

Demonstrations erupt in Tunisian city demanding development

Author:

Mon, 2019-04-29 22:37

TUNIS: About 5,000 Tunisians protested on Monday in central Sidi Bouzid city against marginalization and deteriorating conditions, two days after the deaths of 12 female rural workers in a traffic accident.

Traffic stopped and schools, hospitals and public offices were closed under a regional strike called by unions in Sidi Bouzid, the birthplace of Tunisian revolution.

The deaths of 12 women traveling to work in an inappropriate vehicle in the village of Sabbela on Saturday provoked a wave of anger among Tunisians.

Similar incidents have occurred in recent months, fueling Tunisians' anger at the high cost of living, unemployment and decline of state services.

Protesters including women and youths in Sidi Bouzid chanted anti-government slogans.

In December, 2010, a young Tunisian vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in a suicide protest over unemployment and marginalization, spreading revolt across the Arab world.

"This strike is a support for the victims of this tragedy ... we suffer in Sidi Bouzid from marginalization and very bad conditions," said Mohamed Azhar Gamoudi, an official in the UGTT union.

Unemployment in the country stands at about 15 percent, up from 12 percent in 2010, due to weak growth and low investment.

Tunisia, since 2011, has also experienced multiple terrorist attacks that have killed dozens of members of the security forces and 59 foreign tourists.

The country has been under a state of emergency since November 2015, when a Daesh-claimed suicide bombing in Tunis killed 12 presidential guards.

On Friday, a Tunisian soldier was killed and three others were wounded in a mine blast in the restive Kasserine region, the Defense Ministry said, in an attack claimed by Al-Qaeda-linked terrorists.

The mine exploded on Mount Chambi, in Kasserine, where the army has conducted search operations since 2012 to hunt down terrorists linked both to Al-Qaeda and Daesh, the ministry said.

The area which borders Algeria – a "closed military zone" since 2014 – is considered to be a bastion of Okba Ibn Nafaa, a local affiliate of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Okba Ibn Nafaa claimed responsibility for the attack, SITE Intelligence Group reported late Friday.



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Tunisia soldier killed in mine blast in extremist bastion
Struggle over leadership deepens divisions in Tunisia president's party

[Guards repel assault on Libya's biggest oilfield](#)

Author:

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Mon, 2019-04-29 19:29

TRIPOLI/BENGAZI, Libya: An armed group attacked Libya's largest oilfield but was repelled after clashes with its protection force on Monday, while fighting escalated in eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar's effort to capture the capital, Tripoli.

The state oil company NOC said unknown gunmen fired a rocket propelled grenade at a control station of El Sharara oil field. Guards at the oilfield eventually repelled the attackers, an oil engineer there told Reuters. There were no casualties among oil workers and production was unaffected, the

National Oil Corporation (NOC) said in a statement.

OPEC member Libya's oil output has been repeatedly disrupted by factional conflict and blockades since the 2011 uprising that toppled dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

Haftar's three-week-old offensive to seize Tripoli, seat of Libya's internationally recognized government, has sharpened a power struggle that has fractured Libya since Qaddafi's fall.

The assault by the Haftar-led Libyan National Army (LNA), which is allied to a parallel government based in the eastern city of Benghazi, stalled on Tripoli's stoutly defended southern outskirts last week.

But fighting intensified again on Monday, with heavy shelling, small-arms fire and a warplane all heard in the center of Tripoli coming from southern districts, residents said. No more details were immediately available.

The LNA carried out an air raid overnight on at least one target south of Tripoli, residents said, though it was less intense than one on Saturday night.

The battle for Tripoli has killed 345 people, 22 of them civilians, a World Health Organization official said on Monday. A hospital in Tripoli was evacuated after shelling shattered some windows, he added in a tweet.

The UN refugee agency UNHCR said 146 refugees, mainly Africans and a handful of Syrians, were evacuated on Monday from Libya to Italy, where their asylum claims will be processed. Most of them had been transferred earlier this month from detention centers near the fighting, a spokeswoman said.

But 3,300 migrants and refugees remain trapped in detention centers near the Tripoli clashes, the UNHCR said.

"It's now crucial that other States match this gesture and offer similar evacuation places for refugees caught up in the conflict," UNHCR chief Filippo Grandi said in a statement.

Vulnerable oilfield

It was not clear who the gunmen who targeted El Sharara were affiliated to. The oilfield is in a southwestern region held by forces loyal to Haftar.

State guards and local tribesmen shut down El Sharara in December to press financial demands before allowing production to reopen in March. The field, operated by the NOC and foreign partners, has been pumping crude only intermittently due to blockades mostly by armed groups and other incidents.

UN officials say Haftar is backed militarily by the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, which want to build him up to help fight and neutralize Islamist militants in the region. His opponents see him as a budding new autocrat in Qaddafi's mold.

Divisions among European and Gulf nations over how to deal with Haftar have scuppered UN efforts to broker a cease-fire between the main factions to prepare Libya for elections to help reunify the country.

