

Protest by families of Beirut blast victims brings Palace of Justice to standstill

Author:

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BEIRUT: Relatives of the victims of the explosion that destroyed Beirut's Port in August 2020 staged a fresh protest in the city on Monday, amid growing anger and frustration over what they see as "procrastination" that is hampering the official investigation into the blast.

They blocked roads and entrances at the Palace of Justice to express their "anger and deep sense of the injustice inflicted on them by all those who submit requests to reject the work of judicial investigator Judge Tarek Bitar."

Their demonstration caused work in the courtrooms to grind to a halt. The families accuse authorities of "negligence, ignoring and covering up the crime and the catastrophe of the biggest explosion in modern history that afflicted Lebanon and Beirut."

They said that they will call for an international investigation "if stagnation and threats continue, and the case is diluted."

Bitar, 48, has been unable to complete his investigation into the explosion and the part that the actions of politicians and officials might have played in the events that led up to it. The individuals under investigation include a former prime minister, four ministers and a number of deputies, senior security officials and port officials.

The work of the judge has been suspended for more than two months. He took over the case in February last year after his predecessor, Judge Fadi Sawan, who was removed from the investigation by the Court of Cassation following complaints by two ministers accused of negligence that resulted in the deaths of innocent people.

Since taking over the case, Bitar has been subjected to a smear campaign, intense political pressure and threats inside the Palace of Justice from a Hezbollah official. Suspects in the case, including ministers and representatives, who enjoy parliamentary immunity, have filed dozens of lawsuits calling for Bitar to be removed from the case.

Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah accused Bitar of "politicizing the investigation and exercising discretion." The party's supporters staged protests in October demanding the judge be replaced. Supporters of the Amal Movement joined the demonstrations, which escalated into violent clashes and led to deaths.

During the protests at the Palace of Justice on Monday, families of the victims of the port explosion called on officials to make the necessary judicial appointments to ensure requirements are met for the number of members of the general assembly of the Court of Cassation. The court recently lost its quorum when one of its judges retired, which has hampered efforts to resume the investigation.

A delegation representing the protesters reached the office of Judge Suhail Abboud, the president of the Supreme Judicial Council. Members of the delegation said that when asked about restoring the quorum, Abboud told them "any legal measures that can be taken to protect the investigation will be studied."

The protesters carried banners denouncing the "corrupt political authority and state officials who dilute the investigation file, manipulate the law and want to remove Judge Bitar, who is entrusted by all the Lebanese to reveal the facts and punish the criminal perpetrators, from whichever side."

Another banner read: "No one is immune when 220 are martyred, 6,500 wounded, half of the capital Beirut is destroyed and hundreds of thousands of citizens are displaced."

In a statement, the protesters said: "Enough of wasting time, sometimes by resorting to political immunity and sometimes by accusing Judge Bitar of discretion or politicization in an attempt to remove him and end the investigation."

"Today, we affirm that we are behind the judicial investigator more than ever before and we hold the accused criminals responsible for doing nothing but obstruction and evasion of justice."

The relatives expressed anger over the failure of authorities to act on a warrant, issued by Bitar, for the arrest of MP Ali Hassan Khalil, a former finance minister who is political assistant to the head of the Amal Movement, Nabih Berri.

They questioned "how this minister was able to hold a press conference a week ago without anyone touching him."

A judicial source told Arab News that Judge Bitar will remain unable to resume his investigation until appointments are made to the Court of Cassation so that it can make a decision to do so, and ruled out the possibility of these appointments taking place before the presidential election in May.



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Mon, 2022-01-17 22:25

RIYADH: Qatar's Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman on Monday met with UN envoy to Syria Geir Pedersen, during his visit to Doha, state news agency QNA reported.

During the meeting, they discussed latest developments in the Syrian crisis, and stressing the importance of continuing to facilitate humanitarian access to all Syrians.

The two sides also stressed the importance of reaching a political solution that ends the war and the suffering of the Syrian people in accordance with

UN Security Council resolutions.

.@Geir0Pedersen in Doha for meeting w/FM Mohammed Abdulrahman Al Thani. Appreciate the support of Qatar for my mandate and for the pursuit of a political settlement within the framework of SC resolution 2254.

– UN Special Envoy for Syria (@UNEnvoySyria) [January 17, 2022](#)



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Senior European politicians call for UN probe into 1988 Iran massacres

Mon, 2022-01-17 21:19

LONDON: Senior politicians from across the EU and UK on Monday urged the UN to open an investigation into the 1988 massacres of political prisoners by the Iranian regime.

