

Syria tycoon lashes out at state in fresh accusations

Author:

AFP

ID:

1589724438856345700

Sun, 2020-05-17 12:24

DAMASCUS: Top Syria tycoon Rami Makhoulf on Sunday said the regime was piling pressure on him and threatening to arrest him and close his telecommunications empire unless he hands over profits.

Makhoulf, a first cousin of Syrian President Bashar Assad, made the latest accusations against the Damascus government – the third since April – in a 16-minute Facebook video.

The head of Syria's largest mobile operator, Syriatel, has been embroiled in a power struggle with the Assad government since last summer when authorities seized his Al-Bustan charity and dissolved militias affiliated to him.

When the finance ministry in December froze the assets of several businessmen over tax evasion and illicit enrichment, the Syrian press said Makhoulf, his wife and companies were included.

On Sunday he said authorities are "demanding we forfeit our company's profits" and hand over "120 percent of the profits to the state or else we will be arrested."

Failure to comply, he said, will prompt authorities to revoke Syriatel's license.

At the end of April and again in early May, Makhoulf, who had kept a low profile throughout Syria's nine-year-war, posted online scathing attacks against authorities.

He said they were demanding \$185 million in payments from Syriatel, urging Assad to intervene and reschedule the payment.

Makhoulf, who also has stakes in electricity, oil and real estate, has also accused security services of detaining employees to intimidate him into stepping down from his businesses.

According to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, around 40 Syriatel employees and 19 from Al-Bustan have been arrested since April.

Condemning the arrests, Makhoulf claimed authorities would release the employees if he paid the \$185 million and resigned as head of Syriatel.

Makhoulf said he would be willing to pay the amount demanded by authorities but the issue of his resignation was a red line.

"Whoever thinks I will resign under these conditions, doesn't know me," he said.

Makhoulf has long been seen as a pillar of the Syrian regime since Assad rose to power in 2000, succeeding his father Hafez.

But rumors have swirled in recent months of souring ties between Makhoulf and Assad, who is spearheading an anti-graft campaign in a bid to shore up state finances.

In an interview with Syrian state TV in October, Assad said that he has

“called on everyone in the private sector who has squandered state funds to return the money.”



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Syria](#)

[Rami Makhlouf](#)

[Bashar Al-Assad](#)

Syrian tycoon Makhlouf says security forces are arresting his employees

[Lebanon army says arrests 16 over 'illegal' currency ring](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1589649172402176700

Sat, 2020-05-16 16:55

BEIRUT: Sixteen people in Lebanon, mostly Syrians, have been arrested for money transfers and “illegal” currency exchange operations, the army said Saturday, amid a government crackdown on exchange rate manipulation. The army said it had arrested 13 Syrians and three Lebanese, who were carrying out “money transfers and illegal currency exchange transactions, using licensed companies and offices as a front,” in a statement. The suspects used an “unlicensed online platform belonging to one of the financial companies,” to carry out the financial transactions, the statement said.

The Lebanese pound has been pegged to the dollar at 1,507 since 1997 but the country’s worst economic crisis in decades has seen its value plunge to beyond 4,000 on the black market.

The government has sought to stem the fall by launching a nationwide crackdown on money changers it alleges are exchanging the pound for dollars at a rate weaker than the 3,200 per dollar permitted by the central bank. During the arrests, the army seized “significant sums” but also computers and laptops used in these operations, the statement added, specifying that the arrests took place in twelve regions across Lebanon.

The network sent dollars with motorists across the border to Syria, specifically to the northwestern province of Idlib, a security official said, referring to a region controlled by Al-Qaeda-linked extremists and allied rebels.

After land borders closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, the network started using an “illegal online platform” controlled by a Lebanese money changer, the official added.

Security forces this week arrested that suspect, and found “hundreds of thousands of dollars” stashed in his Beirut home, he said.

Investigations later led to a Syrian residing in Lebanon who was also arrested for involvement in the plot along with several of his Lebanese and

Syrian affiliates, according to the official.
Lebanon has long been a conduit for foreign currency entering war-torn Syria, a country heavily sanctioned by the US and Europe.
The value of the Syrian currency has also fallen markedly.
Lebanon is in the thick of its worst economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war, compounded by the coronavirus epidemic.
A liquidity crunch has seen banks in Lebanon halt dollar transfers and withdrawals.
Dozens of money exchange offices have been raided by security forces in recent weeks after their personnel allegedly purchased dollars at black market rates.
The head of the money changers' union, Mahmoud Mrad and the central bank's director of monetary operations, Mazen Hamdan, are among the many arrested for alleged exchange rate manipulation.
Commenting on charges against Hamdan, the central bank denied any "manipulation in currency exchange markets."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Lebanon](#)

Foreign workers seek evacuation from Lebanon
Lebanon central bank official probed over currency crash

Foreign workers seek evacuation from Lebanon

Author:

AFP

ID:

1589625047710608200

Sat, 2020-05-16 16:22

BEIRUT: Foreign workers in Lebanon are seeking repatriation because the country's dire economic situation has left employers unable to pay them.