France and the United States been accused by Prime Minister Fayed Al-Serraj's government in Tripoli of playing both sides since Haftar launched his offensive. Paris has backed Haftar's efforts to curb radical Islamists while at the same time formally supporting Serraj's UN-recognized government.

Serraj is backed emphatically by Italy, the former colonial power that has oil assets in Libya, and Turkey. Qatar, a Gulf rival of the UAE, also supports Serraj.

UN Libya peace envoy Ghassan Salame warned nations tempted to continue

supporting Haftar that he was no democrat and his political agenda was not favored by most Libyans.

“He is no Abraham Lincoln, he is no big democrat, but he has qualities and wants to unify the country,” Salame told France Inter radio, referring to the president who steered United States through its Civil War, preserving the union, and abolished slavery.

Salame said his peacemaking effort was suffering from deep divisions within the UN Security Council that led to a British draft resolution on stopping the fighting over Tripoli being blocked last week by Russia and the United States.



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GNA advances in Tripoli, UN warns of worsening humanitarian situationUN:
Libya fighting reaches facility holding migrants

Family of Palestinian found dead in Turkish prison after UAE spying charges dismiss suicide claim

Mon, 2019-04-29 20:50

AMMAN: The family of a Palestinian man found dead in prison after being accused of spying for the UAE have dismissed Turkish claims that he committed suicide.

The Istanbul prosecutor's office said Monday that Zaki Mubarak Hassan had been found hanging in his cell in Silivri prison on Sunday.

But his brother, Zakaria, told Arab News that they did not believe he had killed himself and called for an "international investigation."

Zaki was one of two suspects charged earlier this month with international, political and military espionage, Reuters reported.

The pair were arrested on April 19 and had confessed to spying on Arab nationals for the UAE, a senior Turkish official said at the time.

The prosecutor's statement on Monday said an investigation has been launched and the Istanbul forensics institute has carried out an autopsy.

But Zakaria challenged the Turkish government to produce video footage from the cell to prove how his brother died.

"I don't trust the Turkish government nor do I trust the Palestinian ambassador (to Turkey)," Zakaria told Arab News from his home in Bulgaria. "I want an international investigation of what happened to him.

"My brother is innocent and our lawyers told us he would be released. The Turkish government didn't want that because they didn't want to show that they made a mistake."

Zakaria said his brother, who had nine children, went to Turkey for business and to make money for his family. He said Zaki's lawyer told him they had met on Friday and expected him to be released this week.

Turkey, he said, "cared more for its political interests rather than justice."

He said he had informed the Palestinian ambassador in Ankara of his brother's disappearance from a restaurant in Istanbul before his arrest was announced, but that the embassy stopped taking his calls.

Zaki's son, Yusuf, told Al-Arabiya that there should be an international commission to investigate his father's death.

"I want the creation of a specialized medical committee, including a trusted Palestinian doctor who can go there and do the autopsy on my father's corpse in order to find the truth himself," he said.

Relations between Turkey and Gulf allies, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, deteriorated after the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Kingdom's Istanbul consulate in October.





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Turkey's Erdogan vows to confront opponents inside party after vote loss
Turkey says trying to convince US to allow Iranian oil imports

[Algeria's ex-police chief to face graft probe](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-04-28 23:02

ALGIERS: A former Algerian police chief once considered a pillar of the regime of ousted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been summoned for questioning about allegations of corruption, state media said on Sunday.

Since Bouteflika resigned in early April after weeks of mass protests against his rule, several regime officials and businessmen who were close to him have

been sacked or detained over alleged graft.

Gen. Abdelghani Hamel, the former police chief once tipped as Bouteflika's successor before he was fired by the veteran leader in June 2018, is due to appear in court Monday with one of his sons, state radio said.

They are expected to be questioned as part of a judicial inquiry into "illegal activity, bribery, embezzlement of funds and abuse of power," according to state television.

Since Bouteflika's ouster investigators have cracked down on alleged graft, zeroing in on the activities of prominent politicians and businessmen as they try to clear away two decades of cronyism under the former president.

High-profile figures who were targeted over the past week include the North African country's richest man, Issad Rebrab, who was detained on Monday on allegations of false customs declarations.

The head of the vast state oil firm Sonatrach, Abdelmoumen Ould Kaddour, was fired and replaced on the orders of interim President Abdelkader Bensalah.

Four brothers from the influential Kouninef family, close to Bouteflika's brother Said, were also arrested last Sunday over alleged non-compliance with state contracts, according to state media.

A magistrate has also summoned for questioning Finance Minister Mohamed Loukal and former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia in connection with alleged misuse of public funds.

Late last month top Algerian businessman and Bouteflika backer Ali Haddad was arrested as he tried to cross the border into Tunisia with two passports and undeclared currency.



