

Lebanon has 28 days to present rescue plan

Sat, 2020-01-25 00:24

Lebanon has 28 days to prepare a statement showing how it will resolve its crises following a meeting Friday between the UN's special coordinator for the country and Prime Minister Hassan Diab.

The UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Jan Kubis met Diab and reiterated that the most important step that should be taken was "reforms, reforms, and reforms, break up with previous corruption practices, adopt transparency, reestablish trust, and listen to the demands of people demonstrating in the streets in order to win their confidence."

The government has 28 days to prepare its statement, which includes a plan to address the turmoil coursing through Lebanon.

The formation of a new government earlier this week ended months of political deadlock following Saad Hariri's resignation as prime minister in October in response to mass protests over corruption and mismanagement.

Information Minister Manal Abdel Samad said the ministerial committee tasked with drafting the statement intended to promptly issue it as there were "pressing internal and external situations, and the crisis is getting more aggravated."

Hundreds of people were injured in Beirut last weekend after security personnel fired tear gas, water cannons and rubber bullets at demonstrators who threw stones, attempted to invade the Parliament building, and attacked bank offices and shops.

There were also recent clashes between activists and supporters of the Amal Movement, which is associated with the country's Shiite community. People wanting to protest corruption outside a public institution in the southern part of the capital were targeted by knife and stick-wielding men.

"Young men attacked us and accused us of being spies and agents, then started beating women and men alike," said one activist. "We fled in every direction and the guards of a major store denied us entry to hide, for they feared being attacked by the aggressors."

Amal's leadership said the attack was perpetrated without its knowledge and was a "mere improvised reaction" by inhabitants of the area.

But newly appointed Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmy condemned the "brutal attack."

"Security services will not hesitate to pursue the aggressors and unveil their identities," he warned. "We will no longer accept that those who tamper with security continue to violate the rights and dignity of any citizen under

any circumstances or pretext, for demonstrations, sit-ins are legitimate rights protected by law.”

There is also anger at the makeup of the new Cabinet, with senior political figures saying it showed that Hezbollah’s takeover of the Lebanese state was complete.

Former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora said Hezbollah had become the party with the most authority in Lebanon as it was able to extend its influence, authority and control to the head and members of the government.

“What happened so far will have negative repercussions on the government and its approach to a large number of problems, which have become aggravated since Michel Aoun became president and led to a significant decline in the confidence of citizens in the government and the political class as a whole,” he told Arab News.

The new government did not bring independent ministers as promised, he added.

Earlier this week former minister Marwan Hamade told Arab News that Hezbollah regained a parliamentary majority in 2018 thanks to an electoral law designed to benefit the pro-Iranian party.

“Now Hezbollah completes its takeover through the new government where we find the fingerprints of the Syrian regime. The majority of the new ministers in key positions depend either on Hezbollah or on the former security chief, the pro-Syrian Jamil Sayyed, or on Gebran Bassil, their ally,” Hamade said.



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'Jury still out' on new Lebanon government, says rights chief
Lebanon MPs call for extra security

[Powerful quake hits eastern Turkey, four dead](#)

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Fri, 2020-01-24 20:13

ISTANBUL: A powerful earthquake with a magnitude of 6.8 hit eastern Turkey on Friday, killing at least four people, causing buildings to collapse and sending panicked residents rushing into the street.

Rescue teams were being sent to the scene of the quake, which had its epicenter in the small lakeside town of Sivrice in the eastern province of Elazig.

"It was very scary, furniture fell on top of us. We rushed outside," 47-year-old Melahat Can, who lives in the provincial capital of Elazig, told AFP.

"We will spend the coming days in a farmhouse outside the city," she said.

The Turkish government's disaster and emergency management agency said the quake hit Sivrice at around 8.55 p.m. (1755 GMT).

The US Geological Survey assessed its magnitude at 6.7, and said it had a depth of 10 kilometers (about six miles).

Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu said four people had died, two in Elazig province and two in the neighboring province of Malatya, which lies to the southwest.

"We are hoping we will not have more casualties," he was quoted as saying by the official Anadolu news agency.

Turkish television showed images of people stuck in apartments rushing outside in panic, as well as a fire on the roof of one building.

"Sivrice was shaken very seriously, we have directed our rescue teams to the region," Soylu, who is due to go to the affected area, told reporters.

Sivrice – a town with a population of about 4,000 population – is situated south of Elazig city on the shores of Hazar lake – one of the most popular tourist spots in the region.

The lake is home to a "Sunken City," with archaeologists finding archaeological traces dating back 4,000 years in its waters.

The tremor was felt in several parts of eastern Turkey near the Iraqi and Syrian borders, the Turkish broadcaster NTV reported, adding that neighboring cities had mobilized rescue teams for the quake area.

