

Palestinian held by Israel ends hunger strike after 103 days

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RAMALLAH: A Palestinian on Friday ended a 103-day hunger strike against his detention without charge by Israel after being assured his four-month detention would not be extended, the Palestinian Prisoners' Club said. There was no immediate comment from Israeli authorities on whether they had offered any special assurances to Maher Al-Akhras, 49, who has been in an Israeli hospital suffering from heart pain and convulsions, according to his wife.

Akhras, a resident of the city of Jenin in the north of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, was taken into custody in July under an Israeli "administrative detention" order.

Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency says Akhras was detained after it received information that he was an operative of the Islamic Jihad militant group, an allegation his wife has denied.

He had vowed to continue to refuse solid food despite an October decision by Israel's Supreme Court not to extend his detention beyond Nov. 26.

But after receiving what it called "a firm commitment (by Israel) not to renew his administrative detention ... Maher Al-Akhras decided to end his hunger strike starting today, Friday Nov. 6," the Palestinian Prisoners Club, which works on behalf of prisoners, said in a statement.

"He will spend the remaining period until his release receiving treatment in the hospital," the statement added.

The Israel Prison Service referred questions to the Israeli military, which did not immediately provide comment.

There are around 5,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails, 350 of them under administrative detention, Palestinian officials said. Israeli officials say detention without trial is sometimes necessary to protect the identities of undercover operatives.



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[US hits 'corrupt' Lebanese political leader Gibran Bassil with sanctions](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Fri, 2020-11-06 05:18

CHICAGO: Lebanese political leader Gibran Bassil has been hit by US sanctions, with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo accusing him of being "notorious for corruption."

Bassil, who has held various ministerial roles and heads the Free Patriotic Movement, has had his US assets frozen and is barred from entering the country.

Pompeo said Bassil was in violation of President Donald Trump's Executive Order 13818, which targets rights abuses and corruption under the 2015 Magnitsky Act.

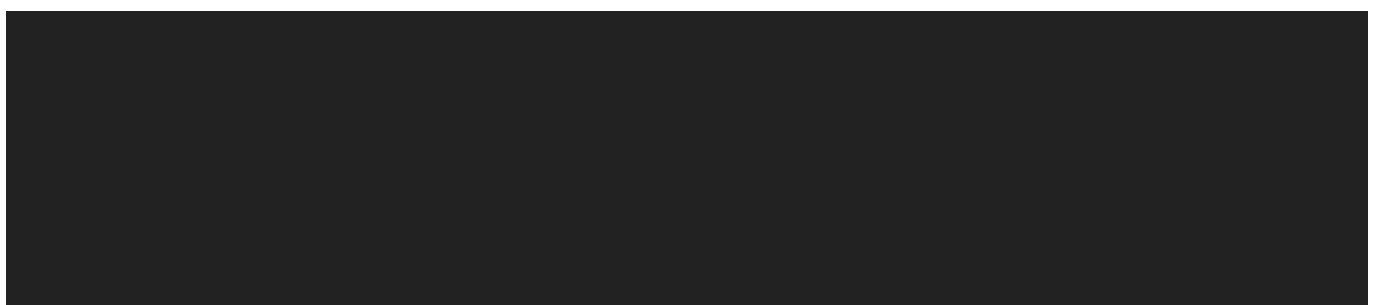
The Magnitsky Act gives the president the power to block US entry and impose property sanctions against any foreign person, or entity, who is responsible for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights or is engaged in government corruption.

"Bassil has served in multiple high-level posts in the Lebanese government, including as minister of foreign affairs and emigrants, minister of energy and water, and minister of telecommunications," Pompeo said. "Throughout his government career, Bassil has become notorious for corruption and has been linked to the purchase of influence within Lebanese political circles. While minister of energy, Bassil was involved in approving several projects that would have steered Lebanese government funds to individuals close to him through a group of front companies."

Pompeo said the action expanded on similar sanctions imposed under Executive Order 13224 on two other former Lebanese officials, including Yusuf Finyanus, who was Lebanon's minister of transportation and public works, and Ali Hassan Khalil, who previously served as minister of public health and then later as minister of finance.

