

Algeria's richest man walks free after 8 months in prison

Author:

Thu, 2020-01-02 01:20

ALGIERS: Algeria's richest man Issad Rebrab walked free on time served early on Wednesday after a court sentenced him to six months for tax, banking and customs offenses.

Prosecutors had sought a one-year prison sentence for the 74-year-old head of Algeria's biggest privately owned conglomerate Cevital, who was one of several tycoons arrested in April as part of a sweeping corruption investigation.

The probe followed the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika after weeks of mass protests against his 20-year rule.

Rebrab had already spent eight months in custody awaiting trial, more than his sentence, so he was released by the court.

He was fined 1.383 billion dinars (more than \$11.6 million, more than €10.3 million).

Cevital subsidiary Evcon was fined 2.766 billion dinars (€20.7 million). Jordan-based Housing Bank for Trade and Finance, which was also prosecuted, was fined 3.169 billion dinars (€23.7 million).

They were convicted of breaking laws on foreign exchange and fund transfers as well as forgery and false custom declarations.

Forbes magazine lists Rebrab as Algeria's richest man and the sixth-wealthiest in Africa, with a net worth of \$3.9 billion in 2019.

Cevital employs 18,000 people, produces electronics, steel and food, and in recent years it has acquired businesses in France.

While his businesses flourished under Bouteflika's rule, Rebrab had backed the protests that ultimately forced the president to resign in April.

His company has said it was "astonished" by his arrest.



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Algerians protest despite day of mourning for army chief

[Yemen government calls on World Bank, IMF to end Houthi banknote ban](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-01-01 23:46

AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: The internationally recognized government of Yemen has sent letters to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, urging them to pressure the Iran-backed Houthis to revoke their ban on the recently-printed banknotes.

The government said that Houthis ban has caused nation-wide economical repercussions including the fall of the currency and the stop of salaries.

"We have told them that Houthi decision would have destructive impact on the national currency," a senior government official told Arab News on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press, adding that

the government turned to the international monetary funds after running out of options to stop Houthis.

"We have no authority over them. The only thing we can do is raising the issue to the international community," the official said.

Houthis have recently banned local traders from trading with banknotes that were recently printed by the central bank in Aden. People under Houthi-controlled areas were given a month to swap their notes with the old ones or replace them with Houthi-initiated electronic riyal.

The Yemeni government said that Houthis, who facing multiple battlefields, aimed to absorb cash from the market to fund their military efforts and other activities.

"Their aim is socking up liquidity from the market and divert it to their military activities. This is a dangerous decision that would leave bad mark on everyone including those who live in liberated areas," the government official said.

Not trusting Houthi procedures, traders said they sent their cash to government-controlled areas such as Marib city, where they replaced their new notes with the old one.

If Houthis-controlled continued confiscating the currency, the Yemeni official warned, the government might be forced into printing more money or a face cash crunch. "We do not want to restore to this option as it would cause inflation," the official said.

On Wednesday, Yemeni riyal continued to plunge, hovering around 610 to the dollar in the port city of Aden after falling from 602 over the weekend. Finance ministry in Aden said on Tuesday that Houthi ban has obstructed paying public servants in Houthi-controlled areas as local banks refused to disperse salaries due to lack of cash.

In a statement broadcast on the national TV, the ministry held Houthis responsible for disrupting salaries, saying 175,000 government employees would not be able to receive salaries and it would resume paying salaries when rebels revoke the decision.

Similarly, the central bank in Aden warned local companies from complying with Houthi ban or electronic riyal, saying recent regulations by the branch of the central bank in Sana'a are illegal, vowing to take action against local companies that deal with Houthi electronic riyal. In Sana'a, Houthis issued a statement warning traders against complying with calls for civil disobedience in their territories, saying shops and companies that shut down operations on Wednesday were doing their annual count.

Politically, analysts in Yemen think Houthis initiated the ban on the recently printed notes to show they are still politically and economically powerful and can made trouble to the government in Aden.