“We have sent four teams to the quake region,” Recep Salci of Turkey’s Search and Rescue Association (AKUT) told AFP.

“We have news of collapsed buildings, and are preparing more teams in case of need.”

Zekeriya Gunes, 68, a resident of Elazig city, said a building 200 meters down on his street had collapsed but he did not know whether it was inhabited.

“Everybody is in the street, it was very powerful, very scary,” he said.

Ferda, 39, said she felt worried and desperate.

“It lasted quite long, maybe 30 seconds,” she told AFP. “I panicked and was undecided whether to go out in this cold or remain inside.”

Turkey lies on major faultlines and is prone to earthquakes.

In 1999, a devastating 7.4 magnitude earthquake hit Izmit in western Turkey, leaving more than 17,000 people dead including about 1,000 in the country’s largest city Istanbul.

In September, a 5.7-magnitude earthquake shook Istanbul, causing residents to flee buildings in the economic capital.

Experts have long warned a large quake could devastate the city of 15 million people, which has allowed widespread building without safety precautions.



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More than 20 dead as Albania hunts for earthquake survivorsIran 5.9 magnitude earthquake kills at least 5, injures 120

[Putin calls for summit on Libya](#)

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Fri, 2020-01-24 21:09

LONDON: Russia's president on Thursday proposed that the UN Security Council's five permanent members hold a special summit in 2020 to discuss the ongoing conflict in Libya.

Vladimir Putin said Russia wanted a "serious conversation" with the US, UK, China and France over the situation in the North African nation, as well as other geopolitical issues.

He added that Moscow was happy for a summit to happen "in any country, at any point" to find a way to resolve the conflict in Libya.

"There are many tasks before us. We discussed one of them very recently in Berlin ... that is Libya. We need to return to this problem at the Security Council and adopt the corresponding resolution," Putin said.

"We discussed (this) with several colleagues and, as far as I understand, in general we saw a positive reaction to holding a meeting of the heads of the permanent members."



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Libya's neighbors, global envoys seek solutions to conflict Turkey says it won't send more advisers to Libya while cease-fire is observed

[Trump: Mideast peace plan likely rolled out in days](#)

Fri, 2020-01-24 02:04

JERUSALEM: President Donald Trump said Thursday that he'll likely release the long-awaited White House Mideast peace plan before his meeting early next week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his main political rival Benny Gantz.

"It's a great plan. It's a plan that really would work," Trump told reporters on Air Force One en route to a Republican Party meeting in Florida.

He said he was surprised that both Netanyahu and Gantz were willing to take a break from campaigning for the March 2 elections to join him Tuesday in Washington.

"They both would like to do the deal. They want to see peace," Trump said.

"Look, Israel wants peace, Palestinians want peace. They all want peace. Not everyone wants to say it."

He said his administration has talked briefly to the Palestinians, who have rejected the administration's peace plan before it even comes out.

"We've spoken to them briefly. But we will speak to them in a period of time," Trump said. "And they have a lot of incentive to do it. I'm sure they maybe will react negatively at first, but it's actually very positive to them."

Vice President Mike Pence announced the invitation for Netanyahu and Gantz to visit during at a meeting with the prime minister in Jerusalem after addressing an international forum Thursday on the Holocaust. He said that at Netanyahu's request, the invitation was also issued to Gantz, a former army chief.

The plan is expected to strongly favor Israel, and is unlikely to garner any international support if it is seen as undermining the prospect of a two-state solution.

"We have had no better friend than President Trump," Netanyahu said. "With this invitation, I think that the president is seeking to give Israel the peace and security that it deserves."

The Palestinians rejected Trump's peace efforts after he recognized disputed Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moved the US Embassy there in May 2018. The Palestinians want east Jerusalem, which Israel occupied in the 1967 war and annexed, to be their capital.

"If this deal is announced with these rejected formulas, the leadership will announce a series of measures in which we safeguard our legitimate rights,

and we will demand Israel assume its full responsibilities as an occupying power," said Nabil Abu Rdeneh, a spokesman for Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

He appeared to be referring to oft-repeated threats to dissolve the Palestinian Authority, which has limited autonomy in parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank. That would force Israel to resume responsibility for providing basic services to millions of Palestinians.

"We warn Israel and the US administration from crossing the red lines," Abu Rdeneh said.

Israel's Channel 12 TV, citing Israeli officials, said the plan is expected to be extremely favorable toward Israel and offer it control over large parts of the occupied West Bank. The Palestinians seek the entire territory, which was also captured by Israel in 1967, as the heartland of a future independent state. Most of the international community supports the Palestinian position. Netanyahu has said he plans to annex the Jordan Valley as well as Jewish settlements across the West Bank, which would all but extinguish any possibility of creating a viable Palestinian state.

Netanyahu has tried to make that the cornerstone of his campaign for reelection following unprecedented back-to-back elections last year that left him in a virtual tie with Gantz, with neither able to cobble together a ruling coalition.

