

Families of Beirut blast victims demand UN Security Council probe into 'massacre'

Fri, 2020-08-14 22:57

BEIRUT: Families of the Beirut blast victims have demanded an international probe into the "massacre," with an FBI team set to arrive in Lebanon on Sunday to join the investigation.

At least 170 people were killed and thousands were wounded following the explosion of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate in a warehouse at the Port of Beirut on Aug. 4.

It destroyed vast swathes of the capital, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless and stoking anger about authorities' negligence and corruption.

Lebanon's government under Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned earlier this week following days of demonstrations demanding accountability for the disaster.

Lawyer Nada Abdelsater said on behalf of the victims' families: "The victims' families do not trust the security and political system in Lebanon and believe it to be the suspect even if it was not the only one involved in this massacre."

She said that the only legal way for an international investigation – and international prosecution – to take place was for the UN Security Council to send an investigative and fact-finding committee to Lebanon before the crime scene was further compromised. "After that, international prosecution takes place either by referring this crime against humanity to the International Criminal Court or by establishing a special court to look into this crime."

She read out a demand signed by thousands of affected families. It was addressed to all UN Security Council member states and she said that copies had been sent through these countries' ambassadors to Lebanon.

Opinion

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

Foreign dignitaries continue to flock to Lebanon following the tragedy.

US Assistant Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale met Lebanese officials on the second day of his visit to Beirut. He will meet political, spiritual, and civil society figures on Saturday.

His trip coincides with that of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who arrived in Beirut on Thursday evening. But Zarif did not go to the areas devastated by the explosion, despite his visit being billed as an expression of solidarity with Lebanon during its time of need.

The first to visit Beirut after the explosion was from French President Emmanuel Macron, followed by Hale and French Armed Forces Minister Florence Parly. They were welcomed by the Lebanese, who requested their help to rescue Lebanon.

Zarif visited President Michel Aoun, Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Diab, and caretaker Foreign Affairs Minister Charbel Wehbe.

It was reported that Iran sent a field hospital to Lebanon. But it was placed on the campus of the Lebanese University in Hadath in the southern suburbs of Beirut, far from the site of the explosion and those directly affected by it.

According to the media office of Baabda Palace, Hale said at his meeting with Aoun that President Donald Trump's directives were that the US be present to help Lebanon. Hale said that his country would not intervene in Lebanon's internal affairs, but that it would cooperate with Lebanese authorities, as well as friends and allies in the region, to help Lebanon and its people. He stressed that the Lebanese people must be listened to and their aspirations must be fulfilled.

He also highlighted the importance of achieving reforms in Lebanon and proceeding with the fight against corruption, as this path would open the door to funding from the Cedar (CEDRE) Conference and cooperation with the IMF "because this is what Lebanon needs now."

Aoun told Hale that the investigation into the explosion would continue, and what was required was help in learning the circumstances surrounding the arrival of the ship that was carrying the deadly ammonium nitrate.

He welcomed the arrival of the FBI team and said a number of port officials were under investigation. He said that the first task of the new government was to achieve reforms, fight corruption and follow up on a crime audit decided by the Cabinet.

Parly, after her meeting with Aoun, said that France was and would remain by Lebanon's side. She announced that Macron had ordered the opening of an air route between Lebanon and France to provide aid.

She also conveyed Macron's message to Aoun and said that her country had provided much aid and would provide more, especially in terms of equipment that helped to remove rubble, complete relief work, and survey the damage.

She said that 750 French soldiers would participate in these tasks and "this is evidence of France's standing with the Lebanese people."

French experts were assisting in the ongoing investigation, she added, and this involvement was in conjunction with sending food and building equipment. "You can rely on France," she said, emphasizing that Macron had pledged

during his Beirut trip to put all of its resources at Lebanon's disposal.

Parly hoped that there would soon be a new government in order to proceed with the reforms the international community deemed necessary. She said that Macron would return to Lebanon on Sept. 1 to complete the dialogue he had initiated with Lebanese officials and leaders, and to learn about repairs to devastated areas.

But Zarif criticized the French initiative to facilitate the formation of a new Lebanese government.

"Lebanon's government and people are the only ones to decide on the government, and no one should exploit the circumstances to dictate to Lebanon what to do," he said. "I believe it is not humane to take advantage of this tragic situation to dictate to Lebanon what to do."



