

Construction sector faces severe contraction in Lebanon

Mon, 2020-06-08 23:14

BEIRUT: A prominent member of the Lebanese engineering and construction sector has warned of dire consequences if the industry collapses.

Maroun El-Helou, chairman of the Syndicate of Contractors of Public Works and Buildings, said: "The collapse, if it occurs, will directly affect 700 contracting companies, 300 consulting firms, and 15,000 engineers working in companies or as freelancers in the public and private sectors. The collapse will affect 3,000 engineering offices and subcontractors and more than 150,000 administrators, technicians, and workers, in addition to workers in all other construction-related jobs."

El-Helou warned that a collapse could lead to "an exodus of skilled and specialized manpower as well as unemployment and starvation in Lebanon."

The accumulated amount owed to contractors, engineers and consultants by the Lebanese government is approximately \$600 million. El-Helou said: "The irregular payments, plus the lack of a clear roadmap for state action in light of the exceptional conditions that Lebanon is experiencing has put all projects in limbo. This will be directly reflected by the decline of environmental, health and living conditions. The investments and projects will be lost because of the government's lack of seriousness in dealing with the burning issues."

Most of the projects carried out by contractors under the Council for Development and Reconstruction are related to infrastructure such as roads and water.

El-Helou said, "There are 18 projects under construction and we demanded the cancellation of contracts for these projects. The projects are worth about \$150 million and were funded locally. They were cancelled due to the failure to clear the bills which amounted to approximately \$40 million for nearly two years. The Ministry of Finance did not transfer funds in 2018 and 2019. We proposed that the state pay half of the amount and complete the projects, but the Council for Development and Reconstruction suggested that cancelling contracts for incomplete projects was the worst possible solution, because it would result in the loss of money spent on the projects without achieving the desired goals."

He added: "There are projects that the government must pay for in dollars, but the payment is very late and is made in Lebanese pounds according to the official exchange rate of LBP1,507 (to the dollar). This led to the suspension of work, increased losses, and (led to) a rise in the dismissal of engineers and workers."

The projects suffered a financial setback more than two years ago because of

irregular payments by the Ministry of Finance. "The major catastrophe that most affected the entire engineering sector was the actions of banks in terms of imposing restrictions on the movement of funds for withdrawal or transfer," El-Helou said.

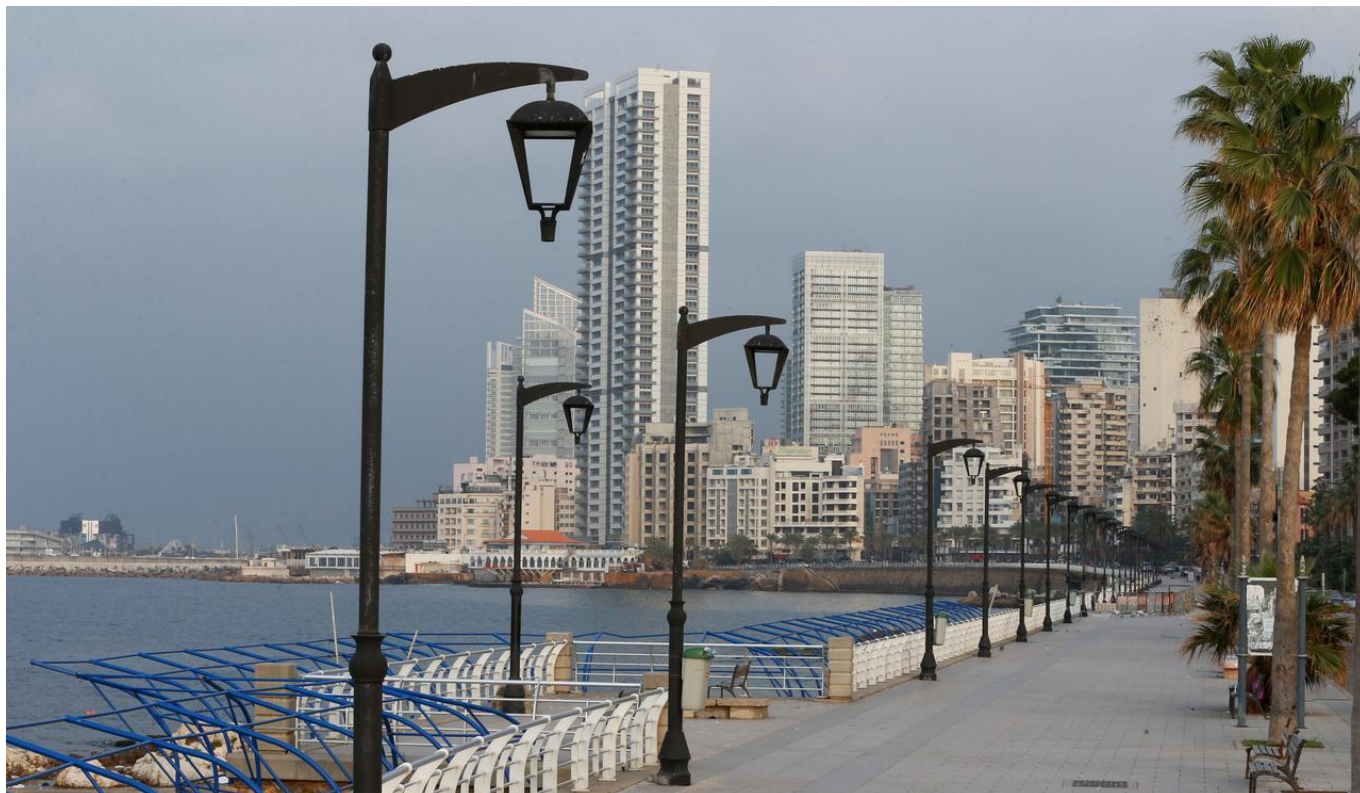
"Today the dollar exchange rate has led to an increase in the high price of materials, the scarcity of materials and the inability to import them. That has in turn led to the suspension of work in most projects and dismissing engineers, employees, and workers by more than 50 percent."

