

'You all go' – thousands of Algerians demonstrate for political reforms

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ALGIERS: With banners reading "You all go" and "We need new figures," tens of thousands of protesters gathered in the Algerian capital on Friday for what has become a regular demonstration demanding the removal of the ruling elite. After 20 years in power, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika quit on April 2 under pressure from protesters and the army, but protests have continued, seeking political reforms and the removal of all officials belonging to the old guard.

This was the 16th consecutive Friday that protesters have taken part in a mass rally.

There was no official count but a Reuters reporters estimated more people joined than the last four Fridays during the holy Muslim month of Ramadan when most fasted until sunset, but fewer than the weeks before that.

The demonstrators are pushing for radical change by seeking the departure of senior figures, including politicians and businessmen, who have governed the North African country since independence from France in 1962.

On Thursday, interim President Abdelkader Bensalah called for all parties to launch an "inclusive dialogue" to prepare for presidential elections, following the constitutional council's scrapping of a vote set for July 4. Bensalah is leading the transition as upper house speaker. He had initially been elected by parliament for 90 days until elections planned for July 4. No new date has been set, to the anger of protesters.

Bensalah said on Thursday he would stay in power until a new president had been elected, despite calls from protesters for him to quit.

One banner held up by protesters read: "Bensalah go."

The army, the country's most powerful institution, has met a number of protesters' demands including launching anti-graft probes against people suspected of misuse of power and public funds.

Last month, Bouteflika's youngest brother, Said, and two former intelligence chiefs were placed in custody by a military judge over allegations of "harming the army's authority and plotting against state authority."

At least five businessmen, including the country's richest man, Issad Rebrab, who is active in food industry and sugar refining, have been detained for alleged involvement in corruption scandals. (Reporting by Hamid Ould Ahmed; Writing by Ulf Laessing; Editing by Frances Kerry and Toby Chopra)



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[Iraq harvests go up in smoke, but who lit the fires?](#)

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KIRKUK, Iraq: Resurgent jihadists, ethnic land disputes or regular field burning? Iraq's northern farmlands are on fire, but the area's complex patchwork of grievances has made it hard to identify the culprits.

Farmers in the country's breadbasket had been hoping for bumper wheat and barley harvests in May and June, following heavy winter rains.

Instead, many saw their hopes turned to ash.

The Iraqi fire service says that in a single month, 236 fires destroyed 5,183 hectares (more than 12,800 acres) of farmland – the equivalent of more than 7,000 football pitches.

The blazes hit four northern provinces, all of which had been at least partly controlled by the Daesh group and have remained prey to the jihadists' sleeper cells.

IS has continued to carry out hit-and-run attacks despite losing its Iraqi foothold in late 2017 and its last Syrian enclave just a few months ago.

Indeed, the group was quick to claim responsibility for the fires.

In its weekly online magazine Al-Naba, it said its fighters had destroyed "hundreds of hectares" owned by "apostates" in the provinces of Kirkuk, Nineveh, Salahaddin and Diyala.

Officials in those areas told AFP they believed IS was responsible for at least some of the fires.

"IS fighters set fire to the fields because the farmers refused to pay them zakat," said one police officer in Kirkuk, referring to a tax imposed under Islamic law.

"They came by motorcycle, started the fires and also planted explosives that would go off when residents or firefighters got there," he told AFP.

The mines have killed at least five people and wounded 10 in Kirkuk province.

But experts are reluctant to blame all of the fires on pyro-jihadists.

The extreme heat of northern Iraq, where temperatures have been hitting 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit), has created tinder-dry conditions in which a stray cigarette can easily set a field alight.

Farmers are also known to burn off vegetation in fields left fallow to make the soil more fertile for future seasons.

And the longstanding tug-of-war over land in northern Iraq likely plays a role, said security expert Hisham Al-Hashemi.

"IS claimed dozens of fires, but the others were certainly the product of land disputes, most often among tribes," he told AFP.

Kirkuk, whose status is disputed by federal government and autonomous Kurdish regional administration, has witnessed periodic violence between Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen.

So has Nineveh, which has seen 119 fires in recent weeks, 16 of them on Thursday alone, according to its agricultural department chief Duraid Hekmat.

"There could be a variety of reasons – it could be deliberate or just an act of God, it could be negligence or personal disputes," he said.

Nineveh was among the provinces hardest hit by IS, which seized its capital Mosul as its headquarters in 2014 and slaughtered thousands of members of its Yazidi religious minority.

"We're facing a huge shortage of fire trucks. We have 50-55 vehicles but it's not enough for 1.5 million hectares," said Zakaria Ahmad, deputy head of Nineveh's fire service.

The fires have been devastating for farmers banking on a good harvest to pay off their debts.

Around a third of Iraqis rely on agriculture for their livelihoods, with the government subsidising seeds and guaranteeing to buy part of the harvest.

Kirkuk's 200,000 hectares produce an average 650,000 tons every year, according to Burhan Assi, who heads the provincial council's agricultural service.