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UNDP to focus on inclusive recovery in supporting Lebanon following Beirut blast
France's Parly confirms Macron plans trip to Lebanon Sept 1

UN chief urges Yemen's Houthis to grant access to decaying oil tanker

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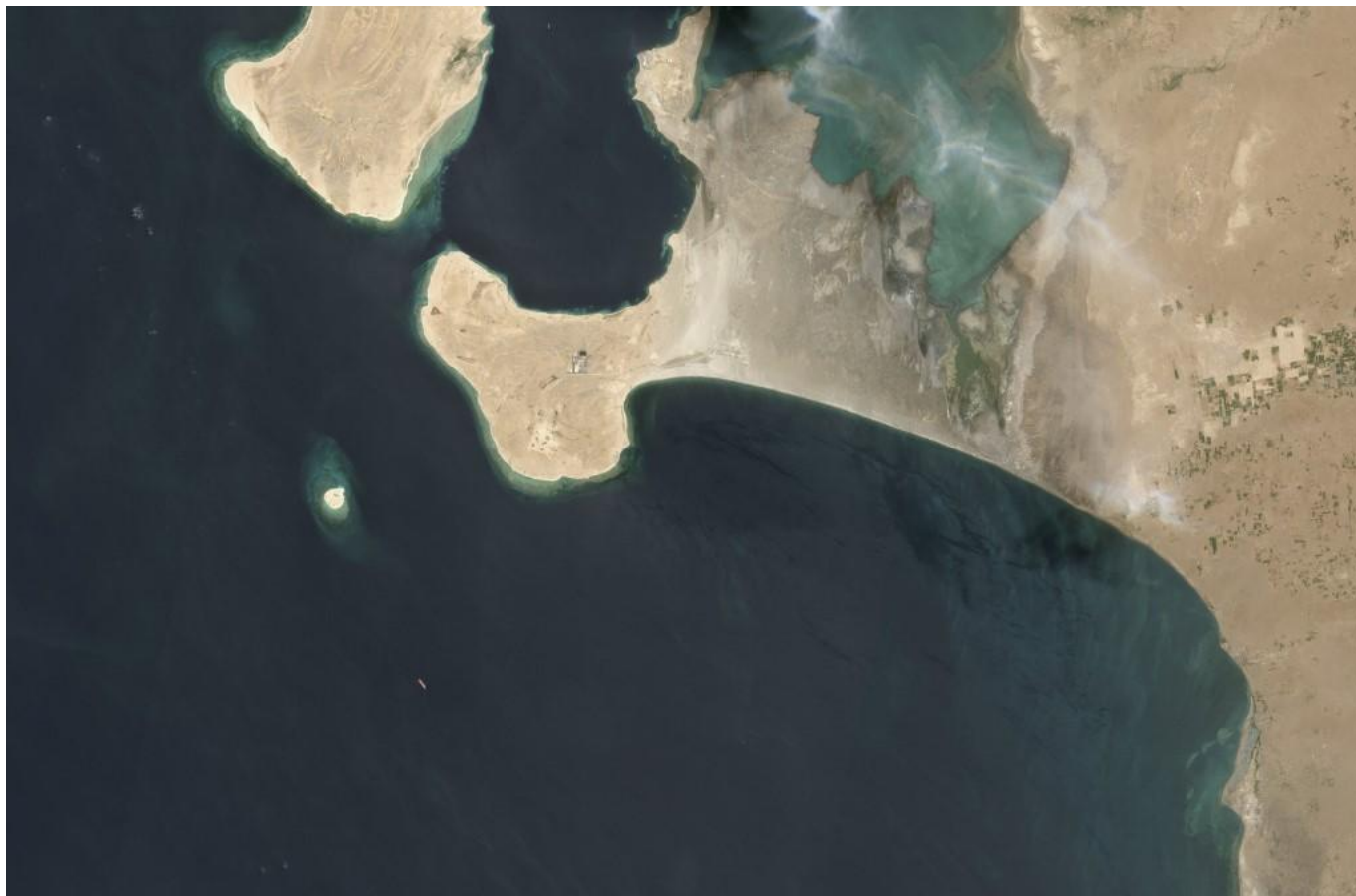
NEW YORK: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged Yemen's Houthis to allow an assessment team to travel to a decaying oil tanker that is threatening to spill 1.1 million barrels of crude oil off the war-torn country's coast.

More than a month ago Houthi officials said they would agree to allow a UN mission to conduct a technical assessment and whatever initial repairs might be feasible on the Safer tanker. But the United Nations is still waiting for formal authorization.

Guterres is "deeply concerned" about the condition of the oil tanker, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Friday. The United Nations has warned that the Safer could spill four times as much oil as the 1989 Exxon Valdez disaster off Alaska.

"He specifically calls for granting independent technical experts unconditional access to the tanker to assess its condition and conduct any possible initial repairs," Dujarric said. "This ... will provide crucial scientific evidence for next steps to be taken in order to avert catastrophe."

