

# Gaza protesters call on Palestinian leader to quit

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GAZA CITY: Thousands of protesters in the Gaza Strip Sunday called on Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to resign after attempts to pressure his rival Hamas with financial cuts in the impoverished enclave.

"Leave!" yelled crowds made up mainly of supporters of Hamas and Mohammed Dahlan, an Abbas rival expelled from the president's Fatah party and who now lives in exile.

They called on the Palestinian Authority to pay the full salaries of public sector employees in Gaza, run by Islamist movement Hamas.

Abbas, 83, has over the course of recent months reduced salaries in the Gaza Strip.

Protesters demanded increased electricity supplies to the enclave, where residents receive power in around eight-hour intervals.

They also demonstrated against Israel's more than decade-long blockade of the Gaza Strip.

Israel says the blockade is necessary to prevent Hamas, with whom it has fought three wars since 2008, from obtaining weapons or materials that could be used to make them.

Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 in a near civil war with Abbas's Fatah. Multiple reconciliation attempts aimed at restoring the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority to power in Gaza have failed.

Separately in the occupied West Bank on Sunday, around 2,500 people demonstrated in support of Abbas in the city of Hebron.

Abbas was in Egypt's Sharm El Sheikh on Sunday to attend a European Union-Arab League summit.

He met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi while there, according to official Palestinian news agency WAFA.

Abbas's term was meant to expire in 2009, but he has remained in office in the absence of elections.





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# Algerian police use tear gas as rare anti-government protests enter third day

Author:

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ALGIERS: Algerian police fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of demonstrators on a third straight day of rare political protests against plans for rarely seen President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to extend his 20-year rule by seeking a fifth term.

Thousands have taken to the streets of the capital and other cities since Friday calling on the authorities to abandon plans for Bouteflika, 81, to stand in a presidential election scheduled to be held on April 18.

Bouteflika, in office since 1999, suffered a stroke in 2013. He has since been seen in public only a handful of times and has given no public speeches in years.

His opponents say there is no evidence he is in fit health to lead the country, which they say is being ruled in his name by advisers. The authorities say he still has a firm grip on affairs despite the rarity of his appearances.

"People do not want Bouteflika," the crowd chanted at a protest called by an opposition group, Mouwatana.

A Reuters journalist saw tear gas being fired to disperse crowds.

Since the ruling FLN party picked Bouteflika as its presidential candidate, several political parties, trade unions and business organizations have already said they would back him. A weak and divided opposition faces high hurdles in mounting an electoral challenge.

Bouteflika has not directly addressed the protests. The authorities announced earlier this week that he would be traveling to Geneva for unspecified medical checks, although there was no official confirmation he had left.

State media quoted a letter in Bouteflika's name read out at a government oil and gas industry event in the southern town of Adrar as saying: "Continuity is the best option for Algeria."

FLN leader Moad Bouchareb dismissed the protests.

"To those who are dreaming of change I say 'Have nice dreams,'" he said in televised comments in the western city of Oran on Saturday.

Supporters of Bouteflika have emphasised the risk of unrest. Algerians have bitter memories of a decade of civil war in the 1990s in which 200,000 people were killed. The war was triggered after the army canceled an election that Islamists were poised to win in 1991.

"Do you want Algeria to go back to years of tears and blood?" said the leader of the powerful UGTA labor union, Abdelmadjid Sidi Said in televised

comments.

Strikes and protests over social and economic grievances are frequent in Algeria, but have generally been localized, rather than touching on national politics.

Algeria saw major street unrest during the 2011 “Arab Spring” that brought down the rulers of North African neighbors Egypt, Libya and Tunisia. But Algerian security forces managed to contain it without Bouteflika’s grip on power loosening.

Lower oil prices in recent years have hurt Algeria’s economy, reigniting discontent. More than a quarter of Algerians under 30 are unemployed, according to official figures, and many feel disconnected from a ruling elite made up of veteran fighters from Algeria’s 1954-1962 independence war with France.



