

Lebanon PM widens plea to secure food imports

Author:

Sat, 2019-12-07 23:39

BEIRUT: Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri on Saturday added Germany, Britain and Spain to the list of countries he has asked for help securing imports of food and raw materials amid an acute dollar shortage.

The Lebanese leader's appeal to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Spanish PM Pedro Sanchez follows an earlier plea to Saudi Arabia, France, Russia, Turkey, the US, China and Egypt.

Lebanon's call for help highlights the dire state of its economy, which is plunging deeper into recession with warnings by the World Bank of "increasing economic and financial pressures."

Hariri has called on "friendly countries" to help "address the liquidity shortage, and provide credits for imports to preserve food security and provide raw materials for production."

The year-long financial crisis in the country has been made worse by strict bank limits on dollar withdrawals and transfers abroad.

Widespread civil unrest and anti-corruption protests directed at the authorities led to the resignation of the government 40 days ago. With no agreement on a replacement PM, the country has been in a state of political deadlock for more than a month.

It is not clear whether parliamentary consultations on Monday will lead to the appointment of a new PM following disagreement between President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah, which want a techno-political government, and Hariri, who wants a government of experts.

Activists on Saturday highlighted the country's growing economic woes by organizing donations in front of the central bank to help the needy.

The economic stagnation can be felt in Beirut markets, with dozens of shops closed and supermarket shelves lying empty as people prepare for the holiday season.

More than 260 food establishments have been forced to close in the past two months, according to a management syndicate, with the number expected to rise to 465 by the end of the month.

"The crisis is not recent," said Tony Eid, head of the Beirut Traders Association. "Lebanon is witnessing a lack of liquidity among banks and consumers, and recent developments have aggravated the crisis.

"Hundreds of establishments, including clothing stores and restaurants, are

closing, while major importers are struggling to import from abroad," he said.

"Lebanon is sick and is being treated with painkillers with no signs of early recovery."

Pierre Achkar, head of the Hotel Owners Association, said that the hotels occupancy rate outside Beirut is "zero," while it ranges between 7 and 12 percent in the capital.

"This is the sector's worst crisis in its modern history," he added.

"Beirut was trying to restore its importance before the crisis, but with reduced banking facilities, we cannot expect tourists to come to Lebanon," he said. "We are working on a campaign to encourage tourism, but we still have no hotel reservations, which means they have booked somewhere else."

Achkar said that hotels had shut down 80 percent of their operations, closing some floors and restaurants, in a bid to stay afloat.

Meanwhile, Kamil Abu Suleiman, the caretaker government's labor minister, formed an emergency committee to oversee legal disputes following collective dismissals.

The ministry considered that "any dismissal carried out without its permission is considered an arbitrary dismissal," he said. "All those who fall victim to such measures and do not receive their legal compensation should consult the ministry."



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[Algeria's presidential debate falls flat, as anger simmers](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-12-07 23:25

ALGIERS: Algeria's first-ever presidential debate seems to have failed to persuade the country's pro-democracy protesters to take part in next week's election.

The five candidates recited their platforms instead of sparring over ideas in the Friday night debate – and they did not even look at each other.

Members of Algeria's 10-month-old protest movement shrugged off the exercise as a farce. They pushed out long-serving President Abdelaziz Bouteflika earlier this year, and now want a whole new political system. They oppose the election altogether because it is organized by Algeria's power structure, and they see the candidates as part of a corrupt and out-of-touch elite.

Students plan new protests Tuesday ahead of the first round of the election Thursday.

In the debate, the candidates – including former Prime Ministers Ali Benflis and Abdelmadjid Tebboune – responded to the same questions posed by four journalists.

The questions concerned their political and economic plans, unemployment, Algerians who risk their lives to migrate to Europe, education, health and foreign policy.

"We saw five candidates answering like automatons ... as if it were an oral examination," said journalism professor Djamel Mouafia.

Other commentators called it a missed opportunity for Algeria's leadership to show they're trying to be more transparent and democratic.

Criticism exploded on social media, notably from protesters.

"Before promising to defend freedoms, the candidates should have first denounced the mass arrest of protesters of the people's movement," activist

Hirak Abdelmadjid Benkaci wrote on his Facebook page.

The candidates had kind words for the peaceful movement, without directly addressing its demands for wholesale change.

Benflis said he chose to seek the presidency “knowing that all conditions are not met.”

“But if I am elected, my top priority would be to engage in a dialogue with the opponents of the presidential election. They have the right to have a point of view contrary to mine, but we must come together to reflect on political reforms,” according to the former prime minister.



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Huge protest days ahead of contentious Algeria vote
Algeria tries top figures for corruption as opposed election looms

[Lebanese women march in Beirut against](#)

sexual harassment

Author:

By OMAR AKOUR | AP

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Sat, 2019-12-07 16:04

BEIRUT: Scores of women marched through the streets of Beirut on Saturday to protest against sexual harassment and bullying and demanding rights including the passing of citizenship to children of Lebanese women married to foreigners.

The march started outside the American University of Beirut, west of the capital, and ended in a downtown square that has been witnessing daily protests for more than seven weeks.

Nationwide demonstrations in Lebanon broke out Oct. 17 against proposed taxes on WhatsApp calls turned into a condemnation of the country's political elite, who have run the country since the 1975-90 civil war. The government resigned in late October, meeting a key demand of the protesters.

"We want to send a message against sexual harassment. They say that the revolution is a woman, therefore, if there is a revolution, women must be part of it," said protester Berna Dao. "Women are being raped, their right is being usurped, and they are not able to pass their citizenship."