Many Lebanese people have ditched their foreign domestic help to avoid the cost of repatriating them to their home countries, or returned them to the employment agencies they were recruited from.

Domestic workers have also run away after employers stopped paying their salaries, seeking refuge in the embassies of their home countries in their bid to be evacuated.

There are more than 150,000 foreigners working legally in Lebanon, and 80,000 working illegally.

"We received videotapes of the detention of some 26 Filipino female workers, including a pregnant woman, in a building adjacent to their country's embassy in the Hadath area in the southern suburb of Beirut more than 35 days ago," Bassam Kantar, a member of Lebanon's National Human Rights Commission, which includes the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (LNHRC-CPT), told Arab News. "They were kept in a room in poor conditions. We visited the embassy and talked to the officials. There are more than 100 other workers inside the consulate awaiting repatriation."

Kantar said that the LNHRC-CPT had been contacted by other foreigners requesting repatriation, especially those who were working illegally. "The LNHRC-CPT contacted Lebanese General Security and it decided to exempt the employees from paying the residency allowance and fines. But it is unable to return them to their countries because it is the responsibility of their embassies."

He said that there was cooperation between the International Organization for Migration and Lebanese General Security to transfer such workers through planes belonging to airlines of other countries that were carrying workers of other nationalities.

Some airlines refused to send empty planes to Lebanon due to huge losses, he said, but explained the biggest problem related to workers from countries with which Lebanon had no diplomatic relations.

Bangladeshi janitors at RAMCO are still waiting for the company's promise to pay their salaries in dollars, not in Lebanese pounds, based on the official

dollar exchange rate of LBP1,515.

Dozens of these workers protested at the company's premises last week, and Kantar described the firm's behavior as "modern-day slavery."

The General Directorate of General Security announced on Saturday that it had started organizing trips to evacuate foreign workers willing to return voluntarily to their countries in coordination with the relevant departments and embassies.

The directorate said that, starting May 20, the repatriation of Egyptian and Ethiopian nationals would begin through Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut, and that coordination was also taking place with those concerned to secure additional flights for other nationalities.

Separately, more than 1,000 Syrian workers and their families who tried to leave Lebanon because they could no longer afford to live there have been stuck at border points after Damascus refused to allow them in. They have been forced to sleep in the open, without food or drink.

"These people live in the open, and they are starving," a security source at the Al-Masnaa border crossing told Arab News. "Lebanon cannot do anything for them except offer humanitarian assistance, while the Syrian regime does not want to open the borders for them yet. They are chasing freight cars that cross the borders between the two countries to request a loaf of bread or a drop of drinking water."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[economy](#)

[Lebanon](#)

Lebanon central bank official probed over currency crash
Crisis-hit Lebanon ready to float pound after aid: Finance minister

[Over 250 global artists urge Israel to end Gaza blockade](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1589635068901128400

Sat, 2020-05-16 13:15

PARIS: More than 250 global artists and writers including rocker Peter Gabriel, director Ken Loach and actor Viggo Mortensen have appealed to Israel to stop the "siege" of Gaza, saying the coronavirus epidemic could have a devastating effect in "the world's largest open air prison."

"Long before the global outbreak of COVID-19 threatened to overwhelm the already devastated health care system in Gaza, the UN had predicted that the blockaded coastal strip would be unlivable by 2020," the online letter said. "With the pandemic, Gaza's almost two million inhabitants, predominantly refugees, face a mortal threat in the world's largest open-air prison," it added.

Other signatories included poet Taha Adnan, Canadian writer Naomi Klein and British group Massive Attack.

The Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when the Islamist movement Hamas started controlling the enclave.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since but reached a truce in late 2018 that was renewed after successive flare-ups last year.

"Well before the ongoing crisis, Gaza's hospitals were already stretched to breaking point through lack of essential resources denied by Israel's siege. Its health care system could not cope with the thousands of gunshot wounds, leading to many amputations," the artists said.

"Reports of the first cases of coronavirus in densely-populated Gaza are therefore deeply disturbing," they said.

"We back Amnesty International's call on all world governments to impose a military embargo on Israel until it fully complies with its obligations under international law."



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Gaza strip](#)

[Israel](#)

Saudi Cabinet condemns Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip

[Sudan inflation soars to 99% as food prices rise](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1589632370920971100

Sat, 2020-05-16 12:29

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese

Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar Al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.



Main category:

[Middle-East](#)

Tags:

[Sudan](#)

[Inflation](#)

Sudan extends Khartoum curfew to slow coronavirus spread
Sudan says US approves ambassador, first in two decades