

# Yemen government says Houthis not taking peace efforts seriously

Tue, 2021-07-13 21:39

ALEXANDRIA: Yemen's government on Tuesday blamed the Iran-backed Houthis for disrupting peace efforts to end the war and renewed calls to the international community to mount more pressure on the rebels to stop their bloody military operations across the country.

The government's accusation against the Houthis comes as fighting raged between Yemen troops and the rebels on key battlefields in Marib and Al-Bayda.

Ahmed Obeid bin Daghar, Yemen's Shoura Council head, in Riyadh, told Marion Lalisse, deputy head of mission of the EU delegation to Yemen, that the Houthis have never taken peace ideas seriously. In addition, Daghar said that the Yemeni government had accepted the Saudi peace initiative and is willing to comply with all efforts to end the war.

"The shortest way to achieve a just and comprehensive peace is to oblige the Houthis to respect the basic references of a solution that achieves the interest of the people and respects their will," he said, according to Yemen's official news agency SABA.

Peace efforts to end the war have reached a deadlock after the Houthis refused to put an end to hostilities that displaced thousands of people and aggravated the humanitarian crisis.

Shuttling between Sanaa, Muscat, Riyadh, and Tehran, the former UN Yemen envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, the US special envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking, and Omani mediators failed to convince the Houthis to accept a peace plan. The UN-brokered plan demanded warring factions to achieve an immediate ceasefire, the reopening of the Sanaa airport, easing restrictions on Hodeidah ports, and later engaging in direct talks.

The Houthis said they would stop their deadly offensive on Marib only after the Arab coalition halts airstrikes against their forces and lifts its "blockade" on Sanaa airport and Hodeidah seaport.

In March, Saudi Arabia proposed a peace initiative that included the same elements as in the current UN peace initiative.

In the same sense, Swedish special envoy for Yemen, Peter Semneby, visited Iran on Tuesday where he discussed peace initiatives to end the war in Yemen.

Fars news agency, in Iran, reported that the envoy met with the Iranian foreign minister's assistant for special political affairs, Ali Asqar Khaji, and discussed alleviating the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, peace efforts to end the war, and addressing the risk of the floating FS0 Safer tanker.

Safer has been moored in the Red Sea, north of Hodeidah, since it fell into Houthi hands in 2015. Carrying more than 1 million barrels of oil, the vessel's situation is deteriorating as a possible spill would be an ecological disaster much worse than that of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska in 1989.

In February, Griffiths visited Iran for the first time as part of his diplomatic efforts to mobilize support for the UN-brokered peace initiative.

Experts believe that international mediators have sought to demand Iran use its leverage on the Yemeni rebels to pressure them to stop fighting.

Meanwhile, on the ground, dozens of Houthis were killed on Tuesday and Monday in the central province of Marib as government troops pushed back several Houthi assaults in key contested areas.

Yemen's Defense Ministry said on Tuesday that army troops and tribesmen drove back a Houthi attack in Al-Kasara, west of Marib, as warplanes from the Arab coalition carried out several attacks in Marib province, targeting Houthi military reinforcements and locations.

In Jabal Murad, south of Marib, three airstrikes destroyed a command room and heavy weapons for the Houthis, local media said.

The latest escalation in fighting in Yemen began in February when the Houthis renewed a major offensive to seize control of Marib city, the Yemeni government's last stronghold in the northern part of the country.



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## [French official: Lebanon's ruling elite 'not committed to reforms'](#)

Tue, 2021-07-13 21:27

BEIRUT: Lebanese officials received another scolding on Tuesday, this time from Franck Riester, French minister delegate for foreign trade and economic attractiveness, in response to their inability to form a government.

"France respects its commitments, unlike the Lebanese ruling class, which has not committed to reforms," Riester said.

Speaking from the site of the Beirut port explosion, he warned that "Lebanon cannot carry on like this. Sanctions will be issued against officials who obstruct the formation of the government. Our message today is to emphasize our support for the Lebanese, and to remind officials of the promises they made."

On Tuesday, French and European pressure was exerted on Lebanese officials to move forward with forming a government and not to postpone the upcoming parliamentary elections. French aid to Lebanon, especially in the period after the Beirut port explosion, has also been discussed.

Both Riester and former chief observer of the EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), Elena Valenciano, visited Lebanon separately on the same day.

Josep Borrell, high representative of the EU for foreign affairs and security policy, on Monday, announced: "The (foreign) ministers reached a political understanding that a sanctions regime against those who are responsible for the situation (in Lebanon) should be established."

During their meeting in Brussels, the ministers also gave the green light to put in place a legal framework against political leaders who pushed the country into economic collapse.

