "the restoration of an institutional system for search and rescue (operations) in the central Mediterranean and the recognition of the essential role undertaken by NGOs in the safeguarding of lives at sea."

Democratic party MP, Laura Boldrini, highlighted an incident reported by non-profit rescue group Sea-Watch on June 30, in which the Libyan coast guard – using a vessel donated by the Italian government – was allegedly seen firing live ammunition at a migrant boat in an apparent attempt to stop it from crossing the Mediterranean to Europe.

She said: "The Italian Parliament cannot be deaf and blind regarding the unscrupulous methods used by the Libyan coast guard. Shooting at a boat full of people is a criminal operation."

The parliamentary session passed a resolution to increase Italy's engagement in the EU naval force Mediterranean operation (IRINI) – that helps in the training of the Libyan coast guard and navy and the disruption of human smuggling and trafficking – so as to limit Italian direct cooperation with the Libyan coast guard.

The resolution, approved by the Italian Chamber of Deputies, said: “This will allow to consolidate the role of Italy in Libya, rationalize the structure of command, and strengthen the European role.”



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Italy says Libyan coast guard fired on its fishing boats, injuring captain
Libyan coast guard intercept boat carrying 75 Europe-bound migrants

White House 'categorically' condemns alleged Iranian kidnap plot against journalist

Wed, 2021-07-14 20:01

WASHINGTON: The United States will continue nuclear talks with Iran, the White House said on Wednesday, after an Iranian plot to kidnap a US-based journalist was made public.

A US Justice Department indictment unsealed on Tuesday showed prosecutors have charged four Iranians in a kidnapping plot of the journalist. The White House condemns the plot, press secretary Jen Psaki said.



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US charges four with plot to kidnap New York journalist critical of IranIran says it is holding talks on prisoner exchanges with US

Head of Sudan's Sovereignty Council says dialogue only way to solve Renaissance Dam crisis with Ethiopia

Wed, 2021-07-14 19:55

LONDON: The European Union has played an effective role in supporting the democratic transition in Sudan, particularly in international forums, the Chairman of Sudan's Transitional Sovereignty Council said.

Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan called on the EU to continue to support the North African country until it overcomes the current internal and external challenges.

His comments came during a meeting with EU envoy for the Horn of Africa Annette Weber on Wednesday, during which he also said the components of the government are working in perfect harmony and seeking to complete the state structure in order to move forward with legal reforms that allow freedoms and establish religious tolerance.

He added that the military component is committed to supporting the democratic transition.

Al-Burhan also said that the transitional government is keen on full stability in its regional neighbors and is working to stabilize the situation in neighboring Ethiopia.

He added that dialogue is the only way to address the issue of the Renaissance Dam, referring to an initiative put forth by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok.

Weber praised the efforts made by the transitional government in laying the foundations for the democratic transition, and said the EU was keen to continue supporting Sudan to face its internal and external challenges.

