

Lebanon's Berri urges government to halt dramatic collapse of currency

Fri, 2020-04-24 01:16

BEIRUT: The political conflict between Lebanon's speaker of parliament Nabih Berri, the government and circulars issued by the Central Bank regarding dollar transfer services has led to a new wave of chaos in the local financial market.

As the Central Bank issued a circular ordering all money transfer services to process dollar transfers in the Lebanese pound, the local currency hit a record low. On Thursday noon, the Lebanese lira significantly collapsed from 3,200 to 3,800 against the dollar.

The head of exchange houses in Lebanon, Mahmoud Mrad, told Arab News: "What happened is incomprehensible. People rushed to money transfer services to receive their money in dollars, just hours before the circular of the Central Bank enters into force, ordering money transfer services to issue cash in the local currency at a market rate and not the official rate."

He added: "At the same time, people also rushed to exchange houses to buy dollars, amid fears of a price increase as the political scene seems very unstable in the country and since people have lost confidence in the financial situation."

The demand for dollars on Thursday was "unprecedented," according to Mrad.

He said: "I personally sold \$200,000 to normal people and not to dealers. I cannot explain the situation. It smells fishy and it seems like there is an attempt to confuse the situation."

Mrad added: "Unlicensed money changers have highly contributed to the current situation by selling dollars at high prices after the closing of approved money changers' houses, without being punished by the state. They are arrested only to be set free later, without even confiscating their money. I personally told this to the interior minister."

On Thursday, people formed long queues outside money transfer businesses.

The gatherings violated the lockdown decision, which banned gatherings to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Lawmaker Faisal Karami said the surprising increase in the dollar price reminded him of what happened to his late uncle, former Prime Minister Omar Karami, in 1992 to bring him down.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab called on "eliminating all red lines protecting Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh and corruption."

He also warned that "the dollar game is the beginning of a social and maybe

even a security disaster.”

Meanwhile, Berri criticized the performance of the government: “The government must use its legal powers to stop the dramatic fall of the lira before it is too late.”

Berri stressed that the government cannot remain “an observer to the financial chaos, claiming to be very concerned about the people.”

Berri has criticized the government for referring draft laws to parliamentary sessions without passing them by parliamentary committees. The secretariat said: “The government must learn to send draft laws to the parliament before insulting it.”

A parliamentary session was suspended because of a lack of quorum, before the parliament could treat the draft law aiming to allocate 1,200 billion liras to support agriculture and industry, import raw material and provide soft loans to small and medium-sized enterprises.

Meetings between Salameh, President Michel Aoun and then Diab did not produce any immediate solutions to the crisis.

Diab is expected to announce what he described as “restrictive positions over the dollar crisis” after Friday’s ministerial session.

He complained about “a lack of coordination between the government and the governor of the Central Bank.”



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Lebanon's currency crashes amid financial turmoil, virusIMF urges Lebanon to enact crisis plan that rebuilds confidence

[Besieged Gazans anxious over new Israeli government's moves](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-04-24 00:07

GAZA CITY: Gazans fear that the new Israeli government's handling of the Gaza Strip could damage political agreements made between the government and Hamas.

Concerns are especially high with regard to understandings reached with Hamas on humanitarian issues and a prisoner exchange deal.

Israel's new "emergency" government is the fruit of a tough agreement and three elections within one year between the Likud party, headed by Benjamin Netanyahu, and the Blue and White party, headed by Benny Gantz.

The policies of this new government appeared to support annexing settlements in the West Bank.

However, the future relationship with Gaza remains unclear.

Among the most important provisions of the agreement to form the Netanyahu-Gantz government is to advance US President Donald Trump's peace plan, especially the issue of imposing Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and West Bank settlements from July.

Experts on Israeli affairs believe the government will be interested in accomplishing the annexation and use what remains of Trump's presidential term before elections in November.

FASTFACT

Adnan Abu Amer, an Israeli affairs columnist, said that the understandings are primarily an Israeli project, and that Benjamin Netanyahu is interested

in neutralizing all issues, including Gaza, and devoting attention to Iran and his internal problems.

