

More hardship as new sandstorm engulfs parts of Middle East

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BAGHDAD: A sandstorm blanketed parts of the Middle East on Monday, including Iraq, Syria and Iran, sending people to hospitals and disrupting flights in some places.

It was the latest in a series of unprecedented nearly back-to-back sandstorms this year that have bewildered residents and raised alarm among experts and officials, who blame climate change and poor governmental regulations.

From Riyadh to Tehran, bright orange skies and a thick veil of grit signaled yet another stormy day Monday. Sandstorms are typical in late spring and summer, spurred by seasonal winds. But this year they have occurred nearly every week in Iraq since March.

Iraqi authorities declared the day a national holiday, urging government workers and residents to stay home in anticipation of the 10th storm to hit the country in the last two months. The Health Ministry stockpiled cannisters of oxygen at facilities in hard-hit areas, according to a statement.

The storms have sent thousands to hospitals and resulted in at least one death in Iraq and three in Syria's east.

"Its a region-wide issue but each country has a different degree of vulnerability and weakness," said Jaafar Jotheri, a geoarchaeologist at the University of Al-Qadisiyah in Baghdad.

In Syria, medical departments were put on alert as the sandstorm hit the eastern province of Deir Ezzor that borders Iraq, Syrian state TV said.

Earlier this month, a similar storm in the region left at least three people dead and hundreds were hospitalized with breathing problems.

Dr. Bashar Shouaybi, head of the Health Ministry's office in Deir Ezzor, told state TV that hospitals were prepared and ambulances were on standby. He said they have acquired an additional 850 oxygen tanks and medicine needed to deal with patients who have asthma.

Severe sandstorms have also blanketed parts of Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia this month.

For the second time this month, Kuwait International Airport suspended all flights Monday because of the dust. Video showed largely empty streets with poor visibility.

Saudi Arabia's meteorological association reported that visibility would drop to zero on the roads in Riyadh, the capital, this week. Officials warned drivers to go slowly. Emergency rooms in the city were flooded with 1,285 patients this month complaining they couldn't breathe properly.

Iran last week shut down schools and government offices in the capital of Tehran over a sandstorm that swept the country. It hit hardest in the nation's southwest desert region of Khuzestan, where over 800 people sought treatment for breathing difficulties. Dozens of flights out of western Iran

were canceled or delayed.

Blame over the dust storms and heavy air pollution has mounted, with a prominent environmental expert telling local media that climate change, drought and government mismanagement of water resources are responsible for the increase in sandstorms. Iran has drained its wetlands for farming – a common practice known to produce dust in the region.

Alireza Shariat, the head of an association of Iranian water engineers, told Iran's semiofficial ILNA news agency last month that he expected extensive dust storms to become an "annual springtime phenomenon" in a way Iran has never seen before.

In Iraq, desertification exacerbated by record-low rainfall is adding to the intensity of storms, said Jotheri, the geoarchaeologist. In a low-lying country with plenty of desert regions, the impact is almost double, he said. "Because of 17 years of mismanagement of water and urbanization, Iraq lost more than two thirds of its green cover," he said. "That is why Iraqis are complaining more than their neighbors about the sandstorms in their areas."



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[Jaafar Jotheri](#)

Sandstorms pose serious risk to human health: WMOWorld's tallest building engulfed as Mideast sandstorms hit UAE

Lebanese authorities begin removing barriers around parliament after elections

Author:

Mon, 2022-05-23 22:30

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities on Monday began removing concrete barriers around the country's parliament building after the election of former protesters as MPs.

The security measures had been put in place at the outbreak of massive anti-government protests in 2019. They are to be relaxed following the election of a dozen reformist newcomers to the 128-member legislature, including some who had taken part in the protest movement.

Some of the new MPs had called for the restrictions to be eased before they attended the first session of the new parliament.

Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi attended the start of the work yesterday afternoon.

The clearing will be completed before the next parliament session is held, a statement from House Speaker Nabih Berri's office said.

The move comes after the election of 15 MPs from the Forces of Change group, which was demonstrating in the streets around parliament, in addition to a number of independent MPs.

Beirut MP Ibrahim Mneimneh, from the Forces of Change, said: "There is no need for the barriers placed around the people's house because it is for the people. They are needless barriers."

He said that the measures decided by Berri were the result of the traditional ruling forces realizing "the decline of their popularity, so they decided to respond to the popular demands."

MP Waddah Sadiq, a former protester, said the fences around parliament are a separation wall. "Today, parliament represents the people who demand change, so they decided to ease the procedures," Sadiq said.

Sadiq said that the economic and living crises "are increasing, and people may turn to a state of rejection again. We need the pressure to address them."

He said that the previous government did not take any effective handling measures.

The plan approved by the government included neither recovery nor economy, said the MP. "Therefore, we are entering a difficult phase and we will be on the side of the people."

