

# Omani claims for damage caused by Cyclone Mekunu exceed \$400 million

Tue, 2019-01-01 14:47

**DUBAI:** Oman's Cyclone Mekunu left a trail of destruction and a multimillion-dollar insurance bill, national daily, Times of Oman reported.

Insurance claims against the damage caused by the devastating cyclone that ripped through southern Oman in May, 2018, have exceeded \$400 million.

Dozens of people were killed when Cyclone Mekuna ripped through southern Yemen and Oman in May, leaving a path of destruction.

It hit Oman late on May 25, bringing with it, torrential rain, gusts of up to 180 kph, eight-foot tall waves, and flash floods.

Now insurance companies say they have received 1,123 claims up to the end of September worth \$403.7 million, the report added, citing data from the Capital Market Authority (CMA).

There was also extensive damage caused to properties, the road networks and coastal defenses.



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Death toll in Oman, Yemen from Cyclone Mekunu rises to 30  
Cyclone Mekunu subsides after leaving 10 dead, 40 missing in Oman and Yemen

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## [Former Israeli foreign minister Livni left out in political cold](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1546340595258446200

Tue, 2019-01-01 10:50

JERUSALEM: Israel's main left-wing alliance split apart on Tuesday, leaving one of the country's most prominent politicians, former foreign minister Tzipi Livni, out in the cold ahead of an April general election.

The Zionist Union, which was the main opposition party, had been a partnership between the Labour Party led by Avi Gabbay and the smaller Hatnua party headed by Livni. With a stone-faced Livni sitting next to him at a meeting of Zionist Union lawmakers, Gabbay unceremoniously dumped her.

"I hoped and believed this alliance would bring about our blossoming, a real connection and we would complement each other. But the public is smart, saw this is not the situation and distanced itself from us," Gabbay said in a nod to the Zionist Union's weak showing in recent opinion polls.

"Tzipi, I wish you success in the election – in any party you're in," he said, announcing the split on live television.

The move appeared to catch Livni, a former peace negotiator with the Palestinians and current leader of the opposition in parliament, by surprise. "I'm not responding. I will make my decisions. Thank you," she said, and then left the room.

Opinion polls have predicted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will easily win the snap election he called for April 9, taking between 27 to 31 of parliament's 120 seats – enough to lead a right-wing coalition government, despite three corruption investigations against him.

Zionist Union trails far behind Netanyahu's Likud and centrist parties in the polls, which predict it will capture only eight to nine seats compared with the 24 it took in its second-place finish in the previous election in 2015. Livni, who became a leading advocate of a two-state solution with the Palestinians, entered politics in 1999 as a member of the right-wing Likud party, serving in several cabinet posts and eventually moving to the center-left as head of the now-defunct Kadima party.

She was foreign minister from 2006 to 2009 and founded Hatnua in 2012,

joining up with Labour to establish the Zionist Union for the 2015 ballot won by Netanyahu, now in his fourth term.



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## [Egypt mulls changing constitution to keep El-Sisi in power](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1546334576168246900

Tue, 2019-01-01 09:20

CAIRO: Supporters of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi are calling for constitutional changes that would allow him to stay in power once his second term ends in 2022.

Backers of the former military chief, re-elected in March with over 97 percent of the vote, want parliament to discuss repealing an article limiting presidents to two consecutive four-year terms.

In an editorial published on Sunday, the pro-government state-run daily newspaper Al-Akhbar voiced hope that 2019 would see “the start of a belated political reform” to secure El-Sisi’s future in power.

The column by the newspaper's director Yasser Rizk said this would "preserve all the people's gains in terms of security, stability and economic recovery" since El-Sisi came to power five years ago,

He said the change could be approved by late summer 2019.

El-Sisi, who led the army's overthrow of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi in 2013 following mass protests against his rule, won his first term as president the following year.

His government has been widely criticized by rights groups over the repression of dissidents.

As well as a crackdown on dissent, El-Sisi has overseen a military campaign against Daesh group-linked extremists in the Sinai Peninsula.

Egypt is slowly recovering from a deep economic crisis that has seen the value of its currency plummet and state subsidies slashed.

In November 2017, even before he was re-elected, El-Sisi told American news network CNBC he would not seek a third term in office.

But after his victory in the March 2018 polls, the question has gradually returned to public debate.

Mohammad Fuad, an MP with the Wafd party close to the government, told AFP that "the whole of Egypt was talking about (Rizk's) article last night."

"This issue has been under discussion everywhere in Egypt, not just in parliament, for some time," he said, adding that a potential parliamentary debate on the issue had not been initiated by the government.

In the current context of Egyptian politics, there was little surprise that the debate was taking place, Fuad said.

"People have been expecting a constitutional amendment on extending presidential terms, because every time the debate turns to the end of (El-Sisi's) second term, the question is: who is the alternative? That causes panic," he said.

Mustafa Kamal Al-Sayed, a political science professor at Cairo University, said Rizk "did not express a personal point of view, but revealed trends within government institutions."

He said El-Sisi "does not want to step down from power while he is alive ... he fears that he could be held to account if he leaves his post."

H.A. Hellyer, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and the Royal United Services Institute in London, said that "every indication from the last few years indicates that amending the constitution is of foremost importance."

"Otherwise we would not have seen all these trial balloons in the media, and we would have seen indications of successors that are being groomed," he said.

On social media, opposition figures deplored talk of allowing El-Sisi to stand for a third term.