"This comes in the context of their attempt to show they are in control of

the economy and have a say on the central bank decisions,” Yasser Al Yafae, a political analyst based in Aden told Arab News on Wednesday.

“They escalated military activities and imposed a ban on the new banknotes to demonstrate they have not been weakened by fighting or economical decisions such as relocation of the central bank to Aden.”



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Yemen officials: Houthi militia ban on banknotes stops gov't salaries Traders threaten strike in Houthi-controlled Yemen as rebels ban currency

[How GCC countries are forging a food-secure future](#)

Wed, 2020-01-01 23:21

DUBAI: For all their futuristic skylines, multi-lane highways and lushly landscaped public parks, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other GCC countries cannot overcome a fundamental geographical disadvantage: They are marginal environments.

Marginal environments are areas of the world characterized by high temperatures, poor soil quality and low annual rainfall, and regarded as most vulnerable to water scarcity, salinity and climate change.

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, marginal environments are at a huge disadvantage when it comes to producing food due to soil-fertility decline, salinization of soil and water resources, population growth, and climate change.

The good news is that geography is not destiny. GCC countries are pioneering and leveraging agricultural technology to overcome the handicap of their desert ecosystem and increase their domestic supplies of food.

With the increasing incorporation of technology in agriculture, the hope is that marginal environments will one day be able to produce high food yields with minimal resources.

As Mariam Almheiri, the UAE minister of state for food security, noted while addressing the Global Forum on Innovations for Marginal Environments held recently in Dubai, "Today, 1.7 billion people live in marginal environments, including 70 percent of the world's poorest, and it is increasing."

The conference, which brought together 250 decision-makers, scientists and experts in agriculture and food production, heard that many of the already extreme harsh conditions faced by marginal environments may become worse in the near future due to prolonged droughts and extreme temperatures linked to climate change.

"Many of these regions will experience large population growth," Almheiri said. "But solutions to addressing this are now on the horizon. Breakthroughs in technology and bioscience in marginal environments now mean these areas can offer promise."

According to Ayman Sejiny, general manager and CEO of the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB) in Saudi Arabia, poverty and food insecurity are endemic in the bank's member states on account of socioeconomic, institutional, environmental and technical hindrances to their agricultural development.

"About a third of the 850 million food-insecure people globally are in IsDB member countries," Sejiny said, adding that the IsDB "invested significantly in agriculture and rural development in the past – and will continue to do so."

Since its inception in 1975, IsDB has funded about 1,000 agriculture and rural development projects, worth a combined \$12bn and accounting for about 12 percent of its total investments.

"But \$1.4 trillion still needs to be invested, and we recognize that the

public sector will not be able to find this money on its own. So we have invested in the value chain to support food security,” Sejiny explained. “People are getting educated about what’s really needed.”

IsDB plans to launch ambitious programs to help develop national, regional and global value chains, Sejiny said, adding that global population growth calls for transformative action that can increase productivity and link farmers to sustainable markets.

“Our member countries – which include Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Pakistan and Morocco – have enormous potential for feeding the world and influencing global agricultural value chains,” he said.



Food experts are calling for more technological investment to help feed the growing population. (AFP)

“Together, these 57 countries account for 29 percent of the world’s total agricultural areas and up to 15 percent of the world’s food production, including cereals, horticulture, livestock, fishery and forestry resources.”

The IsDB’s objectives include boosting self-sufficiency by 10 percent, increasing crop yield to five tons per hectare, and improving the livelihood of more than two million farmers and their families.

“If we want to confront climate change and feed the growing world population, we must invest in science, technology and innovation (STI). Greater deployment of STI in agricultural programs for food security would require increased private-sector engagement and stronger public institutional support.”

The International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA) in Dubai is a leader in conducting applied research to improve agricultural productivity and sustainability in marginal and saline environments.

With an estimated 2,000 hectares of farm soil lost globally every day to salt-induced degradation, the urgency of research, innovation and development in agriculture and food production in marginal environments cannot be overemphasized.

