

Algeria PM starts talks on new cabinet as gas field workers protest

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ALGIERS: Algeria's newly-appointed prime minister has started talks to form a new government, state media reported on Sunday, in a move designed to placate protesters demanding President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika and his inner circle step down.

The discussions began as some workers at Algeria's biggest gas field staged a protest against "extending the fourth term", an energy official said, referring to a proposal by Bouteflika to stay in office until a new constitution is adopted.

Output at the Hassi Rmel field was not affected, said the official from state oil and gas company Sonatrach.

He described the protests as "minor", but such politically-motivated action suggests Algeria's reform push has won some influence inside an enterprise that is the north African country's main economic pillar.

Algerians, who have been demonstrating for over three weeks, have rejected overtures by Bouteflika, who has reversed a decision to stand for another term after 20 years in power.

Bouteflika stopped short of relinquishing office and said he would stay on until a new constitution is adopted, in effect extending his fourth term in office, meaning he will likely remain in power for some time.

State news agency APS reported that the new cabinet would include experts without political affiliation and will "reflect the demographics of the Algerian society".

The aim is to "show willingness to establish a government of great openness", APS quoted an official source as saying.

However Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui is unlikely to defuse anger on the streets simply by starting talks on a new administration.

"The new government will fall in 24 hours as long as it lacks legitimacy and popular support," said Fodil Boumala, one of the people protesters have chosen to spearhead popular pressure against what they see as an authoritarian system.

Algerians have previously heard promises from Bouteflika, who has hinted at wide ranging political reform and steps to improve an economy which has offered many Algerians few opportunities despite the country's oil and natural gas wealth.

Protesters have grown tired of the same ruling elite, veterans of the 1954-1962 war of independence against France, the military, intelligence agencies and big businessmen.

Algerians have made it clear they will only settle for new leaders who can improve living standards, deliver greater freedoms and dismantle a Soviet-style bureaucracy that has discouraged investors.

On Friday, hundreds of thousands of people staged the biggest demonstration since the unrest began. Some carried banners saying “No to Bedoui”.

Bouteflika has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. Protesters say he is no longer fit for office.

The president has been losing allies in recent days since returning from medical treatment in Switzerland, including senior members of the ruling National Liberation Front party, known by its French acronym FLN.

Protests have been mostly peaceful, with security forces showing restraint. The military, which is expected to keep playing its influential behind-the-scenes role as a power broker, has stayed in the barracks.

Giving details of the gas field protests, the head of Sonatrach’s communication department Mounir Sakhri told Reuters that production at both Hassi Messaoud and Hassi Rmel fields was still flowing as usual.

“(There were) some minor protests that did not affect our business,” Sakhri said.

Algeria is an important gas supplier to Europe, mainly Italy, Spain and France. Its oil output is about one million barrels per day, and gas output is about 135 billion cubic meters per year. Several foreign firms operate in the country including BP, Total and Repsol.

In the 1990s, oil and gas production never stopped despite the country’s descent into chaos.



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Algerian protesters step up demands for Bouteflika's ouster
Algeria ruling party turns its back on Bouteflika: he is 'history now'

Tunisia seeks extradition of Ben Ali brother-in-law from France

Author:

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Sun, 2019-03-17 12:44

TUNIS: Tunisia said Sunday it is seeking the extradition of deposed president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali's brother-in-law, who has been arrested in France and is wanted at home for alleged fraud.

The justice ministry, in a statement received by AFP, said it had learned from the Interpol office in Tunis that Belhassen Trabelsi was arrested on Thursday in France.

It said he was facing 17 arrest warrants in Tunisia and 43 international warrants.

There was no official confirmation in France of Trabelsi's arrest.

But a source close to the investigation said he had been detained in the south of the country earlier this week in connection with alleged financial wrongdoing. There were no further details.

The millionaire businessman and brother of Ben Ali's wife Leila Trabelsi left Tunisia in January 2011 when the Arab Spring uprising forced the veteran leader to flee to Saudi Arabia.

Trabelsi and his family flew in a private jet to Montreal where he requested political asylum but Canada turned down his appeal in 2015, and a year later as it prepared to deport him he vanished.

He is wanted in Tunisia where he is thought to have headed a clan that embezzled government funds.

A leaked June 2008 US diplomatic cable concluded that Trabelsi was "the most notorious (Ben Ali) family member and is rumored to have been involved in a wide-range of corrupt schemes."

Trabelsi – whose holdings included an airline and hotels – has denied the allegations against him, saying he accumulated his wealth from being a successful entrepreneur.



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Tunisia minister says hospital infection killed 12 newborns
Tunisia divided over equal inheritance for women

[Israel court orders closure of building at Jerusalem holy site](#)

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Sun, 2019-03-17 09:06

JERUSALEM: An Israeli court on Sunday ordered the temporary closure of a side building at a highly sensitive Jerusalem holy site that has been the source of tensions in recent weeks.

The Jerusalem magistrates court said the building known as the Golden Gate at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, should be closed while the case continues.

