

Al-Shabab militants claim huge Mogadishu bomb attack

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MOGADISHU: Al-Shabab Islamist militants have claimed responsibility for Saturday's massive car bomb in the Somali capital Mogadishu that killed 81 people, including two Turkish citizens.

Saturday's attack hit a busy checkpoint in the southwest of the city, killing 81 people, including a dozen university students, in the country's deadliest assault in two years.

Scores more were wounded in the blast that left surrounding vehicles charred and twisted in an area clogged with traffic because of the checkpoint and a tax office collecting fees from trucks and buses.

"...the mujahideen carried (out) an attack... targeting a convoy of Turkish mercenaries and apostate militia who were escorting them," Al-Shabab spokesman Sheik Ali Mohamud Rage said in an audio message.

Among the dead were 16 students from the private Banadir university whose bus was passing through the crossroads as the bomb detonated.

For the first time, Al-Shabab apologized to the civilian victims of the attack, which it justified as necessary in fight against the Somali State and its foreign backers.

"We are very sorry about the casualty that was inflicted on our Somali Muslim society, and we are extending our condolences to the Muslims who have lost their lives and or wounded and or had their property destroyed."

Al-Shabab do not usually claim attacks that cause such high casualty rates among the civilian population, for fear of losing the support they still enjoy with some Somalis.

The death toll increased to 81 on Monday after two victims died from their wounds, the Somali information ministry said.

Mogadishu is regularly hit by attacks by Al-Shabab, which has fought for more than a decade to topple the Somali government.

In 2010, Al-Shabab declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda. But its fighters fled positions they once held in the capital Mogadishu, and have since lost many strongholds.

They retain control of large rural swathes of the country and continue to wage a guerrilla war against the authorities, managing to inflict bloody attacks at home and abroad.



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Al-Shabab militants kill 50 soldiers in attack on Somalia military base

[Lebanese protesters defy capital controls in sit-in](#)

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Mon, 2019-12-30 16:00

BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters staged a sit-in inside a commercial bank in the capital Beirut on Monday, forcing tellers to give them more than the weekly limit for withdrawal amid a wave of protests against recent capital controls. Amid a spiraling financial crisis, Lebanese banks have imposed informal withdrawal limits of a maximum \$300 a week and totally halted transfers

abroad. Anti-government protesters, who largely blame the country's dire economy on corrupt politicians, say the limits are illegal and have turned their ire against bank officials and the financial sector.

The Association of Banks in Lebanon advised the capital controls to manage depleting foreign currency. Lebanon's economy depends heavily on US dollars. At least two dozen protesters sat on the floor of a branch of the Audi Bank in Beirut's Achrafieh district on Monday, chanting against Lebanese banking policies. They eventually forced the teller to cash a \$5,000 check for one protester while two others withdrew \$1,000 and \$2,000 from their accounts. The protesters waved the money at the cameras in celebration.

"We want the money," the protesters chanted, a number of them clients of the bank. They urged some of the customers in the bank to demand more of their money with the protesters' support. At least one tried, but didn't insist, said Roy Deeb, one of the protesters who cashed the \$5,000 check.

"We stayed and insisted and under pressure, they gave the money," Deeb said. Deeb said it is not legal for Lebanon's bank association to enforce withdrawal limits without parliamentary or government approval.

Over recent weeks, the local currency has taken a nose dive, losing more than 30% of its value after over 20 years of being pegged to the dollar.

Meanwhile, layoffs and salary cuts are becoming the norm while politicians have continued to bicker since late October over forming a new government.

An Audi bank spokesperson was unable to confirm that the money was withdrawn and said bank staff called for security back-up because of the protesters' "aggressive" action. The bank is the largest private bank in Lebanon.

"They are not clients. They are communists," the spokesperson told The Associated Press, declining to be identified in line with regulations. "They are calling for the fall of the banking system."

The doors to the bank were briefly closed while protesters and clients were locked inside, Deeb said. He denied protesters used violence. Security at one point formed a line between the tellers and the protesters. The standoff ended peacefully by the branch's regular closing time.

After nationwide protests erupted on Oct. 17 over Lebanon's plummeting economy, banks closed down for two weeks fearing anger and panic from depositors. When they re-opened, at least one armed security guard was added to each branch, in addition to the regular private security.

