

# Bus accident kills 24 in northern Tunisia: ministry

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TUNIS: At least 24 Tunisians were killed and 18 more injured when a bus plunged into a ravine on Sunday, in one of the country's worst road accidents.

The bus had set off from Tunis to the picturesque northern mountain town of Ain Draham, a popular autumn destination for Tunisians near the Algerian border, the tourism ministry said.

Twenty-four people were killed and 18 injured, the victims aged between 20 and 30, said the health ministry.

An AFP team that went to the scene saw the mangled remains of the bus leaning on its side in the ravine near a river bed, with its seats scattered around the crash site.

The top of the bus appears to have been torn off and bodies, some in sports clothes and trainers, were strewn across the ground.

A sign reading in English "Sweet Time Travel" – apparently the name of the travel agency that ferried the tourists from Tunis – lay among the debris.

The bus with 43 people on board was travelling through the northern Ain Snoussi region when it veered off the road, the interior ministry said.

The vehicle had "fallen into a ravine after crashing through an iron barrier", it said on its Facebook page.

The injured were transferred to nearby hospitals, it added.

Forensic experts were deployed to investigate the crash, AFP correspondents said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the accident, but Tunisian roads are known to be dangerous and run-down.

Tourism Minister Rene Trabelsi told a private radio station Mosaïque FM that the "unfortunate accident took place in a difficult area" and just after the bus had taken a "sharp bend".

A civil defence official, speaking on state television, said there had previously been deadly accidents at the same spot.

Khaled Ayadi, who had arrived at the scene after the accident, told AFP he saw the bodies of "people scattered (all around) and blood".

He said that he and other motorists who had stopped by the side of the road started to help and try to retrieve the bodies until the rescuers arrived and took over the gruesome task.

"On this road there are always accidents, especially trucks... We must find a solution for this road so there are no more accidents," Ayadi said, adding that Sunday's accident was overwhelming.

Social network users bemoaned the tragedy. "What a heavy toll," one of them said.

Another denounced the "roads of death" in Tunisia and wrote: "24 dead and no

one from the government has declared a national catastrophe". The World Health Organization in 2015 said Tunisia had the second worst traffic death rate per capita in North Africa, behind only war-torn Libya. Experts blamed run-down roads, reckless driving and poor vehicle maintenance for a rise in accidents the following year. Tunisian President Kais Saied and Prime Minister Youssef Chahed visited the scene of Sunday's accident, one of Tunisia's worst. In April, seven women day labourers were among 12 people killed when the pickup truck taking them to work collided with a minivan in the impoverished central region of Sidi Bouzid. In August 2016, at least 16 people were killed and 85 others wounded in another road accident in the mountainous region of Kasserine. The authorities recognise the scale of the problem but have said the country's security challenges, including jihadist attacks, have kept them from giving it more attention.



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# Nearly 70 dead in Syria regime clashes with Idlib militants

Author:

AFP

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1575201403992650700

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SURMAN, Syria: Two days of clashes between regime forces and armed groups in Syria's last major opposition bastion have killed nearly 70 on both sides, a war monitoring group said Sunday.

The battles in the northwestern province of Idlib are the most violent there since a Russian-brokered cease-fire agreement went into effect in late August, said the head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

On Sunday morning, clouds of smoke rose over the Maaret Al-Numan region as warplanes pounded militants and allied rebels in positions they had recently recaptured from regime forces, said an AFP correspondent.

Residents of affected villages fled north to escape the fighting, adding to the tens of thousands who have already flooded out of the province's violence-plagued south since an escalation started earlier this year.

The Observatory on Sunday put the death toll from fighting at 69 combatants since battles started the previous day.

At least 36 regime forces were among those killed.

It said an attack led by Syria's former Al-Qaeda affiliate on several regime positions had initially sparked the fighting.

Overnight, the Syrian army backed by Russian warplanes launched a counter-push to reclaim territory it had lost in the battles, according to the Britain-based war monitor.

Regime forces have since regained lost ground but violent clashes are ongoing, the war monitor and an AFP correspondent said.

The Idlib region, home to around three million people including many displaced by Syria's eight-year civil war, is controlled by the country's former Al-Qaeda affiliate.

The Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham jihadist alliance also controls parts of neighboring Aleppo and Latakia provinces where battles with regime forces have also recently taken place.

The region is one of the last holdouts of opposition to forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

A cease-fire announced by Russia in late August has reduced violence in the area.

Between the end of April and the end of August, Idlib was pounded ceaselessly by Syrian soldiers backed by Russian air power.

The Observatory estimates that nearly 1,000 civilians were killed in that period, and the UN says that more than 400,000 people were displaced.

The war in Syria has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions since it erupted in 2011.



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## [Iran may 'reconsider' atomic watchdog commitments](#)

Author:

AFP

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1575201041342610900

Sun, 2019-12-01 11:33

TEHRAN: Iran warned Sunday it may "seriously reconsider" its commitments to the UN atomic watchdog if European parties to a nuclear deal trigger a dispute mechanism that could lead to sanctions.

The 2015 nuclear accord has been unraveling since last year when the United States unilaterally withdrew from it and began reimposing sanctions on Iran. The three European countries still party to the deal – Britain, France and Germany – have been trying to salvage it but their efforts have so far borne little fruit.

“If they use the trigger (mechanism), Iran would be forced to seriously reconsider some of its commitments to” the International Atomic Energy Agency, said parliament speaker Ali Larijani.

“If they think doing so is more beneficial to them, they can go ahead,” he told a news conference in Tehran.

In May, one year after the US pullout, Iran began retaliating by scaling back its commitments to the deal – known formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Following its latest step back this month, the European parties warned the JCPOA’s dispute resolution mechanism could be triggered if Iran continued down that path.