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# EU, Arabs tackle troubled Middle East at first summit

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SHARM EL SHEIKH, Egypt: European and Arab leaders gather Sunday for their first summit aimed at stepping up cooperation on trade, security and migration while the EU-Brexit stalemate looms on the sidelines.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi hosted last-minute preparatory meetings with the European Union before he opens the two-day summit at 5:00 p.m. (1500 GMT) in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

Europeans view the summit, EU sources told AFP, as a way to protect their traditional diplomatic, economic and security interests while China and Russia move to fill a vacuum left by the United States.

The summit in the southern Sinai desert is heavily guarded by Egyptian security forces that are fighting a bloody extremist insurgency a short distance to the north.

Climate change, migration, trade and investment are on Sunday's agenda, EU sources said. Conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya are to be discussed on Monday.

Arab League hosts said the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will also be raised. European leaders first mentioned the summit in Austria in September amid efforts to agree ways to curb the illegal migration that has sharply divided the 28-nation bloc.

But checking migration is just part of Europe's broader strategy to forge a new alliance with its southern neighbors.

EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini insists that the gathering in Egypt of around 40 heads of state and government is about much more than migration.

Donald Tusk, president of the European Council of EU member countries, met Sunday with El-Sisi to help set the agenda, EU sources said.

Most of the 24 European heads of state and government who have confirmed their attendance have already arrived in the Red Sea resort, they added.

British Prime Minister Theresa May was due to arrive later Sunday.

Apart from El-Sisi, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri and King Salman of Saudi Arabia will attend from the 22-member Arab League, based in Cairo.

Most of the other Arab leaders are due to attend except Syria's Bashar Assad, whose country was suspended from the Arab League over the civil war, and Sudan's Omar Al-Bashir.

A UN official warned that Europe's failure to bridge divisions on migration "risks blocking all the other discussions" at the summit.

The EU has struck aid-for-cooperation agreements with Turkey and Libya's UN-backed government in Tripoli, which has sharply cut the flow of migrants since a 2015 peak.

But the official said broader cooperation with the Arab League, which

includes Libya, is limited without the EU being able to speak in one voice. Marc Pierini, a former EU ambassador to Tunisia and Libya, said the Arabs are also grappling with divisions since the Arab Spring revolutions in the last decade.

An EU source said there will “be no deal in the desert” when asked if EU leaders would huddle together to explore ways to break the logjam over Britain’s looming exit from the bloc on March 29.

Brussels has stood united against May’s requests to reopen the November divorce agreement in order to help it pass the British parliament. However, the issue is due to come up when Tusk holds a one-to-one meeting with May in Sharm el-Sheikh.

EU sources said the first EU-Arab summit is all the more important as the United States “disengages” from the region while Russia and China make inroads.

“We don’t want to see this vacuum soaked up by Russia and China,” one of the sources told AFP.



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Saudi delegation to attend EU-Arab Summit Turkish President Erdogan lashes out at El-Sisi over Egypt executions



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# Daesh is down but not out, say fleeing families

Author:

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OUTSIDE BAGHOUZ, Syria: They were living in holes in the ground, with only dry flatbread to eat at the end. Those injured in an intense military campaign had no access to medical care, and those who were sick had no medicine.

Yet, if it were not for the call from their leaders to leave, they would have stayed. Such is the devotion of several hundred men, women and children who were evacuated on Friday from the last speck of land controlled by Daesh, a riverside pocket that sits on the edge of Syria and Iraq. Hundreds, if not thousands, more remain holed up in Baghouz – the last redoubt of the militants' proto-state that leaders once said would stretch to Rome.

They include militants, of course, but also their family members and other civilians who are among the group's most determined supporters. Many of them traveled to Syria from all over the world. And they stuck around as the militants' control crumbled.

At least 36 flatbed trucks used for transporting sheep carried the disheveled, haggard crowd out of the territory to a desert area miles away for screening.

They were the latest batch of evacuees from the territory following airstrikes and clashes meant to bring about the militants' complete territorial defeat.

For now, the civilians are expected to be sent to a displaced people's camp, while suspected fighters will go to detention facilities. Previous evacuations have already overwhelmed camps in northern Syria, and at least 60 people who left the shrinking territory have died of malnutrition or exhaustion.