Speaking at an event hosted by the National Council of Resistance of Iran and attended by Arab News, former heads of state and senior parliamentary figures threw their support behind its campaign for accountability over the massacres.

Guy Verhofstadt, Belgium's prime minister from 1999 to 2008, described the massacres – in which Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi played a key role as a prosecutor in Tehran – as “genocide.”

Verhofstadt, now a member of the European Parliament, said: “The impunity crisis in Iran reached a peak in June when Raisi was appointed as the regime's president. He's one of the main perpetrators of the 1988 mass murder of more than 30,000 political prisoners.

“Instead of being tried for crimes against humanity, he's occupying the post of presidency. This shows that impunity is rampant in Iran.”

The 1988 killings heavily targeted the Mujahedin el-Khalq, an opposition group that played a key role in the 1979 revolution but was later violently turned upon by Iran's then-Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini as he sought to consolidate power.

The MEK is the largest constituent organization of the NCRI, an umbrella movement for Iranian opposition groups.

Many current members of the NCRI lost family and friends in the massacres, which Amnesty International has described as “crimes against humanity.”

Verhofstadt said: “The architects and perpetrators of genocides must always be brought to justice. Crimes against humanity can never go unpunished. We are shocked by the genocide that took place in Iran in 1988. The men and women died only because they strived for a free and democratic Iran.”

Also in attendance at Monday's event was John Bercow, who served as the speaker in the British Parliament for a decade until 2019.

Best known for his commands of “order” aimed at unruly MPs, he took on a somber tone to tell attendees that “the 1988 massacre must be investigated.” Raisi “must be prosecuted for crimes against humanity,” said Bercow. “He's a disgrace.”

Bercow also voiced his backing more broadly for the NCRI's mission, calling

himself an “ally” and “friend” of the group, and reiterating his support for their slogan: “Down with the oppressor, be it the shah or the supreme leader.” He added: “I back your call for a secular and democratic republic.”

Other speakers at Monday’s event included former Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt and former Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini.

Both echoed Bercow’s and Verhofstadt’s calls for an investigation into the 1988 massacres – which they said continues to be covered up to this day – and backed the NCRI under the leadership of Maryam Rajavi, the group’s president-elect.

Rajavi, who has been president of the NCRI since 1993, said the organization seeks to install a government that is “the democratic alternative to the clerical regime.”

The NCRI, she added, “seeks a republic based on the separation of religion and state, gender equality, and the autonomy of the oppressed ethnic groups.”







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Families gather at Tehran cemetery in memory of 1988 massacre
UN urged to launch inquiry into Iran's 1988 massacre

[Fears grow over Iran influence in Lebanon after Hezbollah, Amal Cabinet decision](#)

Sun, 2022-01-16 23:02

BEIRUT: A decision by Hezbollah and the Amal Movement to end a boycott of Lebanon's Cabinet has led to speculation that Iran is making moves to control Lebanon's political system.

Lebanese Forces MP Ziad Hawat said: "The order came from Tehran, so the 'disruption duo' decided to set the Cabinet meetings free. These are the repercussions of external negotiations."

He added: "The 'disruption duo' pawned the country to the outside will. But the parliamentary elections are coming and the hour of reckoning is upon us."

The two parties said on Saturday that they would take part in Cabinet meetings after a three-month boycott.

The decision came as a surprise to many, and positively impacted the currency rate on Sunday.

Reacting to the announcement, Prime Minister Najib Mikati said that he would convene a Cabinet meeting as soon as the Finance Ministry had sent through a draft budget.

He added that the decision "aligns with his personal repeated calls for everyone to participate in assuming the national responsibility in a way that preserves the national pact, especially during these critical times the country is going through."

Mikati's office noted the need "to set a recovery plan to launch the negotiation process with the International Monetary Fund."

Some political observers said that the two parties are facing a political stalemate and popular pressure accusing them of escalating crises.

Parliamentary elections are around the corner and the two parties "want to absorb people's resentment before the date of the said elections next May."

Other observers linked the decision by the two parties to "regional developments regarding the Vienna talks."

They believe that "the decision to disrupt the Cabinet meetings served an external agenda, specifically an Iranian one, and that perhaps they ended their boycott to demonstrate flexibility in the complicated negotiations."

The two parties said in their joint statement on Saturday: "We announce our agreement to participate in Cabinet meetings to approve the national budget and discuss the economic rescue plan, and all that concerns improving the living conditions of the Lebanese."