It is expected to calm the Gaza issue and to prevent anything that hinders the US plan.

Hamas, which has assumed full control of Gaza since mid-2007, rushed after the Netanyahu-Gantz agreement to call for the formation of a “unified national strategy” to confront the “extremist Zionist blocs.” It is opposed – according to experts and observers – to further deterioration in Gaza, and therefore does not want a “military confrontation” with Israel.

In this regard, Musa Dudeen, a member of the Hamas political bureau, said that the movement is committed to understandings as long as Israel maintains its obligations.

Hamas and Israel reached agreements that stopped the tension on the borders and a sharp retreat in the momentum of the “Great Return March” in exchange for Israel allowing the flow of funds, and partly lifting restrictions imposed on exports and imports.

Regarding the future of these understandings, Dudeen said: “There are no fundamental differences between the leaders of the occupation, its parties and its governments. The ball is in the Israeli court regarding the understandings, including the prisoner exchange deal.”

Hamas seized four Israelis, including soldiers Shaul Aaron and Hadar Golden, in the 2014 war. While Israel maintains that they were killed, Hamas has not given any information on their situation.

Hamas is also holding Abraham Mengistu and Hashem Badawi Al-Sayyid, who hold Israeli citizenship. The first is Ethiopian and the second is Arab.

Adnan Abu Amer, an Israeli affairs columnist, said that the understandings are primarily an Israeli project, and that Netanyahu is interested in neutralizing all issues, including Gaza, and devoting attention to Iran and his internal problems.

According to Abu Amer, the estimate in Hamas was that a government formed by the Blue and White party headed by Gantz with the membership of generals would write a “death certificate” for the understandings.

But it seems that the movement’s fears have relatively declined with the formation of the new government, given that Netanyahu is able to subdue Gantz and his party.

“The presence of army commanders within the new government as a factor that may accelerate the prisoner exchange deal, not hinder it, in an attempt to win Israeli public opinion by showing its eagerness to recover their captured soldiers.” Abu Amer told Arab News.

Wadi Awawdeh, an expert on Israeli affairs based in Israel, agreed with Abu

Amer that Netanyahu feared developing understandings with Hamas and their impact on his political life, but today he may have found a “loss partner” in his agreement with Gantz, with whom he will share the “price” of any agreement or understandings with Hamas.

“The development of Israeli humanitarian and security understandings with Hamas into political understandings is possible, and not excluded, based on Netanyahu’s policy that is based on the strategy of separating Gaza and the West Bank, and maintaining division and dissonance in the Palestinian arena. This strategy may be strengthened by an agreement with Hamas – even if it was an interim one – for five or 10 years,” Awawdeh told Arab News.



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Palestinian jailed in Gaza for breaking coronavirus quarantine
 Hamas arrests Palestinians in Gaza for Zoom video chat with Israelis

[Dubai to ease curfew restrictions as](#)

Ramadan starts

Thu, 2020-04-23 21:40

DUBAI: Dubai announced on Thursday it would ease coronavirus curfew restrictions.

Residents will have to stay home between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. instead of the 24-hour lockdown that has been in place for several weeks.

The changes will come into effect on Friday – the first day of Ramadan, Dubai Media Office said.

The decision was made after the emirate's officials "carefully evaluated" the results of preventive measures taken during the past three weeks, including the national sterilization program.

The government stressed the need for all citizens and residents in Dubai to abide by preventative measures including wearing masks and avoiding all gathering outside their homes.

The fine for not wearing a mask outside the home is AED1,000.

Ramadan gatherings should not be held at home or in public places.

Those sectors of Dubai's economy that have resumed work will operate at 30 percent of their capacity.

Dubai's metro, public buses and taxi services will also resume operation on Sunday, Dubai's Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) announced. Passengers will have to observe social distancing measures and wear face masks.

Only two passengers can travel in the back of a taxi.