In a dusty area surrounded by grass, women engulfed in black robes from head to toe and children in dirty jackets – many of them crying for food – formed one line. Men wearing tattered headscarves formed another. Foreign men were in yet a third.

One woman had given birth in one of the trucks. An old man was carried in a blanket by two others to the screening line. A young girl sat under the shade of the wheel of a truck looking dazed, while another moved between the crowd, asking for food.

The evacuees included French, Polish, Chinese, Bengali, Egyptians, Tajiks,

Moroccans, Iraqis and Syrians.

It is impossible to know if all are wholeheartedly behind the militant group or how many expressed support out of fear of reprisals. But many vehemently defended Daesh, arguing the group was down – but not out – and said they only left because of an order from the remaining leader in the area.

Some referred to the wali, the provincial leader, while others said the order was from the group's top leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

It is not clear if Daesh leaders were in agreement. Amid the military pressure, reports have emerged of disagreements among them. The war monitor group the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said one Daesh leader was beheaded in recent days for urging civilians to leave.

All those interviewed gave nicknames or spoke on condition of anonymity because they feared for their safety.

"Baghouz maybe is the most difficult moments of all my life," said 21-year-old Um Youssef, a Tunisian-French woman who came to Syria at 17 with her mother.

Um Youssef – which means mother of Youssef in Arabic – sent her two kids and her mother out of the pocket last month and stayed with her husband.

She said she had no regrets and was at "peace," describing the last few weeks as "the best" since she moved to Syria because they taught her life lessons.

It was hard to see how that could be from the hills overlooking Baghouz. A four-year international campaign has reduced the Daesh reign – which once sprawled over nearly a third of Syria and Iraq – to a tent encampment and a few homes in this village overlooking the Euphrates river.

An estimated 300 Daesh militants are besieged there, hemmed in by the river and the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led militia spearheading the fight against Daesh following an intense push since September. Thousands of civilians have also poured into the area.

The presence of so many civilians– and possibly senior members of the militant group – in Baghouz has surprised the SDF and slowed down the expected announcement of the extremist group's territorial defeat.

Recapturing Baghouz would mark an end to the militants' territorial rule, but few believe that will end the threat posed by an organization that still stages and inspires attacks through sleeper cells in both Syria and Iraq and that has active affiliates in Egypt, West Africa and elsewhere. The group also has a presence online, using social media to recruit new members and promote its attacks.

In the past few weeks, nearly 20,000 people have left Baghouz on foot through the humanitarian corridor, but the militants then closed the passage and no civilians left for a week until Wednesday, when a large group was evacuated.



Among those evacuated Friday was a group of 11 Yazidi children. Thousands from the Yazidi minority were kidnapped by Daesh in Iraq in 2014, and are still missing.

In the dusty clearing where the evacuees were being screened on Friday, a 16-year-old mother of two from Aleppo said she has not had food for a couple of days, opting to feed her children instead.

A child said he has not showered in a month, and a woman from Tajikistan asked for a phone to call her mother. Frantic and in tears, a mother held out her pale and still toddler, screaming for help. Tears of hungry children rang through the open desert as SDF officials searched the evacuees' belongings.

But of over a dozen people interviewed by The Associated Press, only four said they did not want to be in Baghouz.

They described living in holes dug in the ground with tents hoisted to protect against airstrikes. Some said they initially got lentil soup, but then only barely-husk bread was available— a green-brownish loaf of flatbread.

"We weren't going to leave, but the Caliph said women should leave," said Um Abdul-Aziz, a 33-year-old Syrian mother of five whose moniker means mother of Abdul-Aziz in Arabic. She was referring to Daesh leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

Her husband stayed behind to fight.

A few were critical. "Order or no order, I wanted to get out," said Aya Ibrahim, an Iraqi mother who said she was unable to secure medicine for her children. "Many families died from airstrikes. Many kids died from hunger."

The 16-year-old Syrian mother of two from Aleppo said she lost four husbands, her father, sister and two brothers. Um Mohammed said the last days have been hard, with food prices soaring and intensive bombings keeping them in hiding.