The site's administrator, the Waqf religious organization, was given 60 days to respond to the court case involving the building.

Israeli police have called for the building to be closed.

There are believed to be discussions ongoing between Israel and Jordan, the custodian of the holy site, over the status of the building.

There have in recent weeks been scuffles between worshippers and Israeli police at the site in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem over the use of the side building.

Palestinian worshippers have been entering the site despite an Israeli order that it should stay closed.

Israel shut access to the Golden Gate in 2003 during the second Palestinian intifada over alleged militant activity there.

Palestinian officials argue that the organization that prompted the ban no longer exists and there is no reason for it to remain closed.

The larger compound is the third-holiest site in Islam and a focus of Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

It is also the location of Judaism's most sacred spot, revered as the site of the two biblical-era Jewish temples.

Jews are allowed to visit but cannot pray there and it is a frequent scene of tension.



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Israeli army 'uncovers' Hezbollah unit led by notorious commander
Three Israelis wounded in West Bank shooting

[Yemen's Houthi militants threaten to target Riyadh and Abu Dhabi](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2019-03-16 11:54

SANAA: Yemen's Houthi militia warned on Saturday they could launch attacks against the capitals of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The threat came as the United Nations was trying to salvage a truce deal in Yemen, seen as crucial to diplomatic efforts to end the country's four-year war.

The Iran-backed Houthis have targeted Saudi border towns and Riyadh with ballistic missiles.

"We have aerial photographs and coordinates of dozens of headquarters, facilities and military bases of the enemy," militant military spokesman Yahya Saree said in comments carried by the group's Al-Masirah channel.

"The legitimate targets of our forces extend to the capital of Saudi Arabia and to the emirate of Abu Dhabi," he said.

"We have manufactured advanced generations of attack aircraft, and new systems will soon be functional."

The militants triggered the conflict when they seized the capital Sanaa in 2014 and attempted to occupy large parts of the country. An Arab Coalition intervened in support of the internationally recognized government in March 2015.

On Wednesday the UN Security Council met to discuss the stalled truce deal that had been agreed in Sweden in December between the Yemeni government and the Houthis.

The deal – which called for a cease-fire, rebel pullback and mutual redeployment from Hodeidah, Yemen's main Red Sea port controlled by the militants – offered the best hope in years of moving toward an end to the conflict.

While the fighting in Hodeida has eased, redeployment efforts have stalled in recent weeks.

UN envoy Martin Griffiths told the Security Council on Wednesday he was still

working to make the redeployment a “reality.”

The World Health Organization estimates nearly 10,000 people have been killed in Yemen since 2015.

*With AFP



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US should not curb aid to Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, says Pompeo
Security Council members report no progress on Yemen deal

[Iraq begins exhuming mass Yazidi grave left by Daesh](#)

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By SALAR SALIM | AP

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Sat, 2019-03-16 14:59

ERBIL: The Iraqi government has started exhuming a mass grave left behind by Daesh in the northwestern Sinjar region in the presence of Nobel Peace Prize

laureate Nadia Murad, whose slain relatives are believed to have been buried in the area.

The exhumation, which is being carried out with UN support, began Friday in the village of Kocho. Murad's official website said it marks the first exhumation of a mass grave containing the remains of Yazidis, a religious minority targeted for extermination by the extremists.

Daesh militants rampaged across Sinjar in 2014, killing Yazidi men and abducting thousands of women and children. Many followers of the minority faith are still missing, after women were forced into sexual slavery and boys were indoctrinated in extremist ideology.

"I pay my condolence to the Yazidis and the whole humanity. There is not a single Yazidi family that didn't taste the bitterness of this extermination," said Murad. "They all lost their loved ones, their properties and their dreams, and especially in this village," she said.

Murad was one of an estimated 3,000 Yazidi women and girls who were kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. She was raped, beaten and tortured before she managed to escape after three months in captivity.

Over 70 mass graves have been discovered in Sinjar since it was liberated from Daesh in November 2015.

In November, UN investigators said they have verified the location of more than 200 mass grave sites from the time of Daesh rule in northern Iraq, containing the bodies of between 6,000 and 12,000 victims.

Nada Selo, an activist from Kocho, lamented the slow pace of efforts to identify and recover victims.

"Negligence has been going on for four years and until now. The people were hoping during all this time to see their relatives alive. So honestly, this is a huge disappointment for us as Yazidis, and it is a real tragedy," she said.

A statement issued earlier this week by Murad, global Yazidi NGO Yazda and their joint legal counsel Amal Clooney welcomed the process in Kocho. They expressed hope it would be part of a "comprehensive effort which will result in the exhumation of all Daesh mass graves in Sinjar and beyond, the return of victims' remains to their families and the investigation of the relevant crimes, leading to the prosecution of the responsible Daesh militants."

Daesh is on the verge of losing the last area it controls in Syria as US-backed fighters squeeze the extremists in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border. Over the past months a number of Yazidi women and children have been freed in eastern Syria.





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Hopes for missing Yazidis dim as extremists' defeat looms
Anti-Daesh Syria force boosted as extremist holdout shrinks