

Lebanon calls on Iran to release citizen who is US resident

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Fri, 2019-05-03 15:44

BEIRUT: Lebanon is calling on Iran to use the upcoming holy month of Ramadan to grant amnesty to a Lebanese citizen who is also a US resident imprisoned there for more than three years.

The appeal for the release of Nizar Zakka came Friday in a letter sent by Lebanon's Foreign Minister to his Iranian counterpart. The letter was delivered to the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon.

Zakka, a US permanent resident, is an advocate for Internet freedom and has done some work for the US government. He has been imprisoned in Iran since his arrest in September 2015 while attending a state-sponsored conference. He was sentenced to 10 years on espionage-related charges.

In 2017, Zakka went on a hunger strike for over a month calling for his release.



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Hariri: 'Promising summer' for Lebanon after Saudi travel warning liftedIt's

austerity or catastrophe, Saad Hariri tells Lebanon

[Three Palestinians killed by Israeli military in Gaza](#)

Fri, 2019-05-03 19:58

GAZA: Three Palestinians were killed by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip Friday, authorities in the territory said, after Israel said two of its soldiers were wounded in a shooting on the border.

One of the Palestinians was shot dead along the frontier while the two others were killed in an air strike, the health ministry in Gaza said.

The Israeli army said the air strike was in retaliation for the shooting incident on the border that left its soldiers wounded.

The Gaza ministry named the men killed in the air strike as Abdullah Abu Mallouh, 33 and Alaa al-Bubli, 29, while the man killed in the clashes was 19-year-old Raid Abu Teer.

The Israeli military said it had hit a base belonging to Gaza's rulers Hamas after shots were fired at its forces along the border.

The army said "one soldier was moderately injured, and another soldier was lightly injured" when they came under fire during renewed protests.

An army spokeswoman said around 5,200 Palestinians had taken part in the demonstrations throughout the day.

Hamas did not immediately comment on the affiliation of the Palestinians killed but pledged to respond to what it called an "Israeli aggression."

Palestinians have been taking part in often violent demonstrations along the border for more than a year, calling on Israel to ease its crippling blockade of the strip.

At least 268 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire since the protests began in March 2018, the majority along the border.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed in that period.

Israel accuses Hamas of using the protests as cover to carry out attacks.



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Israel targets Hamas in Gaza after 'balloon bombs' launched
Palestinian teen killed by Israeli fire in border clashes: Gaza ministry

[Guterres calls on Lebanese government to prevent Hezbollah holding weapons](#)

Fri, 2019-05-03 19:30

LONDON: UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on the Lebanese government to prevent Hezbollah and other groups from owning weapons in a report issued by the UN on Friday.

The report added that the presence of armed militias threatened Lebanon's stability and security.

It also stressed the need for the state to monopolize weapons and the use of force.

In May 2018, Guterres strongly criticized Hezbollah for operating as the most heavily armed militia and a political party in Lebanon and urged the militant group to halt military activities inside and outside the country, including in Syria.

In a report to the Security Council, Guterres also called on Lebanon's government and armed forces "to take all measures necessary to prohibit Hezbollah and other armed groups from acquiring weapons and building paramilitary capacity" outside the authority of the state.

"In a democratic state, it remains a fundamental anomaly that a political party maintains a militia that has no accountability to the democratic, governmental institutions of the state but has the power to take that state to war," he said.

Hezbollah, which is mainly financed by Iran, is considered a terror group by the US, Canada, Israel and the Arab League.

The heavily armed group has a large militia that has taken part in Syria's civil war alongside President Bashar Al-Assad's government, and also has elected members of parliament and positions in Lebanon's national unity government.

The group's influence over Lebanese state institutions has expanded in the last year. Together with allies that view its arsenal as an asset to Lebanon, it won more than 70 of parliament's 128 seats in an election last year.

The group has taken three of the 30 portfolios in the government formed by the Western-backed Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri in January, including the health ministry – the first time it has held a ministry with a significant budget.



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Lebanon committed to reforms: PMUS targets two individuals, three entities in Hezbollah-related sanctions program

[Summit was attended by heads of government, ministers and bankers from Arab and foreign countries](#)

Thu, 2019-05-02 22:35

BEIRUT: Lebanon is committed to “carrying out the required economic reforms despite the existing difficulties,” Prime Minister Saad Hariri said in his opening address at the 27th Arab Economic Forum in Beirut.

The task is “not easy, especially if we want to fight corruption and waste,” he added. His speech came after Lebanon’s labor union called a strike to protest austerity measures.

“Waste is a huge calamity in Arab countries, and the real waste lies in the time we’re wasting every day without developing our laws. When our energy bill reaches \$40 billion, this too is waste,” said Hariri, who spoke of “optimistic reform plans.”

He added: “These reforms are in the interest of Lebanese citizens and the youth who can’t find jobs.” He promised to rebuild the country as his father did when he was prime minister.

There is a need to “tighten the belt because our financial situation is worn out, so either we all sink or we put an end to the economic decline for everyone’s sake,” Hariri said at a Cabinet session this week.

“Any action in this sense isn’t against any Lebanese group, but aims to protect all the people of Lebanon.”

Addressing the Arab Economic Forum, he said: “Today, we have a choice to make in Lebanon: Do we want to reach a point of economic collapse, or do we want to look at a country like Egypt and say this is the experience we must implement? This is the change we must make.”

He added: “There are changes and openness (in the Arab Gulf states), which we also see in Egypt. We hope this change is contagious and expands to the entire Arab world so that we all work together as one team.”

At the forum, Egypt’s Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli outlined his country’s efforts in recent years to implement economic reforms in order to achieve comprehensive and sustainable economic, social and environmental growth.