"This year, thanks to the rains, we were expecting around four tons per hectare, compared to just two last year because of the drought," he told AFP. But most of that has been destroyed in fires he called "the biggest, most widespread we've ever seen."

Raad Sami, who farms land in southern Kirkuk, lost 90 hectares of wheat to the fires, which he blamed on IS.

"We had been waiting for the end of the season to reap our harvest and sell

it to pay back our debts,” he said.

“Right now, the government needs to compensate us.”

Youssef Ahmad, a Turkmen farmer, doesn't know who burned his fields. But he doesn't much care.

“Either it was IS, people who want to seize our land, or the result of a dispute between Baghdad and the Kurds,” he said.

“All together, they successfully destroyed Iraq's economy and agriculture. Because of them, we're going to have to import wheat.”



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[Egypt officials say police kill 8 militants in Sinai](#)

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CAIRO: Egypt says its security forces have killed eight militants in the restive northern Sinai Peninsula, two days after a deadly attack killed several police.

The Interior Ministry issued a statement Friday saying it had received information about insurgents hiding in an olive farm south of the city of El-

Arish. While hunting them down, a shootout ensued killing the militants, who had in their possession five automatic rifles, a bomb and two explosive belts, according to the statement cited by the official MENA news agency. On Thursday, Egypt announced the killing of 14 militants linked to Wednesday's attack that left eight policemen killed near El-Arish. Daesh had claimed responsibility for the attack.

Egypt has battled militants for years in northern Sinai, where an affiliate of Daesh is based.



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goods' deal to ease sanctions

Thu, 2019-06-06 23:46

BAGHDAD: Iranian and US officials are in the early stages of negotiating an agreement to allow Tehran to sell limited quantities of oil in exchange for goods, Iraqi sources have told Arab News.

Iraq will be the transit point for both the oil exports and the import of goods, according to officials in Baghdad familiar with the talks.

Washington's stated policy is for sanctions to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero, and US government sources denied to Arab News that there was a deal to permit limited sales. However, a senior Iraqi official familiar with what he described as "ongoing talks" said the deal was "a goodwill gesture offered by the Americans to calm the escalation between the two countries, although it is still in its preliminary stages."

Iran arms, equips and controls dozens of armed factions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, whose activities are a serious threat to the US and its allies in the region. One of the aims of US economic sanctions is to prevent Tehran from funding these groups.

"The main goal that the Americans are looking to achieve is preventing the Iranians from obtaining any cash," a second Iraqi official familiar with the talks told Arab News.

"The deal will allow the Americans to monitor and control everything, the amount of Iranian crude oil exported and the kind of goods imported, and be sure that no cash is paid.

"This will paralyze the Iranians and force them to abandon the armed factions they fund and will keep them busy dealing with the internal Iranian situation."

The initial deal is thought to have been concluded by Bijan Zanganeh, the Iranian minister of oil, on an unannounced visit to Iraq a month ago. It is not yet final because details such as the amount of oil to be sold, the main buyer and the kind of goods to be imported are still under discussion.

"The Iranians suggested one of the European countries as a key buyer for the oil but the Americans refused," a source familiar with the talks told Arab News.

"The confirmed thing so far is that Iraq will be the transit area for the exchange operations, so the US can closely monitor the commitment of the Iranians."

The agreement is based on the UN oil-for-food program implemented in Iraq in 1995 to ease the impact of sanctions imposed after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The program allowed Iraq to sell oil in exchange for food, medicine, and other humanitarian needs under UN supervision without obtaining

funds to boost its military.

“The targeted shape of the suggested deal is almost a copy of the oil-for-food program, but Iraq will replace the UN as the supervisor of procurement and receipt and disbursement of funds,” a prominent Shiite leader and a member of Iraq’s oil and power parliamentary committee familiar with the talks told Arab News.

“The proposal is to open a bank account in the Iraqi Central Bank in favor of Iran to deposit the money obtained from the sale of Iranian oil, and then for Iraq to pay for Iranian purchases later, using this money.

Monitoring

“This mechanism will enable the Americans to follow the money closely and monitor Iran’s disbursements.”

Another member of the oil and power parliamentary committee said: “The opening of the bank account, the receipt of the oil money and the payment of the invoices for Iran’s purchases are among the points agreed upon.”

A prominent Shiite leader familiar with the deal told Arab News it also included maintaining all the pre-sanctions contracts that Iran signed with European, Chinese and other Asian companies to provide medical supplies and spare parts for the oil industry. Iraq will financially cover these contracts from the money in the proposed Iranian account.

The deal would also solve another issue. Iraq imported 1,100MW of electricity per day from Iran for many years, in addition to 28 million cubic meters of gas that generates a further 4,000MW.

Supplies ceased last summer because Iraq was unable to pay as a result of US financial sanctions on Iran. The subsequent power shortages led to violent demonstrations in the Shiite-dominated provinces in southern Iraq. At least 17 people were killed, including members of the security forces, and government and party offices, including the Iranian Consulate, were burned.



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Author:

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