About 2 pounds of sugar went for nearly 30,000 Liras (\$70), more than 30 times the price in other parts of Syria, while a liter of cooking oil cost 10,000 Liras. "I have not eaten in four days," she said.

Then the order came for them to leave. But, for some, it is not the end.

Um Youssef, the French-Tunisian, said she has no plans or desire to return home in Tunisia, saying she would find her way to another Syrian city.

Daesh is over? Says who? asked a 14-year-old Syrian girl who refused to give her name. "Wherever you go there is" Daesh.



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Truckloads of civilians leave Daesh enclave in Syria  
Father of US-born woman who joined Daesh sues over citizenship

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## [Syrian Democratic Forces to save more civilians from last Daesh pocket](#)

Author:

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OMA OIL FIELD, Syria: US-backed fighters said on Saturday they are keeping a corridor open to rescue remaining civilians from Daesh's last speck of territory in Syria, as the UN appealed for urgent assistance.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have evacuated nearly 5,000 men, women and children from the militant holdout since Wednesday, bringing the SDF closer to retaking the less than half-a-square kilometer still under Daesh control.

"On our side, the corridor is open and we hope a larger number of civilians

will arrive but that depends on Daesh militants and whether they will give civilians a chance to exit," SDF spokesman Adnan Afrin told AFP at their Al-Omar base.

He said the SDF had evacuated "more than 2,000 people, including women, children and men" on Friday, mostly wives and children of Daesh militants.

Nearly 2,500 people arrived the same day at a Kurdish-run camp for the displaced further north, compounding dire conditions inside the already cramped settlement, the UN's humanitarian coordination office OCHA said.

It warned of the "huge challenges" posed by the influx.

More than four years after Daesh overran large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq and declared a "caliphate," they have lost all but a tiny patch in the village of Baghouz near the Iraqi border.

Some 2,000 people are believed to remain inside Baghouz, according to the SDF.

The force says it is trying to evacuate remaining civilians through a corridor before pressing on with a battle to crush the militants unless holdout fighters surrender.

The SDF transferred the fresh batch of evacuees to a screening point outside Baghouz on Friday, to weed out potential militants.

An AFP correspondent saw hundreds of women and children spread out on the arid desert ground, surrounded by bags, begging for food and water.

A smaller group of men were separated from the women as SDF fighters searched the latest arrivals and checked their identification cards.

An Iraqi woman in her forties wearing a face veil held in her hand a medical report in English.

She said the report was written for her by a doctor inside the Baghouz pocket, explaining that she needed treatment for kidney problems.

Syrian woman Khadija Ali Mohammad, the 24-year-old wife of a deceased Daesh militant, said conditions inside the Daesh pocket were deplorable.

"We were living in tents and eating bread made from bran. My three sisters and I didn't have enough money to pay smugglers to get us out before, and our husbands had died in battle" the woman from Aleppo's countryside in northern Syria told AFP.

She was disappointed at the collapse of the Daesh proto-state.

"God had promised us a caliphate and we went to it," she said. "I feel there



will be no victory although they (militants) tell us victory is near.”

Around 44,000 people – mostly civilians – have streamed out of Daesh’s shrinking territory since early December, according to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

While civilians are trucked north to Kurdish-run camps for the displaced, mainly to Al-Hol, six hours drive from Baghouz, suspected militants are sent to SDF-controlled detention centers.

OCHA said 18 of the 2,500 latest arrivals in Al-Hol, mostly women and children, were in “critical condition.”

“Thousands more are expected in coming hours/days at Al-Hol camp, putting a further strain on basic services,” it tweeted.

“This sudden influx presents huge challenges to the response – additional tents, non-food items, water & sanitation and health supplies are urgently needed.”

The International Rescue Committee on Friday said 69 people, mostly children, had died on the way to Al-Hol, now home to more than 40,000 of the displaced, or shortly after arriving in past weeks.

“Two thirds of the deaths are of babies under one year old,” the relief group said.

The SDF says it has limited resources to administer camps and has called for support from the international community.



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Truckloads of civilians leave Daesh enclave in Syria Turkey tells US not to leave power vacuum in Syria withdrawal