

Beirut emergency law sparks fears of army crackdown

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:08

BEIRUT: Lebanon's parliament has approved a two-week state of emergency in Beirut that gives sweeping powers to the army, prompting warnings of a crackdown on protests in the city.

The green light for the tough new measures comes 10 days after a deadly explosion in the capital killed more than 170 people, wounded 6,500 others and forced the Cabinet to step down.

In its first meeting since the blast, Lebanon's parliament on Thursday backed legislation allowing the army to ban gatherings deemed threats to national security and expanding the jurisdiction of military courts over civilians.

Human rights groups warned that the emergency law will give the Lebanese military extensive powers to quell protests and leave activists at the mercy of military courts.

The Lebanese parliament met in Beirut's Unesco Palace complex after its headquarters were heavily damaged in the explosion.

Opinion

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

A decree imposing a state of emergency was issued by Prime Minister Hassan Diab's government the day after the explosion.

The government resigned five days later amid angry protests demanding "revenge" for the blast, which has been widely blamed on negligence by the authorities.

Sources told Arab News that the Lebanese judiciary is waiting on a report by French experts who joined rescue efforts and investigated the site of the explosion to determine its causes.

The Lebanese judiciary concluded that "according to investigations with officials under arrest and witnesses, the incident was due to negligence that allowed the storing of 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate in a warehouse in the port for seven years without taking precautionary measures."

A source said that "the investigator in charge of the case has listened to the testimony of security officials."

Investigators will also interview former public works ministers Ghazi Aridi,

Ghazi Zaiter and Youssef Fenianos along with former justice and finance ministers, including Salim Jreissati and Maj. Gen. Ashraf Rifi.

Meanwhile, complications surround the appointment of a judicial investigator.

Arab News has been told that the Higher Judicial Council considered appointing judge Tareq Al-Bitar, who was proposed by the caretaker justice minister. However, Al-Bitar declined the role.

Sources said that "Al-Bitar later was pressured by two Free Patriotic Movement ministers to retrieve his resignation, which led to the Higher Judicial Council expressing reservations over his nomination."

Eight MPs – Nadim Gemayel, Paula Yacoubian, Sami Gemayel, Elias Hankach, Michel Moawad, Neemat Frem, Henry Helou, and Marwan Hmadeh – have resigned following the explosion. The parliament session was boycotted by members of the Lebanese Forces bloc.

Protesters gathered near the Unesco Palace during the parliamentary session, chanting slogans and waving Lebanese flags.

Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri accused MPs who resigned of neglecting their duties while "the country is dying right in front of us."

He called for the prompt formation of a new government "with a primary goal of fighting corruption and restoring Lebanese unity."

The parliamentary session lasted for only 40 minutes but brought divisions between those calling for a parliamentary investigative committee and others demanding an international inquiry.

MP Usama Saad warned that the state of emergency will hinder public freedom.

"At this time we want the army and security forces to be a support to the people rather than being coercive agencies," he said.

The White Shirts medical group, which treats people injured during protests, claimed that security forces had used lethal "shredded" bullets – an explosive projectile that causes massive internal injuries – against protesters in recent days.

The volunteer group held a press conference to show X-rays detailing shocking injuries among protesters taken to hospital.

Former health minister Mohammed Jawad Khalifeh was among the first to warn on Twitter against use of the bullets.

Hundreds of volunteers gathered in Martyrs' Square to help remove rubble and broken glass from houses, office blocks and shops throughout the devastated city.

More than 180 aircraft had carried emergency aid to Lebanon by Thursday. The relief operation is being coordinated by the Lebanese army, which is storing

and distributing material including food, tents and medical supplies.

After arriving in Beirut on Thursday, David Hale, US state undersecretary for political affairs, said in a statement: "Economic and fiscal reforms are needed, and an end to dysfunctional governments and empty promises.

"All Lebanese want to see a Lebanon guided by the Lebanese people that fulfills their ambitions and needs, not those of others.

"The US is ready to support a Lebanese government that reflects and responds to the will of the people, and genuinely commits and acts for real change."

Hale said that the FBI will join Lebanese and international investigators at the invitation of the Lebanese "in order to help answer questions that I know everyone has about the circumstances that led up to this explosion and to work with Lebanon in this regard."

Florence Parly, France's armed forces minister, also arrived in the capital, while Mohammad Jawad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, is due to arrive on Friday.



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FBI to join Beirut blast probe, Lebanon must end 'empty promises' Macron warns
Iran: Don't meddle in Lebanon's fightback from Beirut blast

Search stepped up after Egyptian ferry sinking

Thu, 2020-08-13 23:28

CAIRO: Four people returning from a wedding are believed to have drowned after a ferry sank in a canal in Egypt's northern El-Beheira governorate on Thursday.

Families of the victims gathered at the scene, outside the village of Dimishli, after rescue teams found the body of one of the passengers.

Three passengers were rescued from the canal and taken to Menoufia General Hospital.