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Thousands protest against Algeria's ruling elite
Algeria's army chief hails judiciary for anti-graft move

[Russian 'siege' chokes Syrian camp in shadow of US base](#)

Author:

Sun, 2019-04-28 22:55

AMMAN: It was only when his children began to starve that Abdullah Al-Amour decided time had come to leave the sanctuary of Rukban camp with his family to face an uncertain fate back under Syria's Bashar Assad.

The cattle trader from Palmyra fled to Rukban on the Syrian border with Jordan and Iraq more than three years ago after his home was destroyed in Russian airstrikes targeting areas that were held at the time by Daesh.

Conditions at Rukban are tough, but it offers one big advantage to the 36,000 people sheltering there: Protection from Russian airstrikes and pro-Assad forces thanks to its location near a US base.

But in recent weeks life in the camp has gone from bad to near impossible. Food shortages have got a lot worse as a result of a siege by regime and Russian forces that want to see Rukban dismantled and US forces out of Syria, according to people living in the camp and diplomats.

"Today you eat. Tomorrow there is nothing to eat," said Amour, 46, speaking to Reuters by phone from the camp. Amour says his son Hamza, three, has become frail from being fed sugared water instead of powdered milk. Gravel and dirt are being added to dough to make flour supplies go further.

"No one is leaving out of their own will. I can no longer sleep with my children hungry," he said.

Local sources say Russian and Syrian regime forces have choked off supplies to Rukban since mid-February, blocking access for smugglers who used to bribe their way through army checkpoints, and firing on some vehicles.

On Thursday, Washington urged Damascus and Moscow to allow international aid deliveries to Rukban and stop blocking commercial routes into the camp to "avert further suffering."

As shortages have hit, a steady stream of people have crossed out of Rukban into regime territory.

OCHA, the UN humanitarian agency, said around 7,000 had left in the last month or so. Some were in shelters in Homs city where some of the men were settling their status with the authorities, and others had gone to their areas of origin in Homs governorate. Relatives say the Homs city shelters amount to internment centers for many of the men.

Power struggle

Rukban camp is at the heart of a struggle between Russia and the US for control of southeastern Syria and with it a land route to Iraq and Assad's major regional ally, Iran.

Russia, whose military has helped Assad claw back control of much of Syria, views Rukban as a US pretext for maintaining its "illegal occupation in the south" and as a last pocket of anti-Assad rebels in southern Syria who must be wiped out.

The camp's evacuation seems unlikely to lead the US to abandon its nearby garrison at Tanf and the surrounding "deconfliction zone" that envelops Rukban: Tanf is seen as useful to US aims of countering Iran.

But Russia is still determined to see Rukban gone. This would represent a gain for Moscow in Syria as its military advances have ground to a halt in other parts of the country, and would assert its influence over a US-controlled area.

Moscow and Damascus have accused Washington of holding the people of Rukban

hostage and Russia has even compared its conditions to the concentration camps of the second world war.

The US has said it is not preventing anyone from leaving Rukban, while calling for a process of “safe, voluntary and dignified departures” from the camp.

The Russian defense ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

With routes to the camp controlled by Damascus, Rukban has rarely received UN aid deliveries. Following a delivery in November, the US said it recognized Russia had played a role in persuading Damascus to authorize it. The last time a UN aid convoy reached Rukban was early February.

Many at Rukban fear returning to Assad’s Syria, saying they could be detained or forced to join the army. This concern is widely held among refugees, who are unconvinced by Russian assurances they face no threat.

Over the years, the camp has taken on some features of permanence including houses built of mud bricks, schools and markets. Ibrahim Al-Nasser ran a grocery at Rukban until he was forced to close it for lack of goods.

Speaking to Reuters as he was about to leave Rukban, he said he no longer cared about his own fate and only wanted to save his children from starving.

“People are gripped with fear of being arrested,” said Nasser. “But I am forced to leave even if I might face death or prison so that my children live,” he said.

Green buses

Abu Ahmad al Dirbas Khalidi, the head of an opposition-run civil council in the camp, said dwindling food supplies gave people at Rukban no choice but to leave.

“The regime and the Russians have succeeded in their siege, and with hunger and poverty people are leaving,” he said.

The camp’s only bakery stopped production this month. A bag of flour – if available – now costs 40,000 Syrian pounds (\$70) – eight times its price in regime territory.

Reports in Syrian state-run media have shown people leaving Rukban on green buses like those used to evacuate civilians and rebel fighters from other parts of Syria recaptured from insurgents, such as eastern Aleppo and eastern Ghouta.

In an interview with the state news agency SANA, one man leaving Rukban accused militant groups “led by America of putting us under pressure, denying us food and water, just so that we join them.”

But sources in Rukban said men leaving had been detained for weeks at internment camps in Homs before being jailed, released or drafted into the army.

Mahmoud Al-Humeili, a camp official, said he had received reports that two dozen men had been arrested.

Shukri Shihab, a relief worker in the camp, said: "Death in the camp is better than dying behind prison bars."



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Extremist attacks kill 17 Syria pro-regime fighters: monitorIsrael frees two prisoners to Syria after Russian mediation