Finyanus and Khalil "put personal interests and those of Iran-backed Hezbollah ahead of the welfare of the Lebanese people," Pompeo said. "Through his corrupt activities, Bassil has also undermined good governance and contributed to the prevailing system of corruption and political patronage that plagues Lebanon, which has aided and abetted Hezbollah's destabilizing activities. Lebanese political leaders should be aware that the time has long passed for them to put aside their own narrow self-interests and instead work for the people of Lebanon."

Pompeo said he was also strengthening punishments against Bassil by applying two other powerful instruments of US sanctions, including Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (Div. G, P.L. 116-94), due to his involvement in significant corruption that blocked Bassil's travel to the US.





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[Pressure grows on Turkish government over use of earthquake taxes](#)

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Fri, 2020-11-06 00:12

JEDDAH: In the aftermath of the magnitude 7.0 earthquake in Izmir last Friday that killed at least 110 people, pressure is growing on the Turkish government to explain what happened to billions of dollars raised by a mandatory earthquake tax Turks have been paying for more than 20 years. The tax was introduced after a magnitude 7.4 quake in the Marmara region in 1999 that killed 17,000 people. The money from it is supposed to be used to fund projects to reinforce buildings and prepare cities to better cope with earthquakes.

However, experts and opposition politicians say that much of the revenue from the tax was not spent on earthquake-protection measures, and there are growing calls for detailed information about how the money was used. Turkish citizens have paid as much as 147.2 billion Turkish lira (\$17.5 billion) in earthquake taxes since 1999. The country's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) accuses the government of misusing more than 71 billion lira that should have been used to protect cities from quakes. On Thursday, prominent Turkish journalist Fatih Altayli said that since 2011 some of these taxes might have been spent on dealing with about 5 million Syrian refugees. Turkey has received €6 billion (\$7bn) in EU aid to help the country cope with migrants and refugees.

This allegation was also raised by CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu during a parliamentary speech. He asked where the earthquake taxes went and added: "But when it comes to Syrians, there is a lot of money."

Alpay Antmen, a lawyer and CHP politician, told Arab News: "This money was meant to be used for urban transformation and for making housing areas in the earthquake zones much more resilient. However, about 70 billion lira of these taxes was spent on other purposes, and this capital was transferred to the builders close to the government."

Last year, he said he submitted a parliamentary inquiry to Treasury and Finance Minister Berat Albayrak about the use of earthquake taxes. He was referred to the Interior Ministry, which told him it had no information.

“They are collecting these taxes from taxpayers as earthquake taxes, then they merge it into the general budget,” said Antmen. “The financial resources of the government are so depleted that it uses all available tools.”

AFAD, Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Agency, which operates under the Interior Ministry, was harshly criticized for its response to the Izmir earthquake, after it asked people to send a text message if they needed blankets.

Allegations of corruption in the use of earthquake taxes are not new. In January, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan responded to such claims by saying: “We spent it where it was meant to be spent ... we do not have the time to provide accountability for matters like this.”

The CHP is now calling the government to account and demanding full transparency about how the taxes were used.

“When you spend the money of the citizens, you have to account for it,” said Antmen. “Otherwise it is unacceptable. Tens of billions of dollars have, however, been squandered for the relief of pro-government contractors’ debt burdens.”

CHP said that had revenue from the earthquake tax been used properly, millions of buildings around the country could have been strengthened to help them survive powerful earthquakes that are expected to hit Turkey, which lies on several active fault lines, in the coming decades.



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[Libyan parliamentarians meet for peace talks in Morocco](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2020-11-05 18:13

RABAT: Libyan politicians from the war-ravaged North African nation's rival administrations met for the latest round of peace talks in Morocco on Thursday.

The lawmakers met in the coastal town of Bouznika, south of Morocco's capital Rabat, for talks that come ahead of a major meeting in Tunisia slated for November 9.

The talks follow a "permanent" UN-backed cease-fire agreement signed in Switzerland last month, intended to pave the way toward a political solution to the country's grinding conflict.

Libya, with Africa's largest proven crude oil reserves, has been wracked by conflict for nearly a decade, since the overthrow and killing of dictator Muammar Qaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising in 2011.

It has since been dominated by armed groups and divided between two administrations that have been bitterly-opposed: the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the capital Tripoli, and a rival administration in the east backed by military strongman Khalifa Haftar.