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Dubai studying the reopening of shopping mallsDubai launches '10 Million Meals' campaign to feed coronavirus impacted, low income families

[3,000 Palestinians under Lebanon lockdown after first camp virus case](#)

Author:

Thu, 2020-04-23 01:51

BEIRUT: A refugee camp in Lebanon was sealed off and under lockdown on Wednesday after a Palestinian woman from Syria tested positive for the coronavirus.

The woman, who lived in the Wavel camp in Baalbek, known locally as the Jalil or Galilee camp, was taken to Rafik Hariri Hospital in Beirut for treatment.

A medical team from the UN refugee agency UNRWA and hospital staff tested 146 people at the camp, home to about 3,000 people, including all those who had recent contact with the woman.

Lebanon hosts tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees and their

descendants, mostly in squalid camps with no access to public services and limited health care. There are also more than 1 million refugees from the conflict in Syria.

Wednesday's virus case is the first inside one of the camps, but aid workers have warned for months that if the COVID-19 pandemic reached the camps it could cause carnage.

"There is always concern of an outbreak in a crowded place like the camps ... but we hope that the measures we are taking with the ministry and others concerned will help us avoid an outbreak," said Huda Samra, communications adviser for UNRWA in Lebanon.

The Popular Committee inside the Wavel camp urged people to stay at home, close shops, and sanitize neighborhoods, houses and cars.

Lebanon's Health Ministry reported five new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday, including two in Rayak in the Bekaa Valley, raising the total to 682. One patient with underlying health issues died, raising the death toll to 22.

Dr. Iman Shankiti, the World Health Organization (WHO) representative in Lebanon, urged patience, and said measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus should continue.

The US Embassy offered \$13.3 million to help stop the spread of COVID-19 in Lebanon, including an \$8 million donation to UNHCR.

Saudi Arabia recorded 1,141 new cases of COVID-19 on Wednesday, bringing the total to 12,772. Six patients died, raising the death toll to 114.

In the Middle East's worst-hit country, Iran, 94 more people died, raising the total 5,391 from 85,996 confirmed cases.

Egypt's parliament on Wednesday amended the state of emergency law to give President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi power to ban public and private meetings, protests, celebrations and other forms of assembly, suspend classes at schools and universities, and quarantine people returning from abroad.

Egypt has recorded nearly 3,500 cases of the virus, with 264 deaths.

Jordan eased movement restrictions on Wednesday in the large and sparsely populated southern districts of Karak, Maan and Tafileh, where no coronavirus cases have been reported. In Karak city, 120 km south of Amman, heavy traffic clogged the streets.

Jordan has recorded 428 positive cases of the virus and seven deaths.

Worldwide, the number of people infected with the coronavirus passed 2.6 million, and the death toll rose to more than 182,000.



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First virus case in Lebanon Palestinian refugee camp: UNLebanon to start mass coronavirus testing

[Abu Dhabi considering reopening shopping malls to ease coronavirus restrictions](#)

Thu, 2020-04-23 00:44

DUBAI: The authorities in Abu Dhabi are considering reopening shopping malls as the emirate prepares to gradually increase economic activity.

The Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development (ADDED) said Wednesday it was “consulting with stakeholders” and preparing health and safety

guidelines.

[.@AbuDhabiDED](#) is consulting with stakeholders on re-opening malls in [#AbuDhabi](#). In line with government plans for a gradual increase in economic activity, the Department is exploring options in collaboration with the private sector. pic.twitter.com/46ny6Rmmgb

– مكتب أبوظبي الإعلامي (@admediaoffice) [April 22, 2020](#)

“In line with government plans for a gradual increase in economic activity, the Department is exploring options in collaboration with the private sector,” Abu Dhabi Media Office said.

Shoppers would be required to wear gloves and face masks and anyone with a high temperature would be denied entry, according to an ADDED circular reported in UAE media.

Measures would also be in place to limit the number of people inside stores and restaurants.

The UAE has been in a lockdown as part of tough measures to tackle the outbreak.



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Abu Dhabi launches new COVID-19 tracking app to help fight virus spread
Abu Dhabi launches coronavirus operations center to deal with industrial zones