Rescue teams identified one of the victims as Muhammad Abdullah Al-Sarsi, 27, whose body was found about 4 km away.

The Egyptian Public Prosecution ordered an investigation into the sinking as well as a report on the condition of the ferry.

Maj. Gen. Hisham Amna, El-Beheira's governor, visited the scene and confirmed there were seven passengers on board.

The three still missing are Muhammad Abdullah Abdul Qadir, Ahmed Abdel Fattah Shendi and Mahmoud Hamdi Shendi.

The governor said that he directed security and rescue teams to the site to provide support.

Amna announced 10,000 Egyptian pounds (\$628) of aid to families of the victims, and said efforts would be stepped up to recover the bodies.

MP Mahmoud Saad claimed the ferry sank because it was overloaded.

Equipment on board included cookware, which added to the already heavy load.

Saad said that a review of ferry control and maintenance is needed urgently.

The MP said he will submit a statement on the circumstances of the accident and demand action.

"There must be a ferry supervisor who does checks before it sets off. There also needs to be nearby river rescue points, periodic maintenance, worker training and a work permit requirement," he said.

"This is not the first ferry accident and we have repeatedly talked about the need for tighter control. We need regular ferry inspections," he added.

Ahmed Ismail, an eyewitness, told Arab News that the ferry passengers were returning from a wedding. The wedding cook and his assistants were among those on the vessel.



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Upgrade on track as Russian trains join Egypt rail fleetEgypt, Iraq move 'hazardous materials' amid safety drive

[Political novices drawn to rally against Netanyahu](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 02:07

JERUSALEM: In a summer of protests against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the accusations of corruption and calls for him to resign could be accompanied by another familiar refrain: "I've never done this before."

The boisterous rallies have brought out a new breed of first-time protesters – young, middle-class Israelis who have little history of political activity but feel that Netanyahu's scandal-plagued rule and his handling of the coronavirus crisis have robbed them of their futures. It is a phenomenon that could have deep implications for the country's leaders.

"It's not only about the COVID-19 and the government's handling of the situation," said Shachar Oren, a 25-year-old protester. "It's also about the people that cannot afford to eat and cannot afford to live. I am one of those people."

Oren is among the thousands of people who gather outside Netanyahu's official residence in Jerusalem several times a week, calling on the longtime leader to resign. The young demonstrators have delivered a boost of momentum to a movement of older, more established protesters who have been saying Netanyahu should step down when he is on trial for corruption charges.

The loose-knit movements have joined forces to portray Netanyahu as an out-of-touch leader, with the country's most bloated government in history and seeking hundreds of thousands of dollars of tax benefits for himself at a time when the coronavirus outbreak is raging and unemployment has soared to over 20 percent.

Many of the young protesters have lost their jobs or seen their career prospects jeopardized. They have given the protests a carnival-like atmosphere, pounding on drums and dancing in the streets in colorful costumes while chanting vitriolic slogans against the prime minister.

Netanyahu has tried to dismiss the protesters as "leftists" or "anarchists." Erel Segal, a commentator close to the prime minister, has called the gatherings "a Woodstock of hatred."

Despite such claims, there are no signs that any opposition parties are organizing the gatherings. Politicians have been noticeably absent from most of the protests.

Israel has a long tradition of political protest, be it peace activists, West Bank settlers or ultra-Orthodox Jews. The new wave of protesters seems to be characterized by a broader, mainstream appeal.

"The partisan issue is totally missing, and the party organizations are not present," said Tamar Hermann, a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, a Jerusalem think tank and expert on protest movements.

Hermann said the protesters resemble many other protest movements around the world. "They are mostly middle class," she said. "And they were kicked out of work."

Oren, for instance, said he used to survive on a modest salary as a software

analyst thanks to training he received in an Israeli military high-tech unit. Then he moved into tutoring – offering lessons in English, computers and chess to schoolchildren.

He said things were not easy, but he was “too busy surviving” to think about political activity. That changed when the coronavirus crisis began in March.

Oren’s business crashed.

With unemployment soaring, Netanyahu and his rival, Benny Gantz, formed a coalition with 34 Cabinet ministers, the largest government in Israel’s history. Beyond the generous salaries, these ministers, many with vague titles, enjoy perks like drivers, security guards and office space, and can hand out jobs to cronies.

A Netanyahu ally dismissed reports that people were having trouble feeding their families as “BS.”

Oren said he became “furious,” and about two months ago, he went to his first protest against the nation’s leaders. “They are there because we gave them the power and want them to help us. And they’re not doing anything,” he explained.

Oren now treks to Jerusalem from his home in the city of Kfar Saba in central Israel, about an hour away, three times a week. He is easily recognizable with his poster that says “House of Corruption,” depicting Netanyahu in a pose similar to Kevin Spacey’s nefarious “House of Cards” character, Frank Underwood.

