

Higher Defense Council extends general mobilization period in Lebanon

Wed, 2021-12-22 20:36

BEIRUT: Following a meeting chaired by President Michel Aoun on Wednesday, Lebanon's Supreme Defense Council has decided to extend the current general mobilization period until the end of March 2022. It also announced measures to open the borders with Syria for vaccinated residents or those testing negative for COVID-19.

The council asked all military and security services to "ensure security over the holidays, so the Lebanese can enjoy some stability despite the difficult circumstances."

It added: "We have taken security decisions related to smuggling operations at the legitimate and illegal crossings, as well as drug production and trafficking, exchange-rate platforms, and we will be monitoring consumer prices."

During the meeting, council members discussed "the Syrian authorities opening the borders for vaccinated Lebanese, or those with a negative PCR test," and the council asked the Lebanese General Security to take similar measures in coordination with the Ministry of Health.

The Secretary-General of the Supreme Defense Council Maj. Gen. Mahmoud Al-Asmar said the council had discussed the situation of the wheat silos at the Beirut port, which were severely damaged during the explosion on Aug. 4, 2020. He explained that the council had insisted on the need to expedite measures to prevent the silos from completely falling apart.

"The council requested the ministries of economy and public works and the council for development and reconstruction to address the issue," he said.

Statements by the Lebanese army commander Gen. Joseph Aoun published on Wednesday by the army's National Defense Magazine revealed the difficult conditions the country's military is facing.

Gen. Aoun warned that "sedition is just around the corner, but we will nip it in the bud."

"Soldiers need to realize that they are facing a sacred mission; the civil war in 1975 was a bitter experience and we will not allow history to repeat itself. Never again shall we allow militias to take over nor will we live under the mercy of armed gangs and terrorism," he stated.

Addressing his soldiers directly in the article, Aoun said: "In whose hands are we leaving our homeland? Chaos? Civil war? The sacrifices and efforts you are making have prevented Lebanon from collapsing, despite the many developments since October 2019. We faced protests, the pandemic, the Beirut port blast, and devastating economic conditions. But we managed to preserve

civil peace thanks to the confidence of our people and the international community, and this encouraged many to help us.”

The general also addressed reports about the number of soldiers deserting and others applying for resignation. “The rumors exaggerate the numbers,” he said. “Many soldiers who left have rejoined the army’s ranks after they discovered that the benefits provided by the army could not be found in any other job.”

He called on officers “to educate the soldiers so that they do not rush into making decisions they will regret.”

Gen. Aoun touched on the repercussions of Lebanon’s financial collapse on the armed forces, saying: “The major concern has become transportation. I am well aware of all the pressures and challenges you are experiencing, including the protest movements, the fuel and medicine crises, raids, clashes and many others, and you have wisely and patiently taken on every one of these challenges.

“I do not expect the economic crisis to end soon and we could be facing worse scenarios,” he added. “We are not the reason behind the crisis, nor are we the solution. We are simply doing our duty toward our homeland, and we will be present wherever we are needed. Our duty is to help the state find solutions by providing security and stability. We have overcome many difficulties in the past and we will overcome this crisis as well. We will weather this storm until it ends.”

Gen. Aoun noted: “The army has bought buses and vans, and they will be in service soon, which will solve the problem of transportation for many soldiers.”

He revealed that 68 percent of soldiers have received two vaccine doses so far, and stressed “the need to vaccinate the rest. Soldiers who refused to take the vaccine would have to cover their own medical costs should they contract COVID-19, he added.

Gen. Aoun also commented on the rumors about “discrimination in the distribution of aid within the military institution,” calling on soldiers “not to pay any attention to such claims, for the army is for everyone and against all those who violate security.”

The army has requested food aid from Arab and foreign armies.

“Donors are facing legal and constitutional obstacles, but efforts are being exerted to find solutions to secure this aid for the army,” the general stressed.



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As economic crisis bites, Lebanese army withdraws soldiers from Beirut suburbs
Lebanon to set up more checkpoints to clamp down on thefts

[Morocco sees return to normal diplomatic ties with Germany](#)

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1640188782471952100

Wed, 2021-12-22 19:01

RABAT: Morocco said on Wednesday it expected a return to normal cooperation and diplomatic ties with Germany after Berlin expressed support for Rabat's autonomy plan for the disputed Western Sahara territory.