"There are constitutions and laws in authoritarian regimes and constitutions and laws in democratic regimes," wrote Mohamed ElBaradei, a respected former UN nuclear watchdog chief and Egyptian politician on Twitter.

"The former are a tool for entrenching authoritarian rule based on repression and fear, while the second are a tool for establishing good governance based on freedom and justice."



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Sisi denies fat-shaming Egyptians after weight-loss call  
Egypt's El-Sisi says army will defend Gulf Arabs in case of direct threat

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## [French defense minister in Jordan to visit troops fighting Daesh](#)

Author:

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1546288645264847800

Mon, 2018-12-31 18:30

AMMAN: France's defense minister arrived in Jordan on Monday to visit troops battling the Daesh group, showing Paris's determination to continue the fight after a shock US decision to withdraw from Syria. After a stopover in Amman, where Florence Parly is set to meet with Jordanian

Prime Minister Omar Al-Razzaz, she is expected to visit the H5 air base from which French fighter jets take off for sorties against the militants. The minister's last-minute trip to Jordan comes on the heels of US President Donald Trump's surprise decision in mid-December to pull out all 2,000 American troops stationed in Syria, saying "we've won" against Daesh. "The impromptu announcement of the US withdrawal from (Syria) caused a lot of questions," Parly told reporters before landing. France does not "fully share President Trump's analysis," she said, adding the jihadists were "not quite finished." "Our priority is to continue until the end."

After sweeping across swathes of Syria and Iraq in 2014, the militants' cross-border "caliphate" has been erased by multiple offensives, pushing them back to just a few holdouts in the Syrian desert. In Syria, Daesh has been rolled back by separate offensives led by the country's army and an Arab-Kurdish alliance backed by the US-led coalition called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF are currently battling to expel the militants from their eastern holdout near Syria's border with Iraq.

Without the help of Washington, which carries out 90 percent of the coalition's strikes on Daesh, the French government has said it will be difficult to finish the militants off for good. "The United States plays a very important role as leader of the international coalition," said Parly, adding that it might not be "realistic or effective" to continue without Washington.

The French military has deployed 1,200 soldiers as part of the anti-Daesh efforts, via air operations, artillery, special forces in Syria and training for the Iraqi army.

A ranking French officer said the timeline for the US withdrawal "might not be incompatible" with the capture of the jihadists' remaining territory, "if it is long enough and the (SDF) advance is fast enough."

France will also have to deal with the issue of foreign militants, especially Europeans, held by the SDF, now under threat of a looming Turkish offensive to clear Kurdish fighters from its border. "The US-led coalition has relied heavily on the Kurds as ground operators," said Parly. "Their fate is of major concern, and there are other questions about the future of a number of prisoners they are holding."



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## [Syrian war claimed 20,000 lives in 2018, says monitor](#)

Author:

Mon, 2018-12-31 22:59

BEIRUT: Syria's nearly eight-year-old conflict saw its lowest annual death toll in 2018 as the regime reasserted its authority over swathes of territory, a war monitor said on Monday.

A total of 19,666 people were killed this year as a result of the conflict, which erupted in 2011, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitoring group reported.

"2018 was the lowest annual toll since the start of the conflict," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

The Britain-based monitor relies on a vast network of sources across Syria to document the war that broke out after the brutal repression of nationwide anti-regime protests in 2011.

The death toll for 2017 stood at more than 33,000 and the highest annual figure was reached in 2014 – the year Daesh proclaimed a “caliphate” over large parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq – when 76,000 people were killed.

Among those killed in 2018 were 6,349 civilians, 1,437 of them children, Abdel Rahman said.

“Most of those killed during the first part of the year were killed in regime and Russian bombardment of opposition areas, including Eastern Ghouta,” Abdel Rahman said. “The majority of those killed in the second half of the year were killed in coalition airstrikes,” he added.

The first months of 2018 were marked by major Russian-backed government operations to retake opposition bastions in and around the capital Damascus. The bloodiest of them was an assault on Eastern Ghouta, a densely populated area east of Damascus that remained besieged for years.

### **Battle against Daesh**

The most active front of the past few months has been the battle against the remnants of Daesh in eastern Syria.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by a US-led coalition carrying out airstrikes, launched an offensive on Sept. 10.

Militants defending the last rump of their once sprawling proto-state, near the Iraqi border along the Euphrates River, have put up fierce resistance but seem close to collapsing. While fighting has ended or is winding down in several parts of the country, 2019 could see its share of military flare-ups.

Besides the continued threat posed by Daesh sleeper cells even after it loses its last pocket in eastern Syria, two other areas remain of concern.

Turkey has threatened a major offensive against the Kurdish militia that controls regions along its border in northeastern Syria.

The announcement made by US President Donald Trump two weeks ago that he had ordered a full troop pullout from Syria left the US-led coalition’s Kurdish allies more exposed.

Thousands of opposition fighters also remain in Idlib, a northern province where many of them were transferred as a result of deals to end government assaults on other areas across the country.

Under an agreement reached in Russia, Turkey was tasked with disarming some of the groups active in Idlib but little progress has been achieved.

President Bashar Assad has consistently said that his forces would seek to reconquer the entire Syrian territory.



According to the Observatory, the government and its allies now controls 60.2 percent of Syrian territory, while the SDF hold 28.8 percent.

The Kurds last week asked for the regime's help against the threat of a Turkish offensive, a move that will put pay to their ambitions of increased autonomy.

By comparison, the US-based Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project puts the number of conflict-related deaths in Afghanistan at more than 40,000 this year.



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Iraqi jets strike Daesh sites in Syria as Trump slows pullout schedule