MP Elias Jarada, an ophthalmologist from the southern town of Ibl Al-Saqi, called the "doctor of the poor," said that "the parliament is the house of the people, and there are no fences that can separate the representatives of the nation and the citizens."

He said that all the barriers that prevent people from entering Nejme Square must be removed before the MPs are invited to any session.

Ali Hamdan, the media adviser to the parliamentary speaker, told Arab News that "these measures are not an indication of excessive confidence. Rather, elections were held and the results have brought representatives of the protesters to parliament."

He said: "These people represent part of the street, and you may call them a movement, an uprising or a change."

He said the speaker had decided to take a step to reduce security measures, but they "will not be completely lifted around the parliament."

He said that some in Lebanon still feared security setbacks.

"There are successive crises, including the customs dollar and the rise in telecom prices, and we witnessed what happened in Greece and Cyprus."

The area around the building had been transformed by concrete walls that blocked all the roads leading to Nejme Square.

Hotels in the area closed as a result of the damages they suffered from each wave of popular protests targeting parliament since Oct. 17, 2019.

Institutions, companies and shops all moved out of the area after it became difficult to reach them. The area turned into a ghost town as a result of power outages and the absence of people.

Parliament meetings there were suspended after the explosion of the port of Beirut on Aug. 4, 2020, which damaged the building.

The parliament moved its meetings temporarily to the UNESCO Palace, which is on the western-south edge of the capital.

While the temporary location provided a spacious hall, comfortable seats and social distancing as required during the pandemic, it did not provide electronic voting for deputies or the electronic list for the attendance of deputies.

Bechara Asmar, head of General Labor Union, said he was concerned about "the continuation of sterile debates while crises become more complex."



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'Only the Lebanese can help Lebanon,' Saudi finance minister tells Davos
Lebanon unlikely to comply with Interpol request to hand Carlos Ghosn over to French authorities

[UN envoy praises 'potential' of Syria prisoner amnesty](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-05-22 23:05

DAMASCUS: UN special envoy Geir Pedersen has welcomed a general amnesty aimed at freeing thousands of Syrians convicted on terrorism charges.

President Bashar Assad has decreed several amnesties during the country's devastating 11-year war, but the latest in April was the most comprehensive related to terrorism charges since the conflict began, rights activists said. Pedersen, speaking to reporters in Damascus after a meeting with the regime's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, said he had been briefed "in quite some detail" on the latest measure.

"I am very much looking forward to being kept informed on the progress on the implementation for that amnesty," Pedersen said before talks on a new constitution for Syria are to resume in Geneva.

“That amnesty has potential, and we are looking forward to see how it develops,” Pedersen said.

The regime’s Justice Ministry has said hundreds of inmates had been released, and a military official, Ahmad Touzan, told local media this week that the amnesty would cover thousands, including those who are wanted but not detained.

Touzan refused to disclose the number of inmates freed, saying “numbers are changing by the hour.”

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, which relies on a large network of sources inside Syria, says around 1,142 inmates have so far been released across the country under the amnesty, with hundreds more expected. In the next few days Syria’s warring parties are to hold the latest round of constitutional talks in Switzerland, under a process that began in 2019.

It is hoped the talks can pave the way toward a broader political process. Pedersen said he is “hopeful that this will be a positive meeting that can help bring us forward so that we can start to see... some confidence building measures,” Pedersen said.

Syria’s civil war erupted in 2011 after the violent repression of protests demanding regime change.

The war has left around half a million people dead and displaced millions. Throughout the war, the UN has been striving to nurture a political resolution.



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Four killed as Jordanian army thwarts drug smuggling attempt from Syria
Israeli missile strikes kill 3 near Syria capital: state media

Chief of Yemen's Presidential Council backs extending UN-brokered truce

Sun, 2022-05-22 21:59

AL-MUKALLA: The president of Yemen's Presidential Leadership Council, Rashad Al-Alimi, vowed on Saturday to support current efforts by international mediators to extend the UN-brokered truce, fight corruption and unify military and security units.

In a televised speech on the eve of the 32nd anniversary of Unification Day, Al-Alimi said the council supports the UN and US Yemen envoy's continuing activities to renew the truce, which is set to expire on June 2. He called upon the world to pressure the Houthis to stop breaking the truce and implement its provisions, including lifting their siege of Taiz city.



Yemenis fill their jerrycans with water from a well at a makeshift camp for displaced people in the province of Hodeidah. (AFP)

"In the name of members of the Leadership Council, we affirm our continuing support to the tireless efforts of the UN and US envoys to extend the humanitarian truce," Al-Alimi said, noting that the truce would pave the way for peace, save lives and rescue the country from starvation.

He stressed that the 2021 Saudi initiative to end the war in Yemen would be the cornerstone of plans to achieve peace in Yemen.

