

Egyptian minister visits Beijing

Author:

Tue, 2020-03-03 01:36

CAIRO: Egyptian Minister of Health Hala Zayed is visiting China as part of the battle against coronavirus as Egypt announced it had identified a second patient with the virus.

Zayed said that she was carrying a message of solidarity from President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi to China, where the coronavirus started.

In a press conference held with China's ambassador to Egypt before traveling to China, Zayed said that the visit aimed to deliver medical equipment to China as a gift from the Egyptian people.

Zayed said that the message of solidarity "at this time came from the Egyptian political leadership's keenness to maintain strong bilateral relations."

"We offer assistance to China because protecting and helping China to overcome the epidemic is protecting humanity at large," she said.

Zayed said that the ministry had carried out 1,443 tests in Egypt for suspected coronavirus cases.

She said that 13 Egyptians arrived from Saudi Arabia after performing Umra (minor pilgrimage), and that 230 had returned from the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus was first detected.

China's Xinhua news agency reported that China's Ambassador to Egypt Liao Liqiang expressed gratitude to El-Sisi for sending Zayed to China to carry "a message of solidarity from Egypt to the People's Republic of China at this exceptional time."

Liao said that the Chinese government considered it "a visit of support and solidarity as well as exchanging expertise on measures to combat the coronavirus."

He said that the visit would have an impact on relations between Egypt and China, "since it demonstrates the depth and strength of cordial relations between the two countries as the world's two oldest civilizations."

The coronavirus has killed more than 3,000 people, the vast majority in mainland China. There are now more than 88,000 global cases, with infections on every continent except Antarctica.

The Egyptian Health Ministry and the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in a joint statement on Monday that a foreigner had tested positive for the coronavirus in Egypt, the second case reported in the country.

The statement said that the patient showed minor symptoms and that he was now in a stable condition, adding that he was quarantined in a special hospital and that other people who had dealt with him were currently being examined.

The first coronavirus patient in Egypt was announced last week, reportedly a foreign national who had subsequently tested negative while in quarantine.

Khaled Megahed, the spokesman for the Ministry of Health and Population, said that the ministry informed the WHO that all the necessary precautionary measures were taken in cooperation with WHO.

The second patient who tested positive for the virus was transported in a self-sterilization ambulance to the hospital where he was quarantined and received medical treatment and a follow-up check.

Megahed said that the person tested positive for the virus with minor symptoms and that his condition was stable. He added that the ministry was taking intensified precautionary measures for those who dealt with the patient by conducting tests for the virus. Megahed said that the ministry continued to raise the highest levels of alert in airports and other entry points across the country, and to follow up the situation concerning coronavirus. The WHO representative in Egypt, Dr. John Jabbour, hailed the Egyptian government's "quick and transparent" response in dealing with the situation, as well as its keenness to immediately inform the WHO of the suspected case. Jabbour praised the precautionary measures taken by the Ministry of Health and Population in dealing with the case. Minister Zayed is following up the situation in the Health Ministry's crisis management operations room, working with representatives from all other ministries and concerned parties to monitor the coronavirus as well as enacting the ministry's precautionary plans in the country's ports. Meanwhile, officials in the US state of California announced that seven people had tested positive for the coronavirus, including a couple who had just returned from Egypt. Other countries announced similar cases, including Canada, France and the UAE.



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US delegation visits Turkey ahead of crucial Moscow-Ankara summit

Author:

Tue, 2020-03-03 01:05

ANKARA: A flurry of diplomatic meetings are underway this week as violence continues in Syria's rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib.

A high-level US delegation visited Ankara on Monday and there is an expected meeting between Turkish and Russian leaders in Moscow on Thursday.

The US delegation – with Kelly Craft, the envoy to the UN, and James Jeffrey, the special representative for Syria – will visit Turkey on Monday night to hold talks on the mounting tensions in Idlib.

After having lost at least 36 Turkish soldiers to Assad regime airstrikes in Idlib, Turkey launched Operation Spring Shield on Sunday against Russian-backed Syrian forces, downing two regime planes and carrying out drone strikes that killed 19 Syrian soldiers.