"They need to have a Lebanese government in order to avoid a crackdown of the country, fully able to implement the reforms and protect its population," Borell said.

According to a statement issued by the French Embassy, Riester stressed to

Lebanese President Michel Aoun the urgent need for Lebanese officials to form a credible and effective government "that works to implement the necessary reforms in the interest of Lebanon and in line with the aspirations of the Lebanese people."

He said: "France is ready to work with its regional and international partners, especially after the preliminary agreement of the EU's Foreign Affairs Council on July 12 on establishing a sanctions regime, to pressure those responsible for the political obstruction and to find a way out of this crisis."

Riester added that international economic and financial aid to Lebanon is conditional on achieving credible reforms.

Aoun told Riester: "The Lebanese have not forgotten French President Emmanuel Macron's initiatives in the conferences that were held to support Lebanon."

Riester toured the site of the Beirut port explosion and was briefed on the progress of sorting the rubble which is being carried out by a French company.

"France has stood by Lebanon since the first day of the explosion and will always support Lebanon," Riester said. "We are tackling the logistics and conducting the necessary studies to ensure the Beirut port can operate normally as soon as possible. We are not backing down from our promises."

The French Embassy announced a new meeting will soon be held to mobilize international aid for the Lebanese.

"Riester believed that the Lebanese are paying the price of the deepest economic, social, humanitarian, and political crisis in Lebanon," it said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Valenciano met Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, and caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

"The parliamentary elections will be held on time next spring," Aoun assured Valenciano.

Following the meetings, Valenciano tweeted: "Encouraging to hear from the president, speaker, and prime minister that elections will be held in 2022 according to schedule. The right to vote must be respected."

The last and 18th meeting between Aoun and Hariri was on March 22, after which the latter announced that the former was insisting on blocking the third in the government. The two were supposed to meet on Wednesday, but Hariri called Aoun to postpone the meeting because he had an urgent matter to attend to.

Hariri is expected to visit Cairo to meet Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Hariri reportedly will return to Beirut and present to Aoun a government lineup of 24 ministers. If Aoun does not agree, Hariri would end his efforts.

On Monday evening, Hariri met former premiers to discuss possible scenarios, including the possibility of his resignation.

Deputy Speaker Elie Ferzli said on Tuesday that Hariri “is trying as much as possible to deal with the issue of forming the government himself with the tools available and he will try to interpret things on the ground soon.”

Hariri is due to announce his position in a televised speech on Thursday.

Meanwhile, French presidential envoy Patrick Durel arrived in Beirut on Tuesday. Durel’s meeting with Hariri focused on “the issue of forming a government.” He also met with the head of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) lawmaker Gebran Bassil.

Bassil received a call on Tuesday from the Russian president’s special envoy to the Middle East, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, in which he stressed, “the absolute necessity to expedite the formation of a government capable of achieving reforms and ending the collapse.”



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# Chess champ Garry Kasparov speaks out against Iranian regime

Mon, 2021-07-12 21:36

LONDON: World-renowned chess player Garry Kasparov has spoken out about the plight of everyday Iranians at the hands of the regime and urged the US to cease negotiations with Iran, calling them a “terrible mistake.”

Kasparov, who now works as chairman of the New York-based Human rights Foundation, told an Iranian opposition event attended by Arab News: “For all the foreign interference, terror, and war caused by the illegitimate Iranian regime, it is vital to remember that no one suffers more than the citizens of that regime.”

The government, Kasparov continued, “has no authority from the people. Instead, it fears its people, it oppresses and tortures them.”

Kasparov is among the world’s most decorated chess players. He was world number one for a record breaking 255 months, and held the highest ever rating in chess for 14 years, until being dethroned in 2013 by Magnus Carlsen.

Since retiring from chess, he has devoted himself to campaigning on human rights issues and against autocracy – including against his own home country, Russia.

Kasparov denounced the West’s overtures towards Iran, saying: “How can the free world, the world of democracies that supposedly value human life, negotiate with a regime of murderers?”

Those negotiations, he added, are a “terrible mistake.”

He continued: “How can the leaders of countries like the United States, which often talks about the importance of human rights, sit across the table from Raisi, whose role in the 1988 massacre is well established?”

In 1988, Ebrahim Raisi, Iran’s president-elect, was a key figure in what rights-group Amnesty International dubbed “death commissions,” which saw him ordering thousands of political prisoners to death by summary execution, following show trials.

Among those who continue to suffer at the hands of Tehran today are chess players just like Kasparov.

Despite boasting a host of renowned players of its own, Iran continues to stymie their careers for political reasons.