They claimed that the decision came "following the acceleration of events and the escalation of the internal political and economic crisis to an unprecedented level, with the collapse of the Lebanese pound's exchange rate, the decline of the public sector and the collapse of citizen income and purchasing power."

Hezbollah and Amal also mentioned in their mutual statement that their boycott was due to "the unconstitutional steps undertaken by Judge Tarek Bitar in the Beirut Port blast case – the gross legal infringements, flagrant politicization, lack of justice and lack of respect for standardization."

Instead of Bitar presiding over the case, the two parties have requested that a parliamentary panel should look into the matter.

This requirement, however, has not been executed yet, as the prime minister has refused to “interfere with judicial operations,” with his party firmly backing Bitar.

Phalanges Party MP Samy Gemayel said that Hezbollah and Amal “think they owe us a favor by ending the boycott.”

He added: “They paralyzed the country for a year to form the government they wanted and they boycotted it to prevent justice from prevailing in the ‘crime of the century.’

“The Lebanese people are the ones paying the price. There’s no work, no electricity, no heating, no bread and no medicine,” said Gemayel.

He added: “Accountability for humiliating people will be achieved through the elections.”

In his Sunday sermon, Maronite Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi commented on the latest development regarding Cabinet sessions.

“In the democratic system, the procedural authority shall operate according to the powers conferred upon it by the constitution, without being subject to any illegal pressure or condition,” he said.

He warned against “resorting to the disruption of parliamentary and presidential elections – scheduled for next October – for suspicious personal objectives.

“The Cabinet disruption, the political escalation, the continued provocation, the use of justice to undermine the opponents and the inversion of priorities reassure neither the Lebanese people nor Lebanon’s brothers and friends.”

Internet services were disrupted in Lebanon on Sunday because of diesel shortages, adding another essential service to the list of casualties of the country’s economic crisis.

The Energy Ministry, however, categorically denied an Israeli Channel 12 report entitled “Washington approves an agreement to supply Lebanon with Israeli gas.”

The ministry said that “the gas supply agreement between the Lebanese government and the Egyptian government clearly states that the gas must come from Egypt, which owns large gas quantities.

“This gas will pass through Jordan, and then into Syria, which will in turn benefit from it.”



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[US and France discuss ways to promote Libya's democratic process](#)

Sun, 2022-01-16 19:28

LONDON: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held talks with his French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian to discuss efforts to promote the democratic process in Libya, the State Department said on Sunday.

Efforts to lead Libya into elections at the end of December were thrown into disarray when the country's electoral commission said a vote could not take place, citing what it called inadequacies in the electoral legislation and the judicial appeals process.

Blinken also spoke about the recent informal EU foreign ministers' meeting, that was held in the western French city of Brest on Friday as part of the French presidency of the Council of the EU.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian had reiterated following the meeting on Friday his view that talks to revive a 2015 Iran nuclear deal are progressing “much too slowly to be able to reach a result.”

“We now have to conclude and come to a decision: Either the Iranians want to complete this, in which case we have the impression that there will be flexibility in the Americans’ stance.

“Or they don’t want to complete this, and in that case we will be faced with a major proliferation crisis,” Le Drian said.

“There will be nothing more to negotiate if nothing happens,” he warned.

Negotiations to salvage the nuclear deal resumed in late November after they were suspended in June as Iran elected a new, ultraconservative government.

“Secretary Blinken reiterated the United States’ firm commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of continued Russian aggression and discussed US resolve to respond swiftly and strongly to any further Russian invasion into Ukraine,” the State Department also said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met with his Algerian counterpart Ramdane Lamamra in Cairo to discuss developments in Libya, Sudan, Mali, and the Sahel and Sahara regions.

The two ministers stressed the need to intensify coordination within the framework of joint African action in a way that enhances efforts to achieve peace and security on the African continent, especially in light of the various security challenges imposed by the successive developments in the region, the Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman said on Facebook.



Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry and his Algerian counterpart Ramdane Lamamra meet in Cairo. (Twitter/@MfaEgypt)

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit stressed the importance of encouraging the Libyan institutions to assume their responsibilities toward the Libyan people during this important and critical stage that would lead to the desired electoral process.

He was speaking during a meeting with Stephanie Williams, the UN secretary-general’s special adviser on Libya, in the Egyptian capital, the Arab League’s General Secretariat said in a statement.

The two parties agreed on the importance of holding elections that will reflect the will of the Libyan people, while continuing the security, military and economic agenda.

(With AFP and Reuters)



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