Although Ankara currently avoids any direct confrontation with Moscow, they are still on the opposing sides of the conflict. Russia looks determined to back the Syrian regime to regain full control over Idlib.

Experts underline that much depends on the outcome of the US visit to Turkey and the ongoing discussions between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with his US counterpart Donald Trump.

Samuel Ramani, a Middle East analyst at the University of Oxford, said that Turkey's meeting with the US is meant to send a message to Moscow that Washington is behind its actions in Syria.

"Turkey is hoping that it can secure something more than just rhetorical solidarity from the US and possibly could be interested in seeing if the US will offer Patriot deployments or intelligence support in Idlib," he told Arab News.

If the US offers either of these options, Ramani said, Turkey will be able to react to Russia from a position of strength.

"And in that case, Moscow will be much more likely to accept Turkey's outreach knowing that the Russian S-400 air defense system could be at risk and Turkey could be pivoting back into the US and NATO fold," he added.

Washington and Ankara are still considering Turkey's recent request for a temporary deployment of two American Patriot anti-aircraft missile systems along its southern border with Syria, Trump said on Saturday.

But with Ankara's insistence to activate the S-400s in the spring, the deployment of the American systems is not guaranteed.

Turkey also called on the US to conduct aerial patrols near Idlib, and on its NATO allies to give air defense and intelligence support for its military maneuvers.

The US paused sharing reconnaissance with Turkey on Kurdistan Workers' Party targets in Iraq after the Turkish incursion into Syria in last October.

Experts note that if nothing substantial comes of the US-Turkish meeting, it

could embolden the Russian position in the upcoming Erdogan-Putin summit in Moscow.

Turkey's meeting with the US is meant to send a message to Moscow that Washington is behind its actions in Syria.

Samuel Ramani, Analyst at the University of Oxford

"Under that scenario, Russia will wait until Turkey is firmly committed to de-escalation before offering any compromises, and could even try to distract Ankara in the meantime with a parallel escalation in Libya," Ramani said. Meanwhile, the Kremlin is playing hardball with Ankara, warning the latter that it cannot guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft over Idlib.

"Deploying the Patriots at the Turkish-Syrian border will definitely strengthen Turkey's position in its bargain with Russia. Yet it may be not enough to change Russia's calculus in Syria, especially its approach to the Assad regime, because Russia's global credibility is at stake here," said Karol Wasilewski, a Turkey analyst at the Warsaw-based Polish Institute of International Affairs.

"Thus, I think the farthest Russia may go when it comes to its bargain with Ankara is some territorial correction to its long voice argument about the Adana Agreement. And while Ankara seems interested in de-escalation, I doubt Turkish decision-makers will accept the offer," he told Arab News.

Regarding the summit in Moscow, Erdogan hopes to achieve a cease-fire in Idlib. However, the previous cease-fires that were brokered by Turkey and Russia have been fragile and were regularly violated.

Wasilewski thinks that Ankara is clear when it comes to its objectives in Syria – they still want a political process to end the war.

"I think that as long as the main parameters of such a process will include Turkey's security interests – for example, Assad not as a permanent ruler of the country – they will be open to compromise," he added.



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[Exit polls: Netanyahu short of majority in Israel vote](#)

Author:

By ARON HELLER | AP

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1583180090881497500

Mon, 2020-03-02 20:06

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held an edge over his main rival in Israel's third election in under a year, exit polls indicated Monday night, but it was unclear whether he could clinch the parliamentary majority needed to claim victory.

Exit polls on Israel's main TV channels showed Netanyahu and his nationalist and religious allies winning 59 seats, two short of a parliamentary majority.

The center-left bloc, led by former military chief Benny Gantz, was projected to win 54 to 55 seats. Earlier projections had forecast 60 seats for Netanyahu and his allies, putting him on the cusp of victory.

If the official results from Monday's election match the exit polls, Netanyahu could find himself stuck in continued political deadlock ahead of his trial on corruption charges, set to begin March 17.

