

US officials target corruption, terror funding in Beirut talks

Author:

Tue, 2022-03-01 21:29

BEIRUT: A US Treasury delegation on Tuesday held talks with officials in Beirut on the Lebanese government's cooperation in combating money laundering and corruption, as well as the crisis in the Lebanese banking sector.

The delegation – headed by Paul Ahern, principal deputy assistant secretary at the US Treasury; his deputy Eric Meyer; and a group of experts in financial crime – was following up discussions the previous day on combating terror financing, and illicit drug and smuggling operations,

President Michel Aoun told US officials that Lebanese laws “are applied firmly and accurately in this field, and international financial institutions testify to that.”

Aoun said: “Lebanon actively participates in international efforts to combat money laundering, and plays its role in the Financial Action Group for this purpose in the Middle East region. It also established the National Coordination Committee for Combating the Financing of Terrorism and the National Anti-Corruption Commission.”

The Lebanese leader pledged that the fight against corruption “will continue unabated during the remainder of the presidential term,” and cited the forensic audit of the central bank's accounts as “one of its most prominent manifestations.”

Aoun said that the capital control bill targeting foreign transfers and cash withdrawals from banks in Lebanon is due to be approved by parliament before its mandate ends in May.

He also thanked the US for its support for Lebanon's army , as well as humanitarian, development, health and educational assistance.

The US delegation on Monday met Parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri, Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi to discuss the fight against terror financing, and drug and smuggling operations, as well as the country's preparations for parliamentary elections in May.

Talks focused on sanctions against Hezbollah and figures close to the party over illegal finance operations.

According to Lebanon's Almarkaziya news agency, the meeting discussed the continuing investigation into Riad Salameh, the central bank governor, and its likely impact Lebanon's financial and monetary stability.

Observers said that the delegation's visit is proof that the US will refuse to tolerate any reluctance by political, financial and banking authorities in

Lebanon to apply US sanctions, especially when it comes to corruption and terrorism financing.

US officials also discussed Hezbollah's financial arm, the Al-Qard Al-Hassan Association, which is subject to US sanctions.

Meanwhile, an IMF delegation headed by Ernesto Ramirez continued talks with Lebanese officials, including Mikati and Berri, on the country's financial and economic recovery strategy.

The IMF is waiting for Lebanese authorities to begin acting on promises of reforms required by the international community, including an electricity plan since this issue alone is responsible for about half of the deficit in the state's general budget.

Despite high-level talks during the past two weeks, the government has been unable to reach a final formula on the plan.

A Saudi-French agreement was announced on Monday following talks between French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan to finance several humanitarian projects and provide direct assistance to several hospitals and primary healthcare centers.

Saudi Arabia will also donate \$36 million to Lebanon through the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center.



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[Libya parliament approves rival cabinet to unity govt: statement](#)

Author:

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Tue, 2022-03-01 19:02

BENGAZI: Libya's eastern-based parliament on Tuesday approved a new cabinet, in a challenge to the unity government of Abdulhamid Dbeibah in the capital Tripoli in the west.

The new administration, to be headed by former interior minister Fathi Bashagha, won the confidence of the House of Representatives with a majority of 92 members, speaker Aguila Saleh said.

Bashagha had been tasked in early February with forming a government to replace that of Dbeibah, deemed by the HoR as having outlived its mandate. But Dbeibah, the interim prime minister based in Tripoli, has repeatedly said he will only cede power to an elected government.

The construction tycoon had been appointed a year earlier, as part of United Nations-led efforts to draw a line under a decade of conflict following the 2011 revolt that toppled dictator Muammar Qaddafi.

He was to lead the country to elections in December, but they were indefinitely postponed and Saleh, a rival presidential candidate, argued that his mandate was finished.

The House of Representatives, elected in 2014, is based in the eastern city of Tobruk while Dbeibah's administration is western-based in Tripoli, reflecting the deep and complex divisions that have plagued Libya in recent years.

The rise of Bashagha's government once again gives the country two prime ministers, and experts have warned it could spark violence.

Bashagha has said he will "reach out to everyone."