The deadlock was deepened by Netanyahu's indictment last year on serious charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust stemming from three long-running corruption investigations. Netanyahu has asked Israel's parliament to grant him immunity.

Next week's meeting could produce an awkward scene. Gantz has made Netanyahu's indictment the focus of his campaign to oust the prime minister. And his Blue and White party is leading an effort in parliament to block Netanyahu's immunity request before the election. At the same time, they will be joined by an impeached president who is being tried in the Senate. The US was believed to be holding back on releasing the peace plan until Israel had a permanent government. Those calculations may have changed as the deadlock in Israeli politics looks to be further prolonged.

Trump may also be looking for a boost from evangelical and pro-Israel supporters as the Senate weighs whether to remove him from office after he was impeached last month, and as he gears up for a reelection battle this year.

Pence was among dozens of world leaders in Jerusalem on Thursday for the World Holocaust Forum. Many of the participants, including Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron, also paid visits to the Palestinians in the West Bank.

A Palestinian official said Abbas asked the visiting French and Russian presidents to support the Palestinian position when the plan is published. "He asked them to refuse and act against any Israeli annexation of Palestinian lands," said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was discussing closed meetings.

While the plan is expected to be friendly to Israel, it could still face opposition from Netanyahu's hard-line partners.

Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, leader of the ultranationalist Yamina party, called Trump a "true friend" of Israel and said the country likely stands before a "historic opportunity." But he said his party would not allow

the transfer of any land to Palestinian control or for a Palestinian state to be established.



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Kushner's Peace to Prosperity plan met with guarded enthusiasm
Jared Kushner: US to present Middle East peace plan after Ramadan

[Militant sentenced to 19 years for role in Benghazi attacks](#)

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Thu, 2020-01-23 21:42

NEW YORK: A federal judge on Thursday sentenced a Libyan militant to more than 19 years in prison for his role in the 2012 Benghazi attacks that killed four Americans, including the US ambassador.

A jury convicted Mustafa Al-Imam last year of conspiring to support the extremist militia that launched the fiery assaults on the US compounds but deadlocked on 15 other counts.

The attacks, aimed at killing American personnel, prompted a political fracas in which Republicans accused the Obama administration of a bungled response. Al-Imam was sentenced to a total of 236 months behind bars. He is the second militant convicted in the attacks that killed Ambassador Chris Stevens, communications specialist Sean Smith and security officers Tyrone Snowden Woods and Glen Anthony Doherty.

The head of the extremist militia who directed the siege, Ahmed Abu Khattala, was convicted in 2017 on terrorism-related charges and sentenced to 22 years in prison.

Khattala was accused of driving to the diplomatic mission on Sept. 11, 2012, and breaching the main gate with militants who attacked with assault rifles, grenades and other weapons.

The initial attack killed Stevens and Smith and set the mission ablaze. Woods and Doherty were later killed at a CIA annex.

On Thursday, federal prosecutors in Washington asked US District Judge Christopher Cooper to send a message to others contemplating attacks on Americans overseas, saying Al-Imam deserved the maximum 35-year sentence. "In the current geopolitical environment, terrorists must understand that there are harsh consequences for attacking diplomatic posts and harming US personnel – particularly a US ambassador," Assistant US Attorney John Cummings wrote in a court filing.

Defense attorneys said Al-Imam made a "tremendous mistake" by damaging and looting US property after the attacks. But they insisted there was no evidence he intended to harm any Americans, noting jurors could not reach a verdict on the murder charges Al-Imam faced.

"Mustafa Al-Imam is a frail, uneducated and simple man," they wrote in a court filing. "He is not a fighter, an ideologue or a terrorist. He is a former convenience store clerk whose main loves in life are soccer and family."

Al-Imam was tried in a civilian court despite the Trump administration's earlier contention that such suspects are better sent to Guantanamo Bay. His arrest, five years after the attack, was the first publicly known operation since President Donald Trump took office targeting those accused of involvement in Benghazi.

Prosecutors acknowledged there was no evidence that Al-Imam "directly caused" the killings at the US compounds. But they said he aligned himself with Khattala and acted as his "eyes and ears" at the height of the attacks. During a four-week trial in Washington, prosecutors pointed to phone records that showed Al-Imam was in the vicinity of the mission and placed an 18-minute call to Khattala during a "pivotal moment" of the attacks.

Al-Imam also entered the US compound, prosecutors said, and took sensitive material that identified the location of the CIA annex about a mile away from the mission as the evacuation point for Department of State personnel.

In interviews with law enforcement following his 2017 capture in Misrata, Libya, he admitted stealing a phone and map from the US mission.



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House Republicans' report faults Obama on Benghazi attacks
US panel seeks accountability after Benghazi attacks