It covers various stages that could take several months to unfold, but the issue could eventually end up before the UN Security Council, which could decide to reimpose sanctions.

Larijani also suggested the current deadlock with the United States could be “fixed” if Iran’s arch-foe learns from the past.

Ahead of the 2015 deal, then US president Barack “Obama wrote a letter and said that I accept Iran’s enrichment, now let’s negotiate,” he said.

“If the American officials have just as much wisdom, to use past experiences, then they can fix this issue.”

The JCPOA set out restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of Western sanctions.



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Iran starts enriching uranium at Fordow amid reports UN nuclear inspector detained

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## Pro-vote Algerians march against 'foreign interference'

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 22:59

ALGIERS: Several hundred Algerians marched on Saturday in support of a presidential election rejected by a mass protest movement that has rocked the North African country since February.

The march was organized by the UGTA trades union group which is close to the National Liberation Front of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who quit in April under pressure from the street. The UGTA supported Bouteflika during his 20 years at the helm in Algeria.

Pro-regime "spontaneous" rallies have been held across the country as the Dec. 12 polling day nears, but Saturday's was the first staged by a group close to the regime.

"No to foreign interference!" read one placard in response to a European Parliament resolution on Thursday.

The resolution condemned "the arbitrary and unlawful arrest and detainment of, attacks on and intimidations of journalists, trade unionists, lawyers, students, human rights defenders and civil society and all peaceful protesters" in Algeria.

Algiers denounced what it called "flagrant interference in its internal affairs" and a "disregard" for its institutions.

Marchers on Saturday also voiced their support for the military, whose chief Gen. Ahmed Gaid Salah has been Algeria's de facto ruler since Bouteflika stepped down.

"The Dec. 12 vote will go ahead," demonstrators chanted as they also railed against former colonial power France, telling its "children" – anti-vote protesters – to "get out."

Despite protests being banned in the capital since 2001, police escorted the marchers and arrested several onlookers who shouted anti-poll slogans or insulted demonstrators.

The authorities have tolerated massive weekly demonstrations that been kept up despite Bouteflika's departure, but they have also begun to disperse

protesters in Algiers in recent weeks.

Anti-vote protesters fear the poll will cement in power politicians close to Bouteflika. The five candidates standing all either supported him or took part in his government.



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## [US-Russia tensions 'complicate' UN peace efforts for Libya](#)

Author:

Sat, 2019-11-30 22:51

TUNIS: For the UN's Libya envoy, US-Russia tensions top a list of "complications" in efforts to heal international divisions on the North African state's conflict, he told AFP in an interview.

Ghassan Salame said: "The road is (still) full of obstacles and complications" toward convening inter-Libyan peace talks that could be held in Geneva "probably in the first half of January."

"We've recently had many complications, primarily of course concerning this Russian-American tension on the possible presence (in Libya) of Russian security firms," said Salame.

Washington has repeatedly voiced concern over alleged Russian meddling in the conflict that is being exploited by several outside powers for a proxy war.

Russia is suspected of providing military support to eastern Libya's eastern commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, whose forces on April 4 launched a now stalled assault on the Tripoli base of the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).

In early November, Russia denied media reports of Russian mercenaries backing up Haftar's forces, who already have the support of the UAE, Jordan and Egypt.

The GNA, for its part, is propped up by Turkish military aid.

Under an action plan adopted by the UN Security Council in July, Salame has been working to organize an international conference in Berlin aimed primarily at ending foreign interference in Libya, which is in theory under a UN arms embargo.

"Arms are coming in from everywhere," the UN envoy told AFP at his office in Tunis.

Four preparatory meetings have been held in the German capital and a final session is scheduled to take place on Dec. 10, he said.

Apart from the Security Council's five permanent member states, Germany, Italy, Egypt, the UAE and Turkey have also taken part.

"If all goes well, we'll be able to set a date ... for the political meeting that should take place most probably in the first days of 2020," in which other countries could also join, said the UN envoy, to be followed by the inter-Libyan talks.

On the Russian mercenaries, Salame said he was not in a position to confirm their presence in Libya that appeared to have motivated "a growing American interest" in the North African country.

Previously, "the Americans had practically limited their interest to two fundamental questions: The fight against terrorism and the normal flow of oil production," he said.

Senior US officials met with Haftar earlier this month to discuss steps toward ending his offensive on Tripoli, and accused Russia of exploiting the conflict, the State Department said.



Despite apparent initial support for Haftar on the part of US President Donald Trump, Washington has called for a halt to the offensive in the wake of a visit to the US capital by a GNA delegation earlier this year.

Salame termed the renewed US interest in Libya “a novelty” and said the UN, “like the Libyans, are waiting for clarity on what the Americans think they can do” in the country.

The UN envoy also said a military deal signed by Turkey and the GNA following a meeting with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul had added to international tensions.

Their agreements on security and military cooperation, as well as maritime jurisdictions, have raised heckles among Egypt, Greece and Cyprus, he pointed out.

On the humanitarian front, Salame said that the deadlocked fighting south of Tripoli between pro-GNA and Haftar’s forces had caused “a lot of destruction” on top of a civilian casualty toll of at least 200 killed and 300 injured.

Among the combatants, the UN estimates more than 2,000 dead or wounded, he said.

The UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), which Salame heads, has registered more than 146,000 displaced by the fighting launched almost eight months ago.

The envoy said the actual figure for the displaced was much higher, with more than 100,000 believed to have taken refuge across the border in Tunisia.



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[UN envoy for Libya Ghassan Salame](#)

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