Netanyahu, the longest-serving leader in Israeli history, has been a caretaker prime minister for more than a year as a divided country has weathered two inconclusive votes and prolonged political paralysis. With pre-election opinion polls forecasting another deadlock, Netanyahu had sought a late surge in support to score a parliamentary majority along with other nationalist parties for a fourth consecutive term in office and fifth overall.

He appeared to get it in the form of a surprisingly high turnout despite the weariness accompanying the second repeat election.

Netanyahu tweeted a heart emoji with the word "thanks" as well as photo of himself surrounded by his family, aides and supporters proclaiming "a giant victory for Israel."

Miri Regev, a senior Likud member, proclaimed an "overwhelming victory" for Netanyahu's party.

"The nation had its say, a referendum that proved the trust of the people in Netanyahu and in the Likud, with all the indictments and all the attempts to depose Netanyahu," Regev said.

But as the exit polls scaled back Likud's apparent performance, Netanyahu delayed what had been expected to be a joyous victory speech. At 1:30 a.m., Netanyahu still had not emerged at his party's headquarters.

Netanyahu's Likud party was projected to win 36-37 seats, a gain from September, when it won 32. Gantz's centrist Blue and White party, which ran on a message that the prime minister is unfit to lead because of the serious charges against him, was projected to win 32-34 seats, roughly the same number as in September.

Addressing a raucous crowd of supporters early Tuesday, Gantz did not concede defeat.

"This wasn't the outcome that perhaps we would have wanted," he said.

Nonetheless, he said the party would not compromise its principles and would wait for final results.

"We have just begun. We have a long road ahead," he said.

Despite Netanyahu's impressive showing, neither party appeared able to form a coalition with its traditional allies. With the prospect of a unity government between them seemingly off the table after a particularly nasty campaign, the vote may well turn into merely a preamble to another election if Netanyahu's Likud can't garner a majority.

"This is clearly an achievement from Netanyahu's standpoint but by no means is it a clear, decisive outcome that enables him to form a stable, functioning government," said Yohanan Plesner, president of the non-partisan Israel Democracy Institute. "The country is heading toward constitutional uncertainty."

There was little fanfare ahead of the vote, with a noticeable absence of campaign posters on the streets and public rallies that typically characterize the run-up to Israeli elections.

The elections commission said 71% of eligible voters cast ballots, higher

than the previous elections last April and September.

Israel set up some 15 stations to allow voting by hundreds of people who have been ordered to remain in home quarantine after possible exposure to the coronavirus.

"The corona thing is completely under control. Today we've taken all the precautions that are necessary. People can go and vote with complete confidence," Netanyahu said after casting his ballot in Jerusalem.

Netanyahu sought to portray himself as a statesman who is uniquely qualified to lead the country through challenging times. Gantz has tried to paint him as divisive and scandal-plagued, offering himself as a calming influence and an honest alternative.

Gantz says he favors a national unity government with Likud, but only if it rids itself of its longtime leader because of the corruption charges against him. Netanyahu, who still enjoys widespread support in his party, insists he must remain prime minister in any unity deal.

With his career on the line, Netanyahu campaigned furiously. He took a hard turn to the right in hopes of rallying his nationalist base, promising to expand and annex West Bank settlements. In a campaign marked by ugly smears, Netanyahu's surrogates have spread unfounded allegations that Gantz is corrupt, unstable and susceptible to blackmail by Iran.

Netanyahu is desperate to assemble a narrow 61-seat majority before his trial begins. He has failed to secure himself immunity from prosecution, but with a strong hold on power he could seek other avenues to derail the legal proceedings against him.

Netanyahu is charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust stemming from accusations he accepted lavish gifts from billionaire friends and promised to promote advantageous legislation for a major newspaper in exchange for favorable coverage. He vowed to prove his innocence in court.

Maverick politician Avigdor Lieberman, whose party is projected to win 6-8 seats, once again looms as a potential kingmaker. Lieberman has not committed himself to either candidate, although he has promised there will not be a fourth election.

A weary-looking Lieberman vowed to stick to his principles and said he would take stock once the final results are in. "We won't move a millimeter from what we promised our voters," he said.