“Egypt has begun to reap the fruits and positive results of the reforms, the most important of which was achieving an annual economic growth rate of 5.3 percent during the fiscal year 2017/2018, the highest in 10 years,” he said.

“The balance of payments has generated a surplus of about \$12.8 billion, and the extent of foreign exchange reserves held rose from \$14.9 billion in June 2014 to \$44 billion in February 2019, covering about eight months of commodity imports after it used to cover three months only.”

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit spoke of the region’s need for about 50 million more jobs by the middle of the century.

“We need to create jobs that are suitable for the education and expertise of the youth,” he said. “Unemployment rates are dramatically rising among the educated youth, and we can’t remain indifferent toward this phenomenon.”

SPEEDREAD

Egypt’s Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouli outlined his country’s efforts to implement economic reforms to achieve economic, social and environmental growth.

Mohamed Abdo Saidou, president of the Federation of Arab Chambers of Commerce, said: “Strengthening reliance on the digital economy would contribute more than \$3 trillion to the growth of Arab GDP (gross domestic product).”

He urged Arab governments to strengthen the private sector’s role so that it acts as the driver and largest employer of Arab talent. He also called for inter-Arab alliances to provide parallel development.

Joseph Torbey, chairman of the Association of Banks in Lebanon and the World Union of Arab Bankers, said: “In light of current and forthcoming developments, the pressures on Arab banks and the challenges facing them, including the continuing slowdown in deposit growth and the decline in asset quality, are expected to continue.”

He called for “formulating economic development and reform plans in our region through diversifying sources of economic growth, entering into a new generation of reforms, promoting entrepreneurship, strengthening sources for financing SMEs (small and medium enterprises) and start-ups, and developing the knowledge economy as a key growth engine.”

Torbey said: “The banking sector in Lebanon is a key player in Lebanon’s economic life, and has helped maintain monetary stability over the past quarter-century, curbed inflation, and protected the purchasing power of salaries, wages and low-income groups. Therefore, the banking system and its deposits shouldn’t be subject to seasonal tax on every occasion.”



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Prime Minister Hariri: Lebanon should learn from Egypt's economic development
UN force says third tunnel crossed Lebanon-Israel border

[War on the phone front: Combat game all the rage in Libya](#)

Author:

Thu, 2019-05-02 21:43

TAJOURA, Libya: It's a day of rest from fighting on the front line in Libya and Abdelaziz and his comrades down their weapons only to pick up their phones and resume combat.

"(Khalifa) Haftar's guys are coming to get us," shouts Abdelaziz, referring to the military commander who launched a bid to capture Tripoli last month.

The eyes of the young men are fixed on mobile phones as they shoot it out in PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, or PUBG, a brutal "battle royale" game in which the winner is the last survivor.

The online multiplayer video game is among the world's most popular with more

than 360 million downloads.

The Iraqi Parliament voted last month to ban the game for “inciting violence” and it has also been outlawed in Nepal and the Indian state of Gujarat.

In Libya, PUBG is all the rage, especially on the front line in the suburbs of Tripoli and around the city where forces loyal to the internationally recognized Government of National Accord have been fighting Haftar’s Libyan National Army for the past month.

“We play it when we come back from the front, and sometimes even on the front,” the burly Abdelaziz says in his raspy voice.

The 25-year-old and his fellow fighters from a “katiba” or battalion in Misrata are battling alongside other pro-GNA forces in Ain Zara, a district in Tripoli’s southern suburbs.

That afternoon, they rested at their camp in Tajoura, a coastal town in the eastern part of the capital.

Under a large awning, Abdelaziz and his comrades – mostly in their 20s – put their Kalashnikov assault rifles patched up with tape and their rocket-propelled grenade launchers on a table.

They reach for their phones, go online and fire up the game with their carefully selected outfits and avatars, some more colorful than others.

They jump out of planes along with 100 other players and are parachuted onto an island where they collect weapons and eliminate each other until the last one is standing.

“I discovered the game a year ago thanks to these guys. I tried it out of curiosity and fell in love,” says Abdelaziz.

“At night, we play. You don’t sleep,” another player says with a laugh.

Mohamed Shaafi, a 19-year-old in a camouflage cap, chips in.

“Whether it’s morning, afternoon or night, we have to play,” he says.

“It excites us and we can even learn tricks (for the real battlefield): where to look, how to crawl, how to train.

“It motivates us when we play it before going to the front line,” he says, looking from under the visor of his cap raised like a cyclist’s.

Around the table, the first crackles of gunshots are heard from their phones.

Without ever taking their eyes off their screens, the four young men talk to each other as though in battle.

“There’s someone under the tree: Watch out!,” “Get down!,” “You’re far away!,” “You don’t have a gun? I’m here, don’t worry.”

For Abdelaziz, his virtual opponents are the same as “Haftar’s guys” who he fights in the potholed streets of Ain Zara.

“The front is PUBG in real life. That’s why we love this game,” Akram says with a smile, his combat helmet still on his head, as he watches the gameplay.

Abdelaziz says “there’s a big difference between real life and gaming.”

“In gaming, when you die, you can come back. In real life, it’s over.”

Mohamed, on the other hand, almost prefers the reality of the front.

“In the game, when you get hurt and call for help, no one comes, but on the battlefields, someone comes to help you,” says the young man with a bandage on his leg.

After 10 minutes of play, one of the players finally lifts his head from his screen.

He appears upset as he drops his phone on the table, before saying: “I’m out of battery.”



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Merkel to push for single EU stance on Libya crisis UAE says ‘extremist militias’ control Libyan capital