As for projects to which the state contributes 25 percent of financing, and to which international institutions such as the World Bank, plus Arab and foreign funds contribute 75 percent, the Ministry of Finance "does not pay its share, which makes projects faltering, slow, and in danger of being stopped," according to El-Helou.

The Syndicate of Contractors of Public Works and Buildings has asked officials for solutions to the issues they face. Contractors became angry when Lebanon's financial public prosecutor summoned 30 contractors and engineers a week ago to investigate media reports and information on social media regarding suspicious deals.

"We want accountability and transparency," El-Helou said, "and if fraud occurs, we will not protect anyone but we will appear before the competent judiciary and the Audit Bureau. The method of summoning without any documented information that warrants an investigation is unacceptable. Such action is not based on the professionalism and merit that the Lebanese judiciary has always enjoyed."

He added: "Targeting and defaming the sector without hard evidence is tantamount to demolishing the most important pillars of the national economy. It also weakens some 70 professions directly related to the work of engineers and contractors at a time when we are in dire need of reversing the faltering and traumatic economic cycle which underlies our political, financial and monetary problems."



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Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united
Lebanon overcomes sectarian strife as army declares zero tolerance

[UN says ‘encouraged’ by Libyan calls to resume peace talks](#)

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sun, 2020-06-07 19:00

CAIRO: The United Nations on Sunday said it was encouraged by calls to resume talks on ending the conflict in Libya, a day after Egypt announced a unilateral peace initiative supported by the eastern Libyan camp.

The UN support mission in Libya said the fighting over the capital, Tripoli, for more than a year “has proven, beyond any doubt, that any war among Libyans is a losing war.”

The statement urged Libyan parties to “engage swiftly and constructively” in the UN-brokered military talks aimed at reaching a lasting cease-fire

agreement, "accompanied by firm implementation of and respect for the recently renewed UN Arms Embargo on Libya."

The UN said more than 16,000 Libyans were displaced in recent days by the latest bout of fighting in the capital and the town of Tarhouna, which lies 72 kilometers (45 miles) southeast.

Oil-rich Libya has been in turmoil since 2011 when a civil war toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi, who was later killed.

Last year, the commander of the eastern Libyan forces, Khalifa Haftar, launched a campaign to capture Tripoli from the UN-supported but weak government there. After months of stalemate, the clashes intensified as foreign backers of both sides increasingly intervened.

Egypt's initiative to end the fighting came on the heels of major losses by Haftar's forces in western Libya in recent weeks.

Libyan Crimes Watch, a UK-based rights group monitoring the Libyan war, said Turkish drone strikes by Tripoli-allied forces hit vehicles carrying fleeing residents of the town of Tarhouna on Saturday, killing at least 10 civilians including two children and wounding another.

A spokesman for the Tripoli-allied forces did not immediately respond to calls seeking comment.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Saturday announced his initiative to end the civil war, saying the road map includes a cease-fire starting Monday and is meant to pave the way for elections in the North African country.

Haftar is backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia. The Tripoli-allied militias are aided by Turkey, Qatar and Italy.

Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte spoke by phone Sunday with the Egyptian president. Conte's office said the conversation centered on "regional stability, with particular attention to the need for a rapid cease-fire and a return to the negotiating table in Libya."