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Libya rival PM says cabinet line-up ready
Libya interim PM, fighting ouster, promises populist spending plan

[Jordan's wheat stock is sufficient for 15 months, official claims](#)

Tue, 2022-03-01 17:59

AMMAN: Jordan's wheat stock is sufficient for 15 months, according to officials, amid concerns of supply cut-offs and price hikes as a result of the ongoing war between key wheat exporters Russia and Ukraine.

Anwar Ajarmeh, chairman of the Jordan's General Company for Silos and Supply, said the kingdom's storage of imported wheat is "comfortable" and could supply the local market for 15 months.

In remarks to local media on Tuesday, Ajarmeh said the country's storage of barley could also meet the local market needs for 11 months.

He explained that the country has a wheat stock of 1.388 million tons, of which 858,000 tons are stored in the company's silos and the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply's pits.

He said that Jordan imports some 95 percent of wheat consumed, adding that the kingdom is "required to look for alternatives to be prepared for a prolonged Russian-Ukrainian war and an accompanying congestion in global supply chains."

Emphasizing that the Russia-Ukraine war has no impact on Jordan's immediate wheat imports, the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Supply said that 90 percent of Jordan's annual imports of wheat are from Romania.

Yanal Barmawi, the ministry's spokesperson, said there were no imports of wheat during 2021 or 2022 from Russia due to export taxes levied by Russian authorities on wheat, barley and corn.

Barmawi added that Jordan did not import any wheat or barley from Ukraine during the first two months of 2022, adding that wheat imports from Ukraine in 2021 did not exceed 10 percent.

He said that Jordan imports barley from Australia, France, Germany, Romania and Argentina.

"The kingdom's stock of wheat is sufficient for a period of 15 months," he reiterated.

Russia and Ukraine together account for nearly one-quarter of the global wheat exports.

The two warring countries are also key suppliers of barley, sunflower seed oil and corn, among other products, with Ukraine alone making up almost half of exports of sunflower oil.

Nael Kabariti, chairman of the Jordan Chamber of Commerce, said Jordan only imported wheat from Ukraine twice over the past two years and "only in small amounts," adding that the country's supply of wheat comes from non-Ukrainian sources.

Kabariti said Jordan imports sunflower oil and corn from Ukraine but can resort to other producers in case of any disruption, including Malaysia and Indonesia.

He added that Jordanian traders have accumulated experience in addressing disruption in global supply chains, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We have learned a good lesson during the pandemic. Everywhere in the world, there was a shortage in supply except in Jordan.

“It happened before during the Chernobyl disaster (in 1986) when Jordanian traders succeeded in securing alternative suppliers when Jordan had banned imports from Ukraine,” he said.

Asked whether the war in Ukraine would have an impact on prices in Jordan, Kabariti said: “There will be no direct impact on prices of basic food items in the local market because we deal with other suppliers. But of course, there would be an indirect impact in case of an increase in international shipping prices.”

He added that there is “no need to panic and there are solutions in place in case of any disruption in global supply chains.”



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Ukrainian crisis hits Jordanian students, importsEgypt issues wheat tender as Ukraine war threatens supply

UN experts urge Iran to abandon mass internet censorship plan

Author:

Tue, 2022-03-01 18:06

LONDON: Two UN experts have called on Iran to “abandon its efforts to enact a new law that would effectively isolate the country from the global internet.”

In a joint statement, Javaid Rehman, special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, and Irene Khan, special rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, warned that Parliament could soon ratify the Regulatory System for Online Services Bill.

More commonly referred to as the User Protection Bill, it grants Tehran and the military “extensive control over infrastructure that connects Iran to the global internet.”

If enacted, the legislation would force technology companies to “follow state guidelines” or be subject to bandwidth throttling and blocking. It would have a raft of implications for the rights of global companies and Iranian citizens.

The bill would likely block any remaining websites and platforms run by foreign companies still operating in Iran, require people to use IDs to access the internet, and criminalize the distribution and sale of virtual private networks, according to the UN experts.