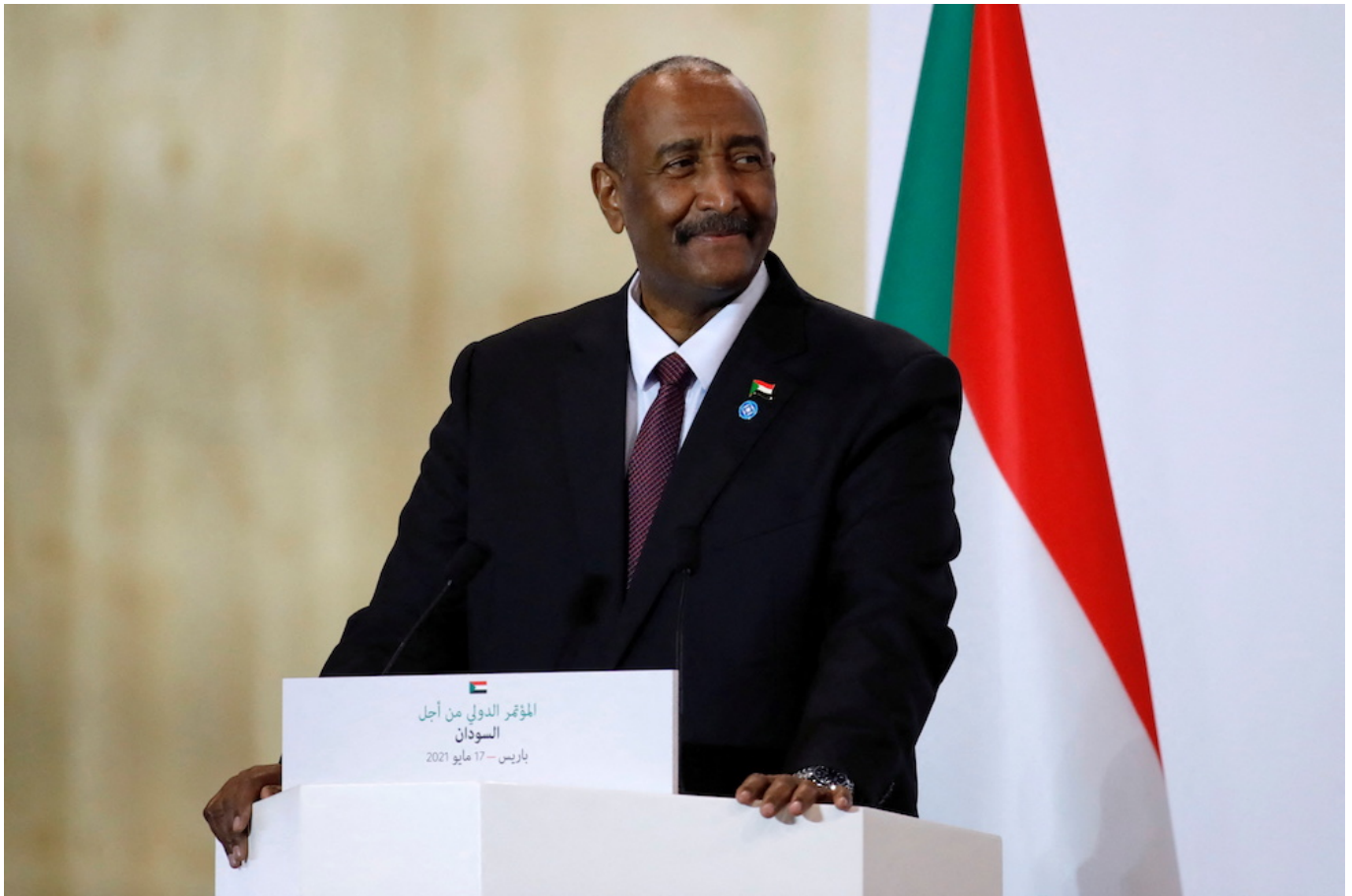
"Very encouraging start of my official visit to the Horn of Africa region," she said after meeting with Hamdok on Tuesday.

Weber, who was appointed to the position on June 21 to coordinate EU policies with the African region, said she and Hamdok exchanged views on the transition in Sudan and the regional dynamics.

Very encouraging start of my official visit to the [#HornofAfrica](#) region. Exchange with [#Sudanese](#) Prime Minister [@SudanPMHamdok](#) on the transition in Sudan and the regional dynamics.

<https://t.co/PQ5R2YieAe>

– Annette Weber (@EUSR_Weber) [July 13, 2021](#)



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Saudi Arabia calls for clear mechanism to start negotiations on Ethiopian dam
EU 'not satisfied' with Ethiopian unilateral decisions on Nile dam:
Egyptian minister

[Populist Iraq cleric demands action over deadly Covid unit fire](#)

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Wed, 2021-07-14 10:53

BAGHDAD: Populist Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr has warned he will hold the Iraqi government responsible if it fails to take action over a devastating fire that killed at least 60 people in a Covid isolation unit.

The warning comes just months before Iraq is scheduled to go to the polls in October for an early parliamentary election that was demanded by a protest movement backed by Sadr's supporters.

"It is incumbent on the government to work immediately to firmly and seriously punish those to blame for hospital fires, whether in Nasiriyah or other provinces, no matter their (political) affiliation," Sadr tweeted late Tuesday.

"Otherwise, this government will be held responsible from its lowest to its highest (official)."

The devastating blaze, which swept through the Covid isolation unit of Al-Hussein Hospital in the southern city of Nasiriyah on Monday evening, was the second such fire in Iraq in three months.

An April fire at a Baghdad Covid hospital killed 82 people and was also blamed on the explosion of badly stored oxygen bottles.

That blaze triggered widespread anger and resulted in the suspension and subsequent resignation of then health minister Hassan Al-Tamimi, a nominee of Sadr's powerful political bloc.

Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi has ordered an investigation into Monday's blaze "that will lead to those directly responsible," his office said.

He already dismissed the hospital's manager, the provincial health director and the local civil defense chief.

Arrest warrants have been issued for 13 officials, including the provincial health director.

Sadr demanded that the findings of the official inquiry be released quickly.

"It must not end up like others conducted into previous hospital fires. Or else we have other means of protecting people's safety and dignity."

The health ministry said Wednesday that 60 people had been confirmed to have died in the fire. Forensics experts had identified 39 bodies while 21 were still unidentified.

Demonstrations in honor of the victims were planned in Nasiriyah later after residents held a candle-lit vigil late on Tuesday.



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Iraqi protesters face off against cleric Moqtada Sadr's followers