

Judiciary to simulate welding operation that preceded Beirut blast

Author:

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BEIRUT: Ten months have passed since the Beirut blast on Aug. 4 last year, and the Lebanese judiciary has still not established the cause of the massive explosion that killed 215 and injured 6,000.

Since then, the judiciary has arrested 19 people, including officers in the State and General Security departments, and has summoned dozens of people for questioning, including senior officials, such as caretaker Premier Hassan Diab, a former minister, two current lawmakers and the Director-General of State Security, Maj Gen. Tony Saliba.

Judge Tarek Bitar, who took over the case three months ago after his predecessor, Judge Fadi Sawan, was dismissed by the Lebanese court of cassation, told journalists recently that he has excluded the possibility that the explosion was caused by a "rocket attack."

Bitar based his judgment on a report prepared by French forensic experts who did not find any remains of a missile in the port area.

Bitar said: "A missile attack is one of three possible theories; the second is that a welding mistake led to the fire that caused the explosion, and the third is that the fire was intentional."

Bitar said he was 80 percent certain he could rule out the missile attack theory, and said that "work is continuing to determine which of the two remaining possibilities is the cause of the explosion."

In his meeting with journalists, Judge Bitar appeared to be getting ready to announce the near completion of technical investigations and to move on to the summoning phase.

A judicial source told Arab News that "security and political officials, and even judges, will be summoned to be questioned in the coming weeks."

Unlike his predecessor, Bitar will use judicial and constitutional means to prosecute officials who enjoy immunity.

On Dec. 10, Sawan summoned Diab and three former ministers over their negligence, but none of them showed up. Sawan had scheduled to question them as "defendants."

On Feb. 18, Judge Sawan was dismissed from the case.

Judge Bitar has told journalists that he "might face some pressure in the coming weeks, but he will still say the truth" and that he will "submit his indictment to the judicial council before the end of the year, with physical

evidence to prosecute those behind the explosion.”

More than 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate, which had been stored in the port of Beirut since 2014 close to fireworks, exploded, destroying hundreds of houses and apartments and leaving a 40-meter-deep crater.

Bitar has focused in his investigation on discovering “the causes behind the explosion, those responsible for the ammonium shipment and its sources, and why it was kept in Beirut for seven years.”

Bitar, just like his predecessor, has stressed that “negligence” is one of the causes.

A simulation of the welding process that preceded the explosion is expected to take place in the next weeks, at the same place and with the same devices used to weld the gate of hangar 12.

The three welders who carried out this mission have been arrested, along with the owners of the company that is responsible for welding works at the port.

The judicial source also told Arab News that Bitar might summon judges who were aware of the dangers of the ammonium nitrate shipment in the port and did nothing about it.”

The families of the victims have staged protests in the port area on the fourth of every month since the explosion. This month, they threatened to storm the parliament if the defendants’ immunity was not waived.

Ibrahim Hteit, spokesperson for the families of the victims, said: “More than 300 days have passed since the massacre and officials have still not bothered even to present an apology, fearing to take any responsibility.”

He warned that the families “will not allow any company or investor to lay one stone or reconstruct the port until the truth comes out.”

Hteit and the families blamed the judiciary that, according to them, “obeys political orders.”

He said “waiving the immunity of lawmakers is crucial for the truth to come out, and parliamentary blocs are welcome to help us, if they want to. However, any bloc that abstains or refrains from voting in favor of this will be considered as a partner in crime and will become our enemy.”

“The families are preparing to stage several sit-ins outside the parliament,” he added.

Pictures of the blast victims are featured on the walls in the heart of Beirut and the road leading to the port. On Friday, a book titled “Alive Ashes” was published, containing a collection of testimonies by 203 families who lost loved ones in the explosion.



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Sat, 2021-06-05 21:17

CAIRO: The claim of ownership of some natural resources and disposing of them in a way that harms other countries is dangerous, according to Egypt's Islamic scholar Ahmed Al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar.