Morocco had recalled its ambassador to Germany in May in protest over what it described as Berlin's "antagonistic activism" after the United States in December 2020 recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, which is also claimed by the Algeria-backed Polisario Front movement.

In March, Morocco ordered all governmental departments and bodies to abstain from any cooperation and contacts with the German embassy and German political organizations.

But last week, the diplomatic situation improved after the German foreign ministry issued a statement describing Morocco's autonomy plan as an "important contribution" to finding a political solution to the Western Sahara conflict, in line with United Nations Security Council resolutions. The Moroccan foreign ministry said in a statement that it welcomed the "positive statements...which bode well for a resumption of bilateral cooperation and a return to normalcy in the work of diplomatic representations of the two countries in Berlin and Rabat."

Morocco has been assertive in pushing European countries and the European Union to follow the United States on its Western Sahara stance. King Mohammed last month said Morocco would not agree "any economic or commercial step that excludes the Moroccan Sahara."



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Sahara tension: Moroccan row deepens with Germany Morocco cuts contacts with German embassy in WSahara spat

Israel PM meets US national security adviser on Iran

Wed, 2021-12-22 18:53

JERUSALEM: The US national security adviser held talks Wednesday with Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who warned that negotiations in Vienna on Iran's nuclear program had "profound ramifications" for Israeli security. Bennett's government has remained firmly opposed to ongoing international efforts to revive a 2015 accord that saw Iran agree to curbs on its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief.

Jake Sullivan, national security adviser to President Joe Biden, said his visit to Israel had come at "a critical juncture."

"It's important that we sit together and develop a common strategy, a common outlook, and find a way forward that fundamentally secures your country's interests and mine," Sullivan said, according to an Israeli government statement.

He did not directly mention Iran but the Israeli statement said the meeting focused on the Vienna talks.

Pleased to meet with President Abbas. I highlighted the Biden administration's interest in strengthening engagement with the Palestinian Authority and deepening ties with the Palestinian people. pic.twitter.com/hevA5HNDtg

– Jake Sullivan (@JakeSullivan46) [December 22, 2021](#)

Later, Sullivan and his Israeli counterpart Eyal Hulata led a meeting of delegations from both countries, a joint statement said.

They discussed the need to confront "all aspects of the threat posed by Iran, including its nuclear program, destabilising activities in the region, and support for terrorist proxy groups," the statement added.

The US and Israel "are aligned in their determination to ensure that Iran never gets a nuclear weapon," it said.

Bennett has called for the nuclear deal negotiations to be halted, accusing Iran of "nuclear blackmail" and charging that revenue it gained from sanctions relief would be used to acquire weapons to harm Israelis.

Lead US Iran negotiator Rob Malley told CNN Tuesday that there are only "some weeks" left to revive the deal if Tehran continues its nuclear activities at the current pace.

Negotiations to restore the pact known as the Joint Collective Plan of Action resumed in November.

Washington was a party to the original agreement, but withdrew under president Donald Trump in 2018.

The Biden administration has warned it may soon be too late to revive the

JCPOA.

“It really depends on the pace of their nuclear process,” said Malley, the US special envoy for Iran.

“If they halt the nuclear advances, we have more time.

“If they continue at their current pace, we have some weeks left but not much more than that, at which point the conclusion will be there’s no deal to be revived,” he said.

Iran says it only wants to develop a civil nuclear program.

Sullivan is also scheduled to meet Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas in Ramallah, in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.



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Arab coalition denies Iranian claims on evacuation of diplomat from Yemen
2021 in Review: Yet another year of disease, drought, privation and repression for Iranians

Permanent 'Year Zero:' Red Cross chief paints bleak picture of Mid-East conflict zones

Author:

Wed, 2021-12-22 01:40

NEW YORK: Although to outside observers the Middle East might appear to be experiencing a period of renewed, active diplomacy, including a host of new peace initiatives, "our teams on the ground see no difference," according to Fabrizio Carboni, regional director of the International Committee of the Red Cross for Near and Middle East.