“This bill represents a worrying step towards the consolidation of a digital wall in Iran,” they said. “It will further restrict information in an environment where the freedom of expression and other fundamental rights are already heavily curtailed.

“It also interferes with the right of individuals to participate in cultural life and have access to cultural resources.”

Internet shutdowns have long been used by Tehran as a tool to hide human rights abuses, especially at times of unrest.

In 2019, during some of the largest ever anti-regime protests seen since the 1979 revolution, the internet was shut down to hide the deaths of at least 324 people at the hands of security forces, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

“Shutdowns and disruption of internet services have since continued, particularly in connection with protests,” said the UN.

The User Protection Bill would further enhance Iran’s ability to disconnect its population from the outside world during times of crisis.

The UN experts said the bill would not only restrict information but also

hamper business operations and adversely impact sectors reliant on information technology, including science, education and medicine.

“It is beyond dispute today that economic and social development of societies rest on access to information and an enabling environment for the exchange of ideas and cultural resources,” they added. “We call on the Islamic Republic of Iran to re-consider this bill.”



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Iran Internet disrupted by cyber attackersCPJ slams Iran's 'outrageous' media censorship

[**Government spokesman: Energy price**](#)

risers due to Russia-Ukraine crisis will benefit Egypt

Sun, 2022-02-27 18:12

CAIRO: Ambassador Nader Saad, a spokesman for the Egyptian government, said that the rise in energy prices due to the Russian-Ukrainian crisis may benefit Egypt, adding that "it is possible to export the largest amount of natural gas we have."

He continued, during television statements to ON TV yesterday evening, that "it is possible to benefit from the price difference and the hard currency," explaining that "this would be distinguished economic thinking to export the largest amount of natural gas that exists in Egypt after taking into account the needs of factories and the use of alternative energy.

"A meeting was held with the governor of the Central Bank to check on the availability of hard currency necessary to secure our needs of strategic goods, especially since the hard currency that was coming through Russian-Ukrainian tourism was affected," Saad said.

He pointed out that the Central Bank and the government are working together in these difficult circumstances to secure Egyptian needs, adding: "We hope that the crisis will not extend for a long time so that we do not put too much pressure on the budget."

Egypt is looking to consolidate its position as a gas producer for Europe, as it is working on a joint agreement with Cyprus and Greece to export gas, linking Greek and Cypriot fields with Egyptian liquefaction stations, to be a gateway for Egyptian gas to Europe.

According to a statement by the Egyptian Cabinet in mid-February, liquefied natural gas exports witnessed significant growth, reaching 6.5 million tons in 2021, compared to 1.5 million tons in 2020.

Egypt and Israel are also studying the construction of an offshore gas pipeline to the Damietta facility, and the Idku liquefaction facility in Egypt, to help export to Europe. Cairo is also working with Lebanon and Jordan on the Arab Gas Pipeline project to solve the Lebanese energy crisis, as it is expected to pump about 1.5 million cubic meters to Lebanon, according to statements by Egyptian Petroleum Minister Tarek El-Molla.

Saad confirmed the formation of a crisis room to follow up on the Russian-Ukrainian crisis and its impact on Egyptian interests, explaining that it is primarily following "the situation of Egyptians in Ukraine, led by students, then wheat and how to secure our wheat needs in light of these circumstances.

"The third aspect is international oil prices and their effects on the Egyptian budget. We hope to bring back the Egyptian students in Ukraine today," he said.

“The eastern, southern and central regions are currently the most dangerous, and the Egyptian Embassy in Kiev instructs people to stay home because the roads have become unsafe. The Egyptians in the west of the country have it relatively easier,” he added.

Nabila Makram, minister of state for immigration and Egyptians abroad, said the government “is now studying sending Egyptian planes to evacuate students who have fled to Ukraine’s neighboring countries.

“There are 22 students who crossed to Poland, while 100 arrived in Romania and there are 1,000 students waiting to arrive in Bucharest,” she said, adding that “there is coordination between state agencies regarding the Egyptian community in Ukraine, and security precautions and the safety of citizens are taken into account.”



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Arab League to meet over Ukraine war Arab students stranded in Ukraine desperate to go home