Official results are expected overnight. Attention will then shift to President Reuven Rivlin, who is responsible for choosing a candidate for prime minister. He is supposed to select the leader who he believes has the best chance of putting together a stable coalition. The honor usually goes to the head of the largest party, but not necessarily. Just as important is the number of lawmakers outside the party who recommend the candidate.

Rivlin's selection will then have up to six weeks to form a coalition. If he fails, another candidate then has 28 days to form an alternative coalition. If that effort fails, new elections would be forced.

"This is usually a holiday, but to be honest, I have no festivity in me, just a sense of deep shame before you, the citizens of Israel," Rivlin said as he voted. "We don't deserve another horrible and filthy campaign like the one that ends today and we don't deserve this endless instability. We deserve a government that will work for us."



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Netanyahu pledges 'immediate' annexation steps if re-elected Israeli challenger Gantz plays character card against Netanyahu

[Algeria court acquits key protest figure and regime opponent](#)

Author:

Mon, 2020-03-02 00:42

ALGIERS: An Algerian court on Sunday acquitted Fodil Boumala, a key figure in a protest movement that has rocked the country for over a year, his lawyer told AFP.

"He has been acquitted. He will go home today," said Zoubida Assoul, a lawyer

for the accused.

The prosecution had sought a year in prison for the regime opponent and former state TV journalist.

Held in detention since his arrest in mid-September, Boumala was accused of “undermining (national) territorial integrity,” which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

He was also accused of distributing “publications that could undermine the national interest,” punishable by a year in prison.

HIGHLIGHT

The prosecution had sought a year in prison for the regime opponent and former state TV journalist.

Boumala was highly active in the “Hirak” protest movement, an unprecedented popular initiative which emerged in February last year to demand then President Abdelaziz Bouteflika abandon a bid for a fifth term in office. The ailing Bouteflika duly stepped down in early April, due to pressure from the enormous protests.

Another key protest figure, Karim Tabbou, faces his own verdict on March 4, according to Nouredine Benissad, a member of his defense team.

He is likewise charged with “undermining (national) territorial integrity,” but is also accused of “violent actions” that sought to “impede the movement of military equipment,” said Benissad.



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Neighbours to meet in Algiers on Libya crisis

Turnout tops corruption as factor in Israel election

Author:

Mon, 2020-03-02 00:38

TEL AVIV: A prime minister who has become the first head of government in the country's history to be indicted in office may appear ripe for electoral defeat.

But according to final polls ahead of Israel's general election on Monday, Benjamin Netanyahu's support has held steady since the last vote in September, despite the prime minister having been formally charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust last month.

Ex-military chief Benny Gantz, the main challenger Blue and White alliance leader, has tried to make Netanyahu's upcoming trial a central issue in his campaign, warning Israelis that the premier's legal woes will distract him from the national interest.

But that message may have failed to influence voters, with both Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and Blue and White projected to fall short of forming a government – the same result as inconclusive April and September polls.

At Gantz's closing rally in Tel Aviv, his focus was squarely on turnout, as he urged the crowd to broadcast on Facebook live, hoping to expand the network of people tuned into his speech.

"Get out and vote!" the Blue and White leader said. Research shows that Israeli voters, including Netanyahu supporters, care about the criminal allegations against him, said the president of the Israeli Democracy Institute think-tank, Yohanan Plesner.

"The numbers indicate that about a third of those who self-identify as right-wing voters are very uncomfortable, or think it is impossible, for someone to continue to serve as a prime minister after being indicted," Plesner told AFP.

But that "does not necessarily mean that they are going to change their voting patterns," he added, explaining that personal affinity for the prime minister and his policies may prove paramount.

Netanyahu will stand trial from March 17 on charges of receiving improper gifts and offering a media mogul lucrative regulatory changes in exchange for favorable coverage.

Plesner explained that 70 percent of Likud supporters have simply rejected the indictments as baseless and "politically motivated."

That position is "ludicrous," he said, but noted that Netanyahu had skillfully managed to persuade some that he was engaged in legitimate

political “wheeling and dealing,” not corruption.



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Netanyahu pledges 'immediate' annexation steps if re-elected
Ex-housekeeper sues Israeli PM's wife over abusive behavior