The Safer tanker has been stranded off Yemen's Red Sea oil terminal of Ras Issa for more than five years. The UN Security Council has also called on the Houthis to facilitate unconditional access as soon as possible.



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Yemeni government, STC discuss coalition under Riyadh Agreement
Yemeni president in US for annual medical checkup

[Yemeni president in US for annual medical checkup](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:33

AL-MUKALLA: Yemen's President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi touched down in the US for his annual medical checkup on Thursday, the Yemeni Embassy in the US said.

Ambassador Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak received Hadi at the airport in Cleveland, Ohio, where the appointment is due to take place, and "reaffirmed his utmost best wishes to the president for continued good health," the embassy said in

a brief statement.

Hadi left for the US after appointing a new governor and a new security chief in Aden, and mandating new Prime Minister Maeen Abdul Malik Saeed to form a new government. Hadi has travelled regularly to Cleveland for medical treatment since becoming president in early 2012, reportedly suffering from heart problems.

Saeed asked the governor, Ahmed Hamid Lamlis, to focus his efforts on reviving public institutions in Aden, restoring peace and security and fixing basic services that have been hit hard by years of instability. The official Saba news agency reported that the prime minister pledged Lamlis his government's full support.

Saeed also entered discussions with various political factions in Yemen with a view to forming his government. Abdul Malik Al-Mekhlafi, an adviser to President Hadi, said on Twitter that the administration would be announced within a month, as the internationally recognized government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC) enacted security and military components of the Riyadh Agreement.

The STC recently rescinded a controversial declaration of self-rule under a new Saudi-brokered proposal to accelerate the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

Signed by both sides in late 2019, the agreement was designed to end hostilities in Aden and other southern provinces. Under the deal, the government and the STC were agreed to withdraw their forces from contested areas in southern Yemen, move heavy weapons and military units from Aden and allow the new government to resume duties.

Meanwhile, a judiciary committee assigned by the country's attorney general to investigate reports of thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate stored at Aden's port found that the material was in fact a different fertilizer, urea, which could also prove hazardous if mixed with other materials.

In a letter addressed to the Yemen Gulf of Aden Ports Corporation, Judge Anes Nasser Ali, a local prosecutor, ordered the port's authorities to remove the urea from the city.

Shortly after the tragic explosion in the Lebanese capital Beirut last Tuesday, Fatehi Ben Lazerq, editor of the Aden Al-Ghad newspaper, ignited public uproar after suggesting 4,900 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in 130 containers had been gathering dust at the port for the last three years, which could cause an equally destructive explosion. The story prompted the country's chief prosecutor, politicians and the public to call for an investigation.



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[Upgrade on track as Russian trains join Egypt rail fleet](#)

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:27

CAIRO: Egypt's rail authority confirmed that a new batch of Russian railway cars has been shipped as part of a contract with the Russian Transmashholding Company to provide 1,300 carriages.

The batch includes 35 carriages on board two ships that are expected to dock at Alexandria before the end of August.

With the arrival of this batch, the number of Russian railway cars that have reached the Egyptian Railway Authority has increased to 68, including the 33 that arrived in two batches weeks ago and are now operating.

The new batch includes regular, dynamic-ventilated cars that will operate on main railways, named "improved second class."

According to plans, the batch is expected to enter service immediately after arrival and will form from three to four trains.

Mohamed Kamal, an Egyptian transport expert, said that with the arrival of the new batch of Russian railway cars in Egypt, the number of Russian trains

operating on the lower and upper Egypt lines will increase to seven. He explained that the plan is to receive new batches of 35 Russian cars every month, and to be in possession of over 240 new Russian railway carriages by the end of the year.

Kamal added that the cost of the 1,300 vehicles contracted with Russia is more than €1 billion (\$1.2 billion) and is financed in the form of a soft loan in collaboration with the Russian Exim Bank. The Russian cars will operate on main lines only.

The agreement with the Russian-Hungarian alliance led by the Transmashholding Company includes the supply of the 1,300 vehicles.

The contract includes the manufacture and supply of 800 air-conditioned vehicles, including 500 air-conditioned third class carriages, which is a new service that is offered to passengers for the first time in the history of the Egyptian railways. The contract also includes 180 second-class air conditioned cars, 90 first-class air-conditioned cars and 30 air-conditioned buffet trolleys.

The rail authority began operating the first three Russian trains to join the fleet just before Eid Al-Adha, after President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi assigned them to transport passengers during the holidays.

The railway commissioned the trains to work on lines between Cairo to Alexandria as well as from Cairo to Aswan. The Russian train now operates alongside a fleet of Spanish, French, Romanian, German and Egyptian trains.