A spokesman for the Lebanese banks association said the capital controls are only a temporary measure to deal with the country's severe liquidity crunch. Georges Abi Saleh, director of communication for the association, said that there were strict orders to avoid clashing with depositors.

"The people are in a state of worry. We have to be understanding," he said, adding that it is unlikely such scenarios would be repeated in over 1,100 bank branches around Lebanon.



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Cash-strapped Lebanon to probe 'suspicious' capital flight

[Traders threaten strike in Houthi-controlled Yemen as rebels ban currency](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-12-30 18:55

AL-MUKALLA, Yemen: Traders in Houthi-controlled areas have called for an open strike starting on Wednesday to protest against the rebels' decision to ban trading with new currency notes issued by the internationally recognized government in Aden.

Workers at local exchange companies told Arab News on Monday that they would shutter businesses until Houthis revoked the decision or provided them with the old notes.

The strike would be the biggest act of civil disobedience against Houthi suppression since the Iran-backed rebels seized power in late 2014.

The Houthis recently banned people from using the newly printed notes, asking them to replace their notes with a virtual currency called the "electronic riyal." The move has caused widespread anger, with people leaving Houthi areas with their cash to avoid confiscation.

The Yemeni government in Aden has condemned the decision, calling it a pretext for ripping off people and warned against trading with the Houthi currency or handing over money to the Houthis. Several cabinet ministers did not respond to Arab News requests to comment on the decision.

Speaking to Arab News from inside Houthi-controlled areas, people expressed anger as many have kept their savings in the new notes. If they comply with the Houthis, they will be broke overnight.

"The people in the Houthi-controlled areas are experiencing a complex frustration," a Yemeni journalist who lives in a Houthi-controlled city told Arab News on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

"People face various security and economical troubles caused by the Houthis. They imposed the decision, indifferent to the already deteriorating humanitarian situation," he said, adding that a large number of people refused to hand over their new notes to the Houthis, fearing bankruptcy or hunger.

Residents say that the decision has created a black market where the new notes are changed with old ones at a lower price. Other residents have resorted to buying hard currencies from the black market at inflated rates. Some are smuggling themselves into government-controlled areas with bags of cash that they deposit into bank accounts or replace with old notes.

A trader in Sana'a who had 8,000,000 Yemeni riyals (\$32,000) in the new notes traveled to the central province of Marib to replace them with old notes.

In September 2016, Yemeni President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi moved the central bank headquarters from Sana'a to the southern city of Aden to stop Houthis plundering its reserves. From its new headquarters, the bank printed new notes when the country was experiencing a severe cash crunch. The Houthis deemed the new notes illegal and accused the government of sinking the market with liquidity.

Experts say that the Houthi decision would have disastrous effects on the country's troubled economy, stabilization of the currency and people's lives.

"This decision is disastrous, improvizational and illogical and will have a wider negative impact on the economy," Mustafa Nasr, director of the Economic Media Center, told Arab News on Sunday, adding that the Houthis would fail to

impose their decision due to public mistrust.

“The Houthis cannot cancel a circulating currency or initiate another one in the same country mainly with the scarcity of the old notes,” he said, arguing that the Houthis are using the currency as leverage to pressure the Yemeni government in Aden to deal again with the central bank in Sana’a.

“The Houthi group would not be able to put into place their electronic riyal. They are using this as a pressure tool on the international community and the internationally recognized government (of Yemen) to restore the central bank in Sana’a.”

Shortly after the Houthis began confiscating the new notes, banks and exchange companies suffered cash problems, triggering them to increase remittance charges five times.

Nasr warned that the larger impact of the Houthi decision would be on the stabilization of the currency, affecting everyone in the country.

“It puts the country’s economy in the wind by undermining monetary policies that led to the stabilization of the riyal this year. It will stifle the private sector and force it into using under-the-table options,” he said.





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Yemeni general vows to seize Sanaa from HouthiHouthi militants in Yemen shell World Food Program's Hodeidah grain store

[Journalists in Turkey convicted of terrorism](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-12-30 00:22

JEDDAH: Seven people from a Turkish newspaper including six journalists have been convicted of terror-related charges. An Istanbul court convicted the group from Sözcü newspaper on Friday, handing down prison terms of two years

or more.