During his virtual speech on Friday at the UN celebration of World Environment Day, Al-Tayeb said that religion is for those who believe in it and respect its laws, explicitly ruling that the ownership of people's essential resources is public property.

It is not right under any circumstances, said Al-Tayeb, to consider these resources as the property of an individual, individuals or state that can use them or dispose of them without taking into consideration the states that

rely on these public resources.

He said that water comes at the forefront of essential resources, and the laws of religions stipulate that its ownership should be collective and that it is forbidden that an individual, group or country usurp it without the consent of other.

This comes amid the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) involving Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia.

Ethiopia began work on the dam in 2011. Egypt fears the GERD will threaten its water supply from the Nile, while Sudan is concerned about the dam's safety and its own water flow.

All negotiations between the three parties have failed to reach an agreement.



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Council of Europe meets to review Turkey's non-implementation of key rulings

Fri, 2021-06-04 21:17

ANKARA: The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe will meet on June 7 to review the Turkish government's failure to implement two key judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) about the immediate release of activist and philanthropist Osman Kavala and the Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas.

The committee is entitled to take action against a member of the council if it does not respect an ECHR judgment, but such a move is rare.

Action against a state was taken for the first time in 2017 against the government of Azerbaijan, which insisted on not releasing the jailed opposition politician Ilgar Mammadov, after the Strasbourg-based court found that his detention was to punish him for criticizing the government.

On Friday, Human Rights Watch, the International Commission of Jurists, and the Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project called on the committee to take all necessary measures to push Turkey to remedy its non-compliance with the ECHR.

The watchdogs, which also demanded measures against Turkey in March for ignoring the ECHR decisions, warned Ankara may face infringement proceedings and more measures if it insists on not complying.

To open proceedings, two-thirds of the Committee of Ministers is required to vote in favor. The case is then considered at the ECHR about whether the state in question has ignored the obligation to comply. Depending on the final decision, the Committee of Ministers can suspend said country's voting rights or even its membership from the Council of Europe.

The ECHR ruled that by keeping Kavala and Demirtas in pretrial detention since November 2017 and November 2016 respectively, the Turkish government violated their right to liberty and abused the option given to governments to levy limitations on rights.

The court ordered their immediate release but was ignored by Ankara, and new criminal proceedings have been opened against both men.

"This cynical non-compliance with the court's judgments requires a robust response from the Committee of Ministers," said Helen Duffy of the Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project in a press statement.

Kavala, who is accused of being involved in the 2016 coup attempt and espionage against the Turkish government, is set for a new hearing on Aug. 6, 2021. In his latest defense statement on May 21, he said charges against him

could be compared to the legal basis required for charges of espionage to be brought under the Nazis in Germany from the 1930s.

Demirtas is being kept behind bars for his political speeches and activities as leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to allegedly undermine the unity and territorial integrity of the Turkish state. His next hearing is scheduled for June 14.

In December 2019, the ECHR ruled Turkish authorities had aimed to "silence Kavala as a human rights defender" by holding him in pretrial detention and prosecuting him merely for his human rights activities.

In December 2020, it also ruled that by keeping Demirtas in pretrial detention and prosecuting him for his activities and speeches, protected under the European Convention on Human Rights, the Turkish authorities had pursued an "ulterior purpose of stifling pluralism and limiting freedom of political debate," and of sending "a dangerous message to the entire population."

The 48-year-old politician, who inflicted a significant blow to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during presidential elections in 2015 and general elections in 2016, faces several charges ranging from leading a terror organization to insulting the president.

"If Turkey continues to undermine the binding nature of the court's judgments and fails to follow the committee's guidance on what to do to implement them, there is no option left for the committee other than triggering the infringement proceedings against Turkey," Ayse Bingol-Demir, from the Turkey Human Rights Litigation Support Project, told Arab News.

"The committee has been taking several necessary steps that it should take prior to triggering the infringement proceedings in the Kavala case. Therefore, the committee is very close to taking this exceptional step in this case if Osman Kavala's unlawful detention is not ended immediately," she added.