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Egyptian rail on track as first Russian trains arrive

Destabilization in eastern Med continues amid tension between France and Turkey

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:24

ISTANBUL: In the face of French President Emmanuel Macron's commitment to send temporary military reinforcements to the eastern Med, the region could turn into a scene of escalating disputes.

Now the key question is whether the row will be resolved through diplomatic negotiations or military retaliations amid a climate of tension.

French armed forces announced on Thursday that they will send two Rafale fighter jets and the naval frigate Lafayette to the region as a precaution against heightened tensions with Ankara, which were sparked by disagreements over Turkey's oil and gas exploration in the disputed waters.

Triggered by competing claims to natural gas reserves in the region, the quarrel escalated this week with the arrival of Turkish seismic research vessel Oruc Reis, escorted by warships, in a controversial area of the Mediterranean which Greece claims under its continental shelf.

"The situation in the eastern Mediterranean is worrying. Turkey's unilateral decisions on oil exploration are causing tensions. These must end in order to allow a peaceful dialogue between neighboring countries and allies within NATO," Macron tweeted on Wednesday in French and in Greek.

In the meantime, the defense forces of France and Greece launched joint military exercises in the eastern Med to the south of the Greek island of Crete, while Macron urged Brussels last month to impose sanctions against Turkey for what he calls "violation of sovereignty" in the disputed waters.

Turkey is planning to issue gas exploration and drilling licenses in the region between the Greek island of Crete and Cyprus. However, French Total is one of the prominent companies that signed a contract with Cyprus for searching and drilling eastern Med gas, but it suspended the operations in the region over the tensions.

An extraordinary meeting of the bloc's foreign affairs ministers will be convened on Friday to discuss the dispute between Greece and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean.

"There is a strong incentive for most of the parties in the region to contain the present escalation and find an off-ramp to the crisis. The danger of miscalculation or an accident sending the conflict in a direction no one

intends is rising to an unprecedented level,” Prof. Michael Tanchum, a senior fellow at the Austrian Institute of European and Security Policy (AIES), told Arab News.

Ankara, whose relations with Paris have already been undermined over the Libyan conflict, is determined to make no concession over its drilling activities in the region.

But it also keeping the door open for dialogue.

“Turkey wants to resolve its disagreement with Greece over energy exploration in the eastern Mediterranean through dialogue,” Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Wednesday. He added: “We want to reach political solutions through peaceful means in line with the international laws.”

According to Tanchum, both Turkey and Greece now have a good measure of the positions of the other relevant regional and European actors.

“Each has made its own calculus. While several EU actors are either neutral or slightly leaning toward Turkey, any further action by Ankara would turn the EU unanimously against Turkey,” he said.

Tanchum suggests that a third party needs to play an active role in defusing the current stand-off between Turkey and Greece.

“Perhaps the most hopeful sign now is the constructive efforts of the United States to achieve a cease-fire and perhaps buffer zone in Libya. The de-linking of flashpoints is necessary and the progress in Libya can create an opening for the EU’s Foreign Affairs Council emergency meeting tomorrow,” he said.

He added: “There is a window now for a face-saving climbdown. But that opportunity will need to be introduced by a third party with sufficient vision, diplomatic skill and commitment.”

A recent maritime deal signed between Greece and Egypt has also angered Ankara.

According to Gabriel Mitchell, director of external relations and policy fellow at the Israeli Institute for Regional Foreign Policies (Mitvim), it is difficult to imagine the EU delivering a statement that is substantially different from previous statements it has made on the issue – essentially supporting Greek sovereignty and calling for the parties to engage in direct negotiations.

“EU member states are relatively divided on this issue and how best to approach it,” he told Arab News.

The foreign ministers of Greece and the US – Nikos Dendias and Mike Pompeo – will meet in Vienna on Friday to discuss tensions in the eastern Mediterranean.

Mitchell thinks that this will be an important opportunity for the US to

reaffirm its support for Greece and call the parties to the negotiating table.

“But with everything that is going on, both globally and domestically, it is hard to say whether Pompeo can offer much more. Greece will likely need to rely on a combination of regional, European and American support. Still, a strong, declarative statement by Pompeo would likely be enough to halt the current escalation in the Eastern Mediterranean,” he said.

Although both Athens and Ankara have declared their desire for direct negotiations, Mitchell considers that each side is at the same time trying to strengthen its position against the other and score some domestic points.

“This increases the risk that one or more Eastern Mediterranean actors miscalculate the other side, and there is an accidental or unintentional escalation,” he said.



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Erdogan says only solution in Mediterranean is dialogue
Erdogan: Turkey resumes energy exploration in east Mediterranean