There was no comment on the Egyptian initiative from either the UN-supported government in Tripoli or its foreign backers.

Nevertheless, the UN support mission in Libya said it was encouraged by the recent calls to resume talks.

"The Mission, as ever, stands ready to convene a fully inclusive Libyan-led and Libyan-owned political process," it said.



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UN: Numerous reports of looting in Libyan towns retaken by Turkey-backed GNA
Egypt's El-Sisi: Foreign interference in Libya threatens stability in region

[Lebanon overcomes sectarian strife as army declares zero tolerance](#)

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Sun, 2020-06-07 22:54

BEIRUT: Following a night of violence, calm was restored in Beirut and other parts of Lebanon on Sunday, with the army warning against dragging the country into chaos that could endanger "national unity."

Riots broke out in central Beirut and other areas after videos circulated on social media showing some supporters of the Amal Movement, and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah, chanting sectarian insults targeting revered religious figures.

The overnight violence left 25 soldiers injured. The Lebanese Army issued a statement vowing action against those who jeopardize the "state's security." Riot police fired tear gas at protesters, after Saturday's attempt to reboot anti-government demonstrations quickly degenerated into rioting and stone-throwing confrontations between opposing camps. Lebanese troops deployed to separate the rival groups, and the tensions eventually subsided before dawn on Sunday.

Protesters also called for Hezbollah's disarmament. According to the army's statement, seven people – four Syrians, one Palestinian and two Sudanese nationals – were arrested for rioting.

All political and religious parties unanimously condemned the sectarian incident and sought to contain the strife.

President Michel Aoun called on all political and religious leaders and citizens, who lived through the events of 1975-1976, to take all possible measures against such elements to ensure national cohesion.

Aoun warned: "Any security setback – if it occurs – will not be in anyone's interest."

The head of the Bar Association, Melhem Khalaf, said: "Were the 17 years of senseless fighting, 200,000 deaths and displacement of 1 million people was not enough?"

As people in the street and on social media expressed their anger and disgust at what happened during the civil protest, it was announced that a protest scheduled to take place on Sunday outside the US Embassy in Beirut had been canceled.

The protest, which was going to be organized by Hezbollah supporters, was to denounce US interference in Lebanon's internal affairs.

Dr. Ziad Abdel Samad, researcher in development and public affairs, told Arab News: "Indeed, people are repulsed by what happened, but it will not prevent them from taking to the streets again to demand their rights."

He said: "The movement that resumed on Saturday is a continuation of the Oct. 17 revolution. People are free to voice their demands. The majority raised economic slogans, and if some called for disarming Hezbollah, that does not mean they should be accused of treachery. Saturday's demonstrations surprised the authorities, so they decided to respond with violence in which they reminded us that they can repeat what they did on May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah militarily seized control of Beirut after clashing with the Future Movement as well as the Progressive Socialist Party in Mount Lebanon. About 100 people were killed then."

Abdel Samad added: "What happened on Saturday will not eliminate the civil movement, which is committed to its demands and to pressuring for the reestablishment of the authority by forming a government with powers that allow it to draft a new electoral law, as happened in Tunisia."

He said: "The current government is unable to accomplish anything. Even the negotiation between the government and the International Monetary Fund were not serious. It seems as if the government, and especially Hezbollah, do not want to resort to this option to save the country's economy. They want to resort to their choice: Iran. In this sense, Hezbollah does not care about Lebanon – either it takes control or the country gets burned down."

Public affairs expert and activist Dr. Walid Fakhreddin told Arab News: "Hezbollah previously caused such tensions four or five times since the protests started on Oct. 17. However, this is the first time this happened

under the government of Hassan Diab. This means that Diab's government is in crisis, and this is Hezbollah's way (of operating) when it does not want a government to continue."

Fakhreddin added: "On the other hand, no one is ready to stand up to Hezbollah. I believe Diab's government is unable to continue and will not manage to obtain funds to prevent economic collapse."

He said whatever happened on Saturday was a response to the protesters' demand to disarm Hezbollah "because another protest with this demand took place a few days ago outside the Palace of Justice in Beirut, and Hezbollah did not respond that time."

He added: "I think Hezbollah was surprised that people took to the streets despite being intimidated and amid a pandemic."

Political analyst Ghassan Hajjar, though, told Arab News: "What happened is new. It is not an extension of Oct. 17, but rather it will mark the start of a new stage.

"Hezbollah is in crisis more than ever because it believes the threat against it is increasing and has become direct. The civil movement is targeting Hezbollah by raising the demand for its disarmament. Hezbollah is afraid of what is introduced regionally by federations that are tearing apart the Iranian axis.