The charges relate to a failed coup attempt in 2016 to oust the Turkish government and remove President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Ankara blamed the coup attempt on Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish preacher who has lived in self-imposed exile in the US since 1999.

The seven individuals were convicted of helping the coup perpetrators through their reporting.

Columnists Emin Colasan and Necati Dogru were handed down sentences of three years and six months. The paper's chief editor Metin Yilmaz and its online edition's managing editor, Mustafa Cetin, were given three years. Online news editor Yucel Ari, financial manager Yonca Yucelan and journalist Gokmen Ulu were sentenced to two years each.

They will appeal the verdict and have denied the charges against them. Sözcü denounced the verdict as a "black stain."

Turkey is ranked the second highest jailer of journalists in the world according to data from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).

Currently 108 journalists are incarcerated in Turkey, where the media industry is either controlled directly by the government or by conglomerates which are dependent on government contracts and therefore back the state's position.

"Turkey's daily Sözcü is and always has been openly critical of the group which the journalists were found guilty of helping," Ozgur Ogret, the CPJ's Turkey representative, told Arab News. "This trial has always been an absurd one from the very beginning by that fact alone."

HIGHLIGHT

The seven individuals were convicted of helping the coup perpetrators through their reporting.

Dozens of media outlets were shut down following the coup attempt and, as many newspapers depend on advertising revenue that the Press Advertising Agency allocates from state resources, there emerged another trigger for self-censorship and restrictions on the space for independent journalism. Sözcü is a staunch opposition of the domestic and foreign policies of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP), enraging pro-government circles through critical headlines especially those regarding the president.

Colasan recently criticized Erdogan over his decision to send troops to Libya's Government of National Accord, asking how could the president speak so irresponsibly, while Dogru has written about government corruption. The newspaper also disclosed where Erdogan was on the day of the coup attempt, infuriating pro-Ankara figures who said the president had been made into a target.

"Turkish authorities have tried and imprisoned many journalists since the failed coup attempt of 2016 with highly questionable evidence of links to Gülen and his network, like in the Cumhuriyet trial," said Ogret. "The guilty verdict of the Sözcü trial is the latest example of this misguided approach." Kemal Kilicdaroglu, who leads the main opposition CHP, also condemned the

verdict. "It is a decision made upon the instruction of the political authority," he told Arab News. "They cannot tolerate that Sözcü enlightens Turkey and says the truth."



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Turkey will not withdraw from army posts in Syria's Idlib Turkey-backed Syrian rebels being sent to join Libya fighting

[Anxious Gazans fear for the future as daily life in Palestine worsens](#)

Author:

Mon, 2019-12-30 00:15

Mother-of-six Suad Sultan, 54, cannot hide her fear that the coming year will be all but impossible for her family along with other residents of the Gaza Strip.

After years of conflict, and with no political or economic solutions on the horizon, living conditions in the Palestinian enclave are steadily worsening. Two of Sultan's children are university graduates, but are unable to find work and build their own families, just as her husband cannot find a job with

a steady income.

"We are on the threshold of a new year, but I can see no difference between last year and the coming year. All I see is another year of suffering," Sultan said.

In 2012, the UN Conference on Trade and Development predicted that the Gaza Strip could become "uninhabitable by 2020."

"The social, health and security implications of high demographic growth and overpopulation are among the factors that may make Gaza uninhabitable by 2020," the report said. The Gaza Strip suffers from a scarcity of water sources. Up to 97 percent of the groundwater is unsuitable for drinking, forcing the local population to buy supplies from itinerant vendors.

SPEEDREAD

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A shortage of medical services is another pressing problem. Sultan said: "I don't care about official reports, positive or negative. The circumstances on the ground show that we are in a very bad situation."

High unemployment adds to the enclave's woes, with up to 60 percent of young people unable to find work. "We have been living in an uninhabitable place for many years," Ali Salman, 31, a freelance nurse told Arab News.

"Things have been getting complicated since the war in 2014, and if you look at our situation you will find that the elements of life are absent here. The electricity is cut off, infrastructure is destroyed, water is not safe to drink, transportation is difficult and agriculture continues to deteriorate.



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Hundreds join final Gaza-Israel border protests for three months
Organizers say Gaza protests to be scaled back in March