Activists have been campaigning for years so that parliament drafts a law that allows Lebanese women married to foreigners pass their citizenship to their husbands and children.

Earlier this year, Raya Al-Hassan became the first woman in the Arab world to take the post of interior minister. The outgoing Cabinet has four women ministers, the highest in the country in decades.

Lebanon is passing through a crippling economic and financial crisis that has worsened since the protests began.

During the women's protest in Riad Solh Square, a man set himself on fire before people nearby extinguished the flames. His motivation was not immediately clear and an ambulance came shortly afterward and evacuated him.

Also on Saturday, outgoing Prime Minister Saad Hariri appealed to more countries to help Lebanon in its crisis to import essential goods. The request made in a letter to the leaders of Germany, Spain and Britain, came a day after Hariri sent similar letters to other countries including Saudi Arabia, US, Russia and China.



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Lebanon's journalists suffer abuse, threats covering unrest
People with special needs protest in Lebanon

Israel detains Palestinian journalists for 'illegal activity'

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-06 22:18

JERUSALEM: Israeli police on Friday detained four journalists from Palestine's official television station in Jerusalem, drawing protest from Palestinians who say their activities in the holy city are increasingly restricted.

The Palestine TV crew was filming a talk show outside of Jerusalem's walled Old City when Israeli officers detained them and took their equipment, the Authority's Wafa news service said.

The journalists with the daily "Good Morning Jerusalem" program were held for four hours at a police station in Jerusalem and later released, said Mohammad Barghouti, Palestine TV's general manager for news.

Israeli police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said: "The journalists were detained in connection with illegal activity by (the) Palestinian Authority in Jerusalem."

Israel forbids any official activity in Jerusalem by the Western-backed PA, saying it breaches Israel's sovereignty over the city and violates interim peace agreements.

The Palestinians want East Jerusalem, which includes the Old City, as capital of a future state. Israel annexed the area after capturing it in the 1967 Middle East war and says the entire city is its eternal and indivisible capital.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas condemned the journalists' detention as "part of the Israeli government's scheme to entrench Israeli control over the occupied city of Jerusalem and its holy sites."

In November, Israel ordered the closure of Palestine TV's Jerusalem office for six months on the grounds that it was planning to stage activities for the PA, which exercises limited self-rule in the occupied West Bank adjacent to Jerusalem.

An office of the PA's Education Ministry in Jerusalem was also given a six-month closure notice in November, which Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Gilad Erdan said at the time was "part of a firm policy against any attempt by the (PA) to violate our sovereignty in the capital."

The last round of peace talks between the two sides broke down in 2014. Palestinians have boycotted US President Donald Trump's mediation efforts, partly over his recognition in 2017 of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.



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Close associates of Israeli PM to be indicted in graft case
Israeli troops kill Palestinian teen at Gaza protest

[UN: Iranian forces were 'shooting to kill' protesters](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-06 21:59

GENEVA: Iranian security forces were “shooting to kill” in their deadly crackdown against protesters in recent weeks, according to credible video footage, the UN human rights chief said on Friday.

It had obtained “verified video footage” showing security forces firing on protesters, apparently with intent to kill, the UN human rights office said in a statement.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet said the unrest left at least 208 people dead nationwide, supporting a toll previously given by

Amnesty International.

"There are also reports, which the UN Human Rights Office has so far been unable to verify, suggesting more than twice that number killed," the statement added.

Iran disputes death toll figures released by foreign organizations but has so far refused to any countrywide casualty or arrest figures.

Bachelet said footage received by her office appears to show demonstrators were gunned down while running away, or being shot "directly in the face and vital organs."

It also said that at least 7,000 people have "reportedly" been arrested in Iran since mass demonstrations erupted last month, and called for the immediate release of those arbitrarily detained.

Such actions amounted to "serious violations of human rights," Bachelet said.

She urged Iran to allow independent investigations into the violations, and release of all protesters who were unfairly stripped of their liberty during the crackdown.

"Verified video footage indicates severe violence was used against protesters, including armed members of security forces shooting from the roof of a justice department building in one city, and from helicopters in another," Bachelet said.

Bachelet's office said it had received many reports of ill-treatment against people arrested, "including with the apparent aim of extracting forced confessions."

The demonstrations began in mid-November after the government raised minimum gasoline prices. Cheap gasoline is practically considered a birthright in Iran, home to the world's fourth-largest crude oil reserves despite decades of economic woes. That disparity, especially given Iran's oil wealth, fueled the anger felt by demonstrators.

Additional video material shows "armed members of security forces shooting from the roof of a justice department building" in the city of Javanrud, west of Tehran in Kermanshah province, as well as gunfire from helicopters in Sadra, in Fars province.

The toll of at least 208 makes it the bloodiest unrest in Iran since the time of the Islamic revolution.

Iran has yet to give overall figures for the number of people killed or arrested when security forces moved in to quell the unrest that saw buildings torched and shops looted.

Bachelet charged that "many of the arrested protesters have not had access to a lawyer," while raising alarm over "reports of severe overcrowding and harsh

conditions in detention centers, which in some cities include military barracks, sports venues and schools.”

“I urge the authorities to immediately release from detention all protesters who have been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty,” she further said.

The 2009 Green Movement protests that followed a disputed presidential election drew millions to the streets but saw far less killing.

The demonstrations show the widespread economic discontent gripping Iran since May 2018, when President Donald Trump imposed crushing sanctions after unilaterally withdrawing the US from the nuclear deal that Tehran struck with world powers. That decision has seen Iran begin to break limits of the deal, as well as a series of attacks across the Mideast that America has blamed on Tehran.



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