"No one won on Saturday – not the government, the Hezbollah nor the protesters. Everyone lost," he added. "I do not think that toppling the Diab's government needs these clashes. Bringing it down requires a political decision by Hezbollah. It is true that there is talk about a government change, but it will only happen if Hezbollah is convinced that Saad Hariri will return to head the government and control the Sunnis.

"Hariri's return to the government is in the interest of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) after the losses it suffered as it does not have a Sunni cover, and the Shiite cover is not enough if the FPM considered the republic's presidency. However, no agreement with Hariri has been reached."



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Protests set to resume in Lebanon but activists are no longer united
Troops use tear gas as violent clashes rock Beirut

[Yemen army troops briefly capture major city in Abyan](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-06-07 21:54

AL-MUKALLA: Heavy fighting broke out on Sunday between government forces and separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) troops in Yemen's southern Abyan province after loyalists attacked a major city there, local media reports and residents said.

Army troops and allied tribesmen briefly recaptured Ja'ar town after a brief and abrupt attack on separatists who retreated to neighboring areas under their control. Residents told Arab News that separatists pushed loyalists out

of Ja'ar three hours later after regrouping and getting reinforcements from Abyan's capital.

"Government forces entered the town at nearly 11 a.m. and subsequently set up checkpoints before being forced into retreating after a counterattack by STC troops," a resident, who preferred to remain anonymous, said.

Clashes have reportedly killed several combatants and civilians. Pro-government figures posted images on social media of captured forces and military equipment abandoned by separatists. STC media broadcast footage of military vehicles seized from government forces after the clashes.

The latest circle of violence in southern Yemen began in April, when the STC announced self-rule in Aden and other southern provinces and vowed to block the return of the internationally-recognized government to Aden, prompting the government into ordering its forces to push toward Aden to expel the separatists.

Separatists managed to fight back despite the relentless attacks.

In the north of the country Yemen's defense ministry said on Sunday that army troops and allied tribesmen had liberated a number of mountainous locations in Sanaa's Nehim district following heavy clashes with the Iran-backed Houthis.

The Armed Forces Media Center reported that government forces, backed by air support from Saudi-led coalition warplanes, pushed Houthis out of several "strategic" locations in Najed Al-Ateq in Nehim, east of Sanaa.

Brig. Mohammed Mashali, an army commander in Nehim, was quoted as saying that government forces liberated 11 km in Nehim after killing and injuring dozens of Houthis, adding that army troops seized three vehicles, weapons and ammunition after the clashes.

Coalition warplanes targeted Houthi gatherings and reinforcements, destroying eight military vehicles on their way to the battlefield in Nehim, the Yemeni commander said.

Government forces have escalated attacks on Houthis in Nehim to recapture strategic areas that have fallen to the militia in the last couple of months. Fighting in Yemen has intensified since early this year, despite many calls from local health workers for a humanitarian truce to allow them to fight the spread of coronavirus.

Coronavirus deaths in government-controlled areas have topped 111, amid a severe shortage of testing kits at local laboratories.

The Aden-based national coronavirus committee on Saturday recorded 13 new COVID-19 cases in Aden, Taiz, Lahj, Abyan, Hadramout, Marib, Mahra, Dhale and Shabwa, bringing the total number to confirmed cases to 482, including 23 recoveries.

Laboratories in the province of Hadramout have run out of testing kits since

Wednesday, when heavy rains destroyed the main road that links the provincial capital with Aden, disrupting the arrival of testing kits.

“We could not transport the province’s shipment of PRC machine testing kits from Aden due to floods,” a local government official, who wished to remain anonymous, told Arab News. “We alternatively use rapid tests for diagnosing coronavirus cases.”



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Eritrean navy urged to free dozens of Yemeni fishermen from custodySaudi Arabia extends mine-clearance project in Yemen

[Erdogan’s former ally Davutoglu prepares opposition alliances in Turkey – report](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-06-07 20:35

LONDON: Former Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu said he is ready to cooperate with opposition parties to stand against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), [Al Arabiya reported](#).

Davutoglu, once a close ally of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now leads an opposition party after splitting from the AKP.

Davutoglu was speaking at a meeting on Saturday with members of his Future Party as it prepared for possible early parliamentary or presidential elections, the report said.

He said Turkey needed a new political vision and that the current government was unfit to manage daily crises.

"Turkey cannot bear a policy that sets barriers between political parties," Davutoglu said according to the report. "The country's future and the nation's peace are not entitled to one party."

He also criticized the government's failure to manage the COVID-19 crisis.

Turkey's next elections are scheduled for 2023, but speculation has been mounting that they could be called as early as November.



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Hard-hit Turkey's easing of lockdown criticized Erdogan-Davutoglu standoff before launch of splinter party