“We also renew our adherence to the initiative of the brothers in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, considering it a just basis for a comprehensive peace process.”

Al-Alimi came to power in April when Yemen’s former President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi ceded authority to the eight-man Presidential Leadership Council that would run the country and start peace talks with the Houthis.

On Saturday, the new president pledged to address economic problems in Aden and the other provinces, fight corruption, boost revenues and bring together different armed groups under the council’s command based on the Riyadh Agreement.

“We will firmly move forward to unify the military and security establishment.”

The truce that came into effect on April 2 has largely reduced violence and deaths across the country, despite hundreds of violations by the Houthis and allowed commercial flights to leave Sanaa airport as at least a dozen fuel ships entered Hodeidah port.

The Yemen president’s pledge to support the renewal of the truce came as the Yemeni government and the Houthis are preparing to participate in discussions on opening roads in Taiz and the other provinces.

Houthi media said on Sunday that their delegation left Sanaa for the Jordanian capital on a UN plane.

A government official told Arab News on Saturday that their negotiators were told to get ready to travel to Amman for the meeting.

In the besieged city of Taiz, dozens of people on Sunday arranged a rare protest near a blocked road that links with Hodeidah province, west of the city, to draw attention to the Houthi siege.

The posters stood in a line on the road, carrying posters that called for ending the Houthi assault.

“Taiz has paid a heavy humanitarian bill due to the siege of the Houthi militia,” read one of the posters.

The Houthis have been besieging the city of Taiz since 2015 to force government troops that defend the city to surrender.



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Pressure mounts on Houthis to lift Taiz siege
Saudi deputy defense minister: UN, international pressure needed for Houthis to engage in peace process

[Slow rebuilding frustrates Gaza year after conflict](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-05-22 21:02

GAZA CITY: Delayed rebuilding efforts in Gaza have frustrated locals, with many still living in temporary accommodation a year after the end of fierce fighting.

Ayman Dahman has lived with his family for more than a year in a rented house after his home was destroyed during the Palestinian-Israel conflict in May last year.

Dahman does not know when his old apartment – which he is still paying installments on – will be reconstructed.

The Gaza Strip has witnessed four conflicts, the last of which was in May 2021. The fighting that year lasted for 11 days, during which about 1,700 housing units were completely destroyed.

“I bought my apartment some years before the war, and I still pay the installments from my monthly salary. Now I live with my wife and two daughters and two sons in an apartment I rented after the war; we don’t know when we will return to our home again,” Dahman said.

Dahman and his family used to live in a five-storey building inhabited by 10 families, in the north of Gaza City.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Refugees paid rent allowance to 154 Palestinian families whose homes were completely demolished during the war, including the Dahman family.

Naji Sarhan, undersecretary at the Ministry of Public Works in Gaza, said that no more than 20 percent of the damaged properties have been reconstructed since the end of the war last year.

“What has been accomplished and what is underway in the housing sector so far does not exceed 20 percent of the completely destroyed houses, and 70 percent of the partially damaged houses,” Sarhan said at a press conference in Gaza on Sunday.

He added: “There are no commitments for the reconstruction of the high-rise and multi-storey residential buildings that were bombed and demolished by the occupation during the aggression of last May.”

Last year, Egypt and Qatar pledged \$1 billion to rebuild the post-war Gaza Strip.

“Many friendly countries began pledging to rebuild Gaza after the aggression on the city last year, led by Egypt with a grant of \$500 million, and Qatar with a grant of \$500 million, in addition to some sporadic grants of limited amounts provided by countries and institutions,” Sarhan said.

Egypt also began construction on Gaza’s 1.8-kilometer-long Corniche Street, three residential communities comprising 117 buildings with a total of more than 2,500 housing units, in addition to a construction plan for a bridge in the Shujaiya area, and an open tunnel in the Saraya neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Qatar has started construction of 200 housing units, in addition to the restoration of 11 residential buildings that were partially damaged. It is also repairing a number of destroyed street intersections with a pledge to continue the reconstruction process, Sarhan said.

Fears over new rounds of fighting between Israel and Hamas have mounted amid tensions over preparations by Israelis to conduct a flag march on May 29 in Jerusalem. A similar move led to the outbreak of violence last year.

Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas’ political bureau, said during a conference held in Gaza: “We are following the threats to storm the blessed Al-Aqsa

Mosque on May 29, or organize a march of flags.

“I warn the enemy against committing such crimes and such steps.”

Palestinians in Gaza are divided over support for a new confrontation.

Supporters of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and some supporters of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine express a willingness to confront Israel over flag marches. Others fear that any conflict would only add to the economic woes of the Gaza Strip.



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Israel reopens Gaza crossing after nearly two weeks EU launches €60bn program for investment in Gaza