Oren says he does not belong to any political party or any of the movements organizing the rallies, but that the diverse group of activists all want similar things. “No to the corruption, the poverty, the detachment. We’re just saying enough,” he said.

University student Stav Piltz went through a similar evolution. Living in downtown Jerusalem near Netanyahu’s residence, she quickly noticed the demonstrations in her neighborhood when they began several months ago. She talked to protesters as well as local residents at the cafe where she waitressed before she was laid off.

She said she noticed a common theme. “They feel that something is very critical now in the political climate and no one is listening to the citizens and the pain we are experiencing,” she said.

But Piltz said the spark that drew her to protest was a national strike last month by the country’s social workers.

Piltz, herself a social work student, said she has a history of social activism but has never been involved with party politics. The collection of women, coming from different religious, political, ethnic and racial backgrounds, was a powerful sight. “This is where I saw how much power we have when we are together,” she said.

The demonstrations, which have gained strength in recent weeks, are the largest sustained wave of public protests since hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in 2011 to draw attention to the country's high cost of living. While those protests ultimately fizzled, two of their leaders entered parliament, and one, Itzik Shmuli, is now the country's welfare minister.

Both Piltz and Oren said they are determined to keep up their activities in the long term.

"People have nothing to lose. So it's very easy to go demonstrate these days, especially if you're young and you see no future here," Piltz said.

Hermann, the political analyst, said too many Israeli youths have been "politically ignorant" and that it is a "very good sign" for the country's democracy that people are becoming involved.

The leaders, however, may not be so pleased to face a politically aware young generation.

"They are much more difficult to be controlled while they gain political views and confidence," she said.



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Netanyahu's uneasy alliance seems headed toward collapse 'Your time is up': Thousands protest against Netanyahu over economy, corruption allegations

More tribal clashes in Sudanese city; death toll at 25

Author:

Thu, 2020-08-13 02:01

CAIRO, Juba: Tribal clashes that have gripped a Sudanese port city over the past three days have killed at least 25 people and wounded scores, a doctors' association said on Wednesday.

The fighting in Port Sudan in the eastern province of Red Sea erupted earlier this week between the Beni Amer tribe and the displaced Nuba tribe. It was not the first time the two tribes clashed in Port Sudan or elsewhere in the county.

The clashes prompted local authorities on Tuesday to impose a round-the-clock curfew across the city. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok said on Wednesday that troops have been deployed to Port Sudan to help contain the fighting.

He urged political parties in eastern Sudan to cooperate with local authorities to "protect security and social peace."

The Sudan Doctors' Committee said the clashes continued until late on Tuesday. The death toll climbed to 25, after 13 people were initially reported killed on Tuesday, it said. At least 87 others were wounded.

The committee is part of the Sudanese Professionals' Association that spearheaded nationwide protests against longtime leader Omar Bashir. The military ousted Bashir amid the protests in April last year.

Local media reported that several houses and shops were set on fire amid the violence in Port Sudan.

The tensions between the two tribes date back to May 2019 in the eastern city of Qadarif, mainly over water and other resources. The clashes flared up in August last year in Port Sudan, when at least three dozen people from both sides were killed. They also clashed in January in the port city, when nine people were killed.

The tribal violence poses a significant challenge to efforts of Sudan's transitional authorities to stabilize the country amid a fragile transition to democracy.



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Sudan protesters rally one year after bloody crackdown Heavy floods ravaged tens of thousands in Sudan

[Libya's GNA govt detains 35 Egyptian fishermen](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-08-12 22:02

CAIRO: The fate of at least 35 Egyptian fishermen hangs in the balance after they were arrested by the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) on Nov. 2 last year.

The families of the fishermen have appealed to the Egyptian government to step up their efforts to secure their freedom as Cairo has been working on their release since November.

Little is known about the fate of the fishermen in Libya other than their location, after it was leaked to Egyptian authorities that they were held in the Turmina Prison, which is affiliated with the GNA.

The head of the Fishermen's Syndicate in Kafr El-Sheikh, Ahmed Nassar, said they had not been able to communicate with the fishermen since last November and after their disappearance they came to learn that the GNA authorities had detained them.

The GNA is still holding the fishermen without a clear accusation to justify their detention. Nassar said that the fishermen were not fishing in Libyan territory without a permit.

Nassar explained that the fishermen were working on Libyan boats. Alongside them were a number of colleagues working on boats that belong to the Al-Wefaq government. They were not approached by anyone unlike their detained colleagues who were arrested and sent to prison without being charged with any crime.

The Fishermen's Syndicate chief said that people had called on the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the government, and the consular section had also been contacted about the matter.

Many of the detained fishermen come from Kafr El-Sheikh, while others come from Abu Qir in the governorate of Alexandria.

The fishermen had been supporting families of up to eight members.

Egyptian authorities say they are exerting great efforts to bring the fishermen back safely, while the fishermen's families continue to demand safety and justice for the men.



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2 Egyptian fishermen killed by Tunisian navy