“Increasing droughts pose a serious threat to food production in marginal environments,” said Dr. Ismahane Elouafi, director general of the ICBA. “Farmers feel it much more because they are dependent on that water. What we have today as arable land will most probably change over time. Four billion people are water-scarce and this (number) will grow.”

Noting that just three crops – wheat, maize (corn) and rice – provide nearly 60 percent of total plant calories that humans consume, Elouafi said: “Globally, nine plant species account for 66 percent of total crop production. But the planet is full of plant species, of which 30,000 are edible and 6,000 are cultivated for food.”

The way forward, in her view, is a diversification of agricultural production systems.

Elouafi said that, considering that two billion children are malnourished today and 88 percent of countries face two or three forms of serious malnutrition, a diet transition is vital for the planet and for the human race.

“It is happening, but we see it much more in the north, where people are consuming quinoa and kale,” she said, adding that production of such crops needs to be scaled up and introduced in the south, “where they are needed the most.”

“We are trying to do that, by talking about other crops which are very nutritious, such as millet, quinoa and barley.”

The problems outlined by Elouafi do not, of course, comprise the entirety of the global food challenge. According to Dr. Nina Fedoroff, emeritus professor of biology at Penn State University, smarter agriculture technologies will be needed going forward as food demand is expected to double by 2050 to keep pace with population growth.

“Farm machinery increasingly does everything from planting to harvesting,” she said. “But we can only go so far with technology and we can’t grow our rain crops under glass. We need biology – and genetics – for marginal environments.”

She said that the introduction of insect-resistant crops and gene technology will be key to achieving sustainability in food production. “We don’t have the luxury of millennia to come up with the crops of the future, so we need the modern tools of genetic modification,” Fedoroff said. “Genetically modified crops have been adopted by farmers faster than any in the history of humanity – roughly 18 million farmers in 26 countries. We don’t have the luxury of time because of climate change.”

Gene editing will play a crucial role, Fedoroff said, despite people’s fears and inadequate research.

“We need all of the techniques of genetics, from domestication to plant breeding to the most modern genetic-modification techniques,” she said. “Countries must address the politics of modern molecular genetics, including public acceptance and developing an appropriate regulatory framework, which is not an easy task.”

Fedoroff said none of this can happen without seriously boosting investment in modernizing agricultural research facilities, adding: “There are extraordinary opportunities for this in Africa and the Middle East.”

In this regard, the ICBA is doing its bit by expanding its work with the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (Ifad), besides the IsDB, said Elouafi.

“More areas around the world will turn marginal due to climate change and other factors,” she said. “Resources are the most vulnerable to climate change, so we have to protect them, address the challenges facing people in marginal environments, and diversify crops. But we can only do that through partnership. We need to plan and act together.”

“We can’t do it with one hand, we all have to clap together and work together.”



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Innovations, food security take spotlight at Riyadh agriculture expo

[Egypt draws ire with artifacts' move to busy Tahrir Square](#)

Author:

Tue, 2019-12-31 20:46

CAIRO: Egypt's recent decision to transport ancient Pharaonic artifacts to a traffic circle in the congested heart of Cairo has fueled fresh controversy over the government's handling of its archaeological heritage.

Cairo has some of the worst air pollution in the world, according to recent studies. Archaeologists and heritage experts fear vehicle exhaust will damage the four ram-headed sphinxes and an obelisk, currently en route to their new home in Tahrir Square.

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi has weighed in to say that similar obelisks are displayed in Western cities, according to a statement late Monday.

But Dr. Monica Hanna, a heritage expert, said Egyptian artifacts in cities

like London, Paris and New York are themselves endangered by being outdoors. "The sphinxes are made of sandstone, they are part of the dry environment in Luxor, when they would be moved to Tahrir Square with all the pollution, they will deteriorate as a result of the reactions with the carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide in the air," Hanna told The Associated Press. She and a member of parliament are part of a lawsuit to block the artifacts' move, filed recently by a local rights group.