Warring factions returned to the negotiating table in September in UN-supported talks, with negotiations being held in Morocco, Egypt and Switzerland.

Details of the agenda of the talks in Morocco have not been released.

Negotiators are pushing parallel efforts to broker peace, with the military section of talks taking place this week for the first time on Libyan soil.

On Tuesday, former enemy officers sat together in a joint military commission and agreed on a road map for implementing the cease-fire deal.



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Libya UN envoy expects election date to be set at coming talks

[Thousands of buildings would be destroyed in a powerful quake in Istanbul, says report](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-11-05 22:13

ANKARA: A new study has said that major Turkish cities are poorly prepared a powerful quake – which experts believe is likely to occur in the coming decades.

This follows the 7.0-magnitude earthquake off Turkey's western coast on Friday afternoon that killed 114 in western city of Izmir and injured 1,035 people.

According to research carried out by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake in Istanbul would demolish or seriously damage around 48,000 buildings in the city, while another 194,000 buildings will be moderately damaged.

The study, which was prepared by Istanbul Planning Agency, claimed that one third of the roads within the city will be blocked in such an event, and there would be the threat of a tsunami, as well.

The Princes' Islands, a popular tourist destination just south of the city in the Sea of Marmara, are said to be at high risk from waves that could be more than 12 meters high.

The total damage caused by a major earthquake could reach 120 billion Turkish liras (\$14.27 billion) in Istanbul alone.

The level of preparedness of Istanbul is of key importance as the city is crossed by several fault lines and has suffered many quakes in the past.

Despite the fresh memories of a 7.6-magnitude quake in the Marmara region, to the south of Istanbul, that killed more than 17,000 people, experts fear the authorities have not been taking the necessary precautions.

"Although earthquakes are natural disasters, the loss of life and the collapse of houses do not derive from natural causes, but are man-made, preventable difficulties. Although it is impossible to prevent the earthquakes, it is possible to minimize the losses," the report said.

The ruling government has been harshly criticized for not disclosing where the earthquake taxes it has raised have been spent on. The Turkish presidency said 147.2 billion liras have been collected in the 17 years since the massive quake in 1999.

Ali Babacan, Turkey's former economy tsar and founder of the breakaway Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), suggested that the government should earmark the country's resources for constructing earthquake-resistant buildings, instead of spending them on profit-seeking projects such as the controversial 45-km-long Istanbul Canal between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea.

Geologists and earthquake experts even fear that the canal could trigger earth movements, as 1-1.5 billion cubic meters of material will be excavated and used to form small islands in the Marmara Sea.

Burhanettin Bulut, a lawmaker from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), was among a team of politicians that conducted a field visit to Izmir just after the earthquake.

"This earthquake showed us that private contractors used cheap and inadequate

materials for these buildings. However, it is the duty of the state to enforce building codes and monitor all stages of their construction to monitor the earthquake-resiliency," he told Arab News.

Bulut spoke to many earthquake victims and urged the authorities to act.

"We shouldn't ignore the lives of our own citizens. The majority of the buildings that collapsed in Izmir benefited from the controversial zoning amnesty which was issued by the government ahead of the general election in 2018. Rather than focusing on rent-seeking activities in the major cities, there is an urgent need for a strict control over the construction sector," he said.

With that zoning amnesty, about ten million illegally constructed buildings throughout the country gained approval. Izmir topped the list for the number of such buildings. In the recent tremor 20 buildings in Izmir collapsed and became "graveyards" for their unlucky residents.

The Turkish parliament approved the formation of an investigation committee on earthquake measures on Nov 3 – a motion that had long been requested by the opposition parties.

"From now on, the government should work with the experts on this issue because earthquake victims that I talked to were disillusioned. Everybody should learn serious lessons from this quake and take necessary precautions to protect human lives," Bulut said.

Years ago, Ali Agaoglu, a famous figure in the construction business in Turkey and architect of dozens of luxury residential zones in Istanbul, described how poor-quality materials, including salty sea sand and scrap iron, were routinely used in the buildings his company constructed in the past.

"The buildings will collapse like paper in an eventual big earthquake in Istanbul," he once said in a televised interview.



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