Players are regularly prevented from competing against Israeli counterparts, instead being forced to withdraw from tournaments or resign matches – behavior that prompted a severe warning last year from the International Chess Federation (FIDE).

“We are increasing pressure on Iran to follow the law, and if it does not comply, the Iranian federation will see the consequences,” said FIDE.

If the Iranian Chess Federation refuses to comply with the rules, FIDE said, “they will definitely be suspended.”

Last year, an Iranian chess referee was forced to flee Iran and claim asylum in the UK after she was pictured wearing a hijab that Iranian media condemned as too loose-fitting.

Separated from her husband and family, she told Arab News at the time: “The officials were watching me and checking my photos. Sometimes they’d send bad reports about us. It was affecting my career and my happiness.”

She added: “Even in other countries, we don’t feel free.”



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## Judge in Lebanon blast probe 'rejects MPs' immunity move'

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Mon, 2021-07-12 21:34

BEIRUT: The judge investigating last year's deadly Lebanon port blast on Monday rejected a request by MPs for more evidence before immunity for three ex-ministers can be waived, a judicial source said.

Hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer exploded on the dockside at Beirut port last August 4, killing more than 200 people, injuring thousands and ravaging swathes of the capital.

Afterwards, it emerged that officials had known about the explosive substance being stored there unsafely for years.

Coming less than a month before the first anniversary of the tragedy, Monday's move may mean a new standoff, with fears that the probe could be derailed by political interference.

Earlier this month, lead judge Tareq Bitar said he had demanded that parliament lift the immunity of ex-finance minister Ali Hasan Khalil, former public works minister Ghazi Zaiter and ex-interior minister Nohad Machnouk. Bitar said he was looking at possible charges of "probable intent to murder" and "negligence."

Deputy speaker Elie Ferzli said parliament's administration and justice committee on Friday decided to "request all evidence available in the investigation, as well as all documents that prove suspicions."

He said the committee would reconvene once it had received a reply, to decide whether or not to waive immunity.

On Monday, the judicial source said no further documents would be forthcoming.

"The investigating judge rejected parliament's request ... In an official letter he explained that he had already handed over all the documents that needed to be handed over," the source told AFP.

Lawyer and activist Nizar Saghieh said the committee's request on Friday went against the separation of powers between the judiciary and the legislature, and "violated the confidentiality of the investigation."

"They're just trying to buy time," he alleged.

On Monday, relatives of victims of the massive blast protested outside Machnouk's and Zaiter's homes, demanding that their immunity be lifted, the official ANI news agency reported.

Last month, rights groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called for a UN investigation into the explosion in light of the stalled investigation.

In February, Bitar's predecessor as lead judge in the probe was removed by a court, which questioned his impartiality because his home was damaged in the



explosion.

The judge had in December issued charges against caretaker prime minister Hassan Diab and three former ministers for “negligence and causing death to hundreds,” triggering outrage from politicians.

Rights activists condemned the court ruling as another example of the country’s entrenched political class placing itself above the law.

Diab stepped down after the blast, but has stayed on as caretaker premier.

The economic crisis that started in the autumn of 2019, sparking mass street protests, has deepened over the past year.

Foreign donors have pledged millions of dollars in aid to the Lebanese people, but stopped short of offering any assistance to the state itself.



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# UN Security Council members do not want to resolve Renaissance Dam issue, Egypt envoy says

Mon, 2021-07-12 19:56

CAIRO: Egypt strongly reaffirmed its position during the UN Security Council session on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam negotiations, a top diplomat said.

Mohammed Idris, Egypt's permanent representative to the UN, stated that Cairo held the Security Council accountable for its responsibilities regarding the Renaissance Dam crisis.

The Egyptian state has engaged in intensive diplomatic moves to present the Ethiopian dam crisis to the Security Council, the ambassador announced in televised statements.

The world is full of issues that threaten security and peace, and the Security Council must play its role, the envoy added.

The members of the Security Council do not want to take a position on the dam, said the envoy.

In previous statements, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said that the matter within the Security Council was complicated, given "political considerations and alignments," the interaction between permanent and non-permanent members, and "overlapping interests."

He stated that bringing the issue of the Renaissance Dam to the Security Council was an important matter in order to "hold it responsible as the main organ in the UN system concerned with maintaining peace and security."

He added that Ethiopia's argument during the Security Council session was "weak and did not live up to the words of Egypt and Sudan."



# Battle for the Nile

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Egypt stresses need for negotiated settlement on Renaissance Dam Egyptian minister accuses Ethiopia of intransigence over GERD