Mostafa Waziri, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, said the government "will do everything" to protect the artifacts. Tahrir Square was the epicenter of Egypt's so-called Arab Spring uprising in 2011. The square also contains the Egyptian Museum.

The decision to move the artifacts as part of a larger renovation of Tahrir Square was taken without debate in parliament. The controversy only surfaced after archaeologists objected.

Since coming to power in 2013, El-Sisi has touted a number of megaprojects aimed at rebuilding and expanding infrastructure. Those include an expansion of the Suez Canal and a new Egyptian museum near the Giza Pyramids. A centerpiece of the new museum is a towering statue of Ramses II. It once stood in a busy square near Cairo's main railway station, but was removed in the 1990s due to preservation concerns.

Waziri, the antiquities chief, said the four sphinxes are not part of the famed avenue of sphinxes in the city of Luxor. They were among several located behind the first edifice of the temple of Karnak.

The obelisk was recently moved to Cairo from the San el-Haggat archaeological site in the Nile Delta, the ministry said.

But Hanna, the heritage expert, stressed that the obelisks in Western capitals had been moved during the colonial era. "We really had no say in their shipment."



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Egypt breaks record with largest coffee cup mosaic of Tutankhamun's death mask
Egypt to reopen historic Jewish synagogue in January

[Arab League reaffirms rejection of foreign interference, calls for Libya solution](#)

Tue, 2019-12-31 20:11

CAIRO: The Arab League Council reaffirmed commitment to Libyan unity, sovereignty, and safety yesterday, and also reaffirmed supporting the full implementation of the Sokhairat agreement, signed in December 2015, for a

political solution to settle the crisis in the North African country. The council held an emergency meeting in an extraordinary closed session attended by permanent representatives, after the Arab League General Secretariat received a memorandum from Egypt requesting an extraordinary meeting of the council to discuss the latest developments in Libya. In its memorandum, Egypt called for a discussion on its neighbor, as well as the prospects of escalation.

The meeting was headed by Iraq, represented by Ambassador Ahmed Nayef Al-Dulaimi, its permanent representative to the Arab League and chair of the current session. The meeting aimed to find a unified Arab stance towards illegitimate foreign interventions in Libyan affairs.

In its resolution, the council expressed grave concern regarding the military escalation in the country which, it said, threatened the security and stability of both Libya and its neighbors in North Africa and the Mediterranean. It underscored the need to halt military conflict, and said that a political solution was the only way to restore stability.

The league underlined the dangerous consequences of a unilateral decision by any Libyan party that would allow foreign military interventions, thus contributing to the escalation and prolonging the period of conflict in the region.

The resolution also stressed the need to prevent regional interventions that, among other things, would contribute in facilitating the movement of foreign combatants from other conflicts into Libya. It underlined its rejection of violating international resolutions banning the supply of weapons in a way that would threaten the security of Libya's neighboring countries as well as the security of the Mediterranean.

The council called on UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to submit a report on the issue to the UN Security Council to accelerate the process of handling developments, since any potential foreign military intervention in Libya would entail a threat to international peace and security, and asked Kuwait, the only Arab member of the Security Council, to discuss the issue with its partners.

It also called on Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit to conduct high-level contacts with the all international parties concerned with the Libyan crisis with the aim of deriving positive coordinated stances to resolve the crisis. Such efforts stemmed from the Berlin Process to reach an all-Libyan solution to the crisis, and to submit periodical follow-up reports to the Arab League Council on the implementation of the resolution.

Al-Dulaimi called on concerned parties to resort to constructive national dialogue. The Iraqi representative also called for Arab support for efforts to achieve peace and stability, and for the league's efforts.

The chair delivered a speech in which he underlined his country's firm stance rejecting and condemning foreign interventions in the affairs of any Arab country. He said that this, the second extraordinary meeting of the council within two weeks, reflected the magnitude of the challenges facing Arab nations and peoples, and added that the stability of each was the cornerstone of stability of the whole Arab world.



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Erdogan in bid to drag Algeria into Libyan war
Turkey mulls sending allied Syrian fighters to Libya