According to Bingol-Demir, the same will eventually be seen in Demirtas' case as well, but the committee needs to first follow its internal procedure and apply other measures, as has been in the case for Kavala.

The cases of Kavala and Demirtas still draw condemnation from around the world, with several rights groups and countries calling for their release.

Germany and France recently released a joint statement urging the Turkish government to immediately release Kavala.

In their meeting with Erdogan in Ankara in April, EU Council President Charles Michel and President of the EU Commission Ursula Von der Leyen called on Turkey to comply with the ECHR rulings, and said the issues were non-negotiable.

"The Council of Europe is an extremely important institution in the region that Turkey has lots of strong ties with. Turkey's interest is certainly in

maintaining good relations with the council, its subsequent bodies, and member states,” Bingol-Demir said.

She added that this gives the Council of Europe and the Committee of Ministers “very strong leverage” to deal with the challenges Turkey has posed to the council’s human rights protection system.



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[Erdogan says Turkey discovered 135 bcm additional natural gas in Black Sea](#)

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Fri, 2021-06-04 17:42

ANKARA: Turkey has discovered 135 billion cubic metres of additional natural

gas in the southern Black Sea, President Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday, raising the total discovery in the region to 540 billion cubic metres. Last year, Turkey's Fatih drill ship discovered 405 bcm of natural gas in the western Black Sea region's Sakarya field, in the country's biggest discovery. "Our Fatih drill ship made a discovery of 135 billion cubic metres of natural gas in the Amasra-1 borehole in the Sakarya gas field," Erdogan told an opening ceremony in the Black Sea province of Zonguldak. "Our new drilling operations around (the borehole) continue, God willing we expect new good news from this region," he added. Turkey uses two of its three drill ships to speed up field development. In a sign that the size of reserves would upgrade after each drill, Energy Minister Fatih Donmez said last month that one drill ship would open new test wells to appraise firmer reserve figures while the second one will upgrade testing wells to production status. Ankara aims to pump gas from the Sakarya field to its main grid in 2023, with sustained plateau production starting in 2027 or 2028. The field will reach full production status after a four phase development plan, Donmez has said. A pipeline stretching at least 160 km will be required to connect new wells in the region to the main grid, while Ankara will need to construct a receiving station within two years to match its timetable. Turkey, which has little oil and gas, is highly dependent on imports from Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran, as well as LNG imports from Qatar, the United States, Nigeria and Algeria for its gas. It imported 48.1 bcm of gas last year, up 6% from a year before, of which a third were from Russia. Turkey has also been exploring for hydrocarbon resources in the Mediterranean, where its operations in disputed waters have stoked tensions with Greece and Cyprus.



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WASHINGTON: The United States on Friday blamed Iran-backed Houthis for the failure of a cease-fire to take hold in Yemen on Friday and accused them of not taking other steps toward ending the brutal conflict.

"While there are numerous problematic actors inside of Yemen, the Houthis bear major responsibility for refusing to engage meaningfully on a cease-fire and to take steps to resolve a nearly seven-year conflict that has brought unimaginable suffering to the Yemeni people," the State Department said.

The US special envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking, returned on Thursday from a trip to Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, where he discussed the humanitarian and economic crisis in Yemen with government officials, Yemenis and international partners, the department said in a statement.

Since taking office in January, US President Joe Biden has made Yemen a priority and appointed Lenderking to help revive stalled UN peace efforts. After Lenderking returned from a visit last month, the State Department accused the Houthis of worsening Yemen's humanitarian crisis by attacking Marib, the last northern stronghold of the legitimate government that the Houthis drove out of the capital.

The situation has not changed.

"The Houthis continue a devastating offensive on Marib that is condemned by the international community and leaves the Houthis increasingly isolated," the State Department said.

Lenderking had talked to Yemenis about strengthening "inclusive processes" that could help citizens discuss the country's future and increase efforts toward peace, it said.



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