During a virtual briefing in New York, he painted a bleak picture of a region that continues to struggle with protracted conflicts, collapsing economies and dire financial predicaments, on top of efforts to battle a COVID-19 pandemic that continues to rage amid vaccine scarcity in many countries. Only 5 percent of Syrians have had their first dose of a vaccine, and 2 percent of Yemenis, for example.

This amid "donor fatigue," said Carboni, as conflicts proliferate elsewhere in the world, including Afghanistan and Ethiopia, and donor nations divert resources that would previously have gone to help people in the Middle East.

"For the time being, we are \$8 million short of what we need for a full slate of humanitarian activities in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories," Carboni said, by way of an example.

"In Iraq, we are short of \$20 million. And even if these countries are not in the top headlines on a daily basis, the families (there) continue to suffer and need massive help."

Adding to the difficulty of funding humanitarian work in some parts of the region is the fact that "we are moving from true emergency, like distributing food, to another phase – let's call it 'early recovery' – where we need to work on systems to allow people to be autonomous and get back on their feet. And this is a more complex activity to finance and it costs a lot because of the size of the destruction."

The destruction caused by a decade of conflict in Syria is reminiscent of that caused in Europe during the Second World War, according to Carboni.

"Every time I go back to Syria I always have the feeling that the conflict ended the day before," he said. "There is this permanent state of 'Year Zero' and it's really heartbreaking.

"And the financial crisis hitting Syria today is an additional layer of vulnerability and complexity, and it is hitting very, very hard the average Syrian."

Warning that the freezing winter temperatures are making conditions even harsher for displaced Syrians, both internally and as refugees, Carboni in particular highlighted the plight of children as the worst-affected by the crisis. The situation in northeast Syria represents "one of the largest child-protection crises in the world today," he said.

At the Al-Hol camp, for example, which the official recently visited, he said the vast majority of residents are children under the age of 12. Many of them were separated from their families during transfers to other camps. These children need to be reunited with their families, repatriated alongside them, or have alternative care provided for them, Carboni added.

The packed Al-Hol camp is home to more than 60,000 women and children, many of them the wives and children of defeated Daesh fighters. The majority of states where they originally came from, including the UK, refuse to repatriate them.

Carboni called for "collective action to have a long-term view for those populations who are still stranded in northeast Syria in a legal limbo." He encouraged all states to repatriate their citizens and "do it lawfully, according to standards and principles, including support to returning children and their families."

He added: "Family unity should be the norm during repatriation. Keeping families together is usually in the child's best interest and it's what international law requires, unless otherwise justified by a rigorous assessment."

Referring to the political process, Carboni lamented the lack of will to make sacrifices for the sake of peace.

"Peace agreements are about compromise," he said. "My fear around Syria, but also generally speaking, is that parties to the conflict try to find a painless solution.

"Oftentimes, there is a political price to pay when you decide to make peace. You always need a form of political courage; giving in on something. What we see in Syria (is) there is no will to make this compromise. That's why the situation is frozen, rotting, and the ones who are paying the price are Syrians."

In Yemen, where "all basic services are down," seven years of conflict have come on top of other chronic challenges facing the nation that have nothing to do with war, such as climate change and an education crisis, Carboni said.

In the absence of basic healthcare, with 24 million people in need of assistance and three-quarters of the population living in near-famine conditions, what is needed is for "states with influence to help reach an agreement to shut down this conflict and to allow the people of Yemen to focus on rehabilitating their country and the existential challenges it is facing," he added.

Turning to the COVID-19 crisis, Carboni said that while the pandemic is the

major threat facing the West, it is just one additional layer of vulnerability in places such as Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, where people are trying to cope simultaneously with multiple crises.

Preventive measures such as social distancing become an absurd demand at overcrowded refugee camps and shelters, he pointed out. Sheltering at home is out of the question for Yemenis, who have to venture out every day to find food for their families. Frequently washing hands might sound a simple precaution for people in Western nations, but for those in Tikrit, Mosul, Hodeida or Aden, water is often not so readily available, he said.

Reaching vulnerable populations with vaccines remains an “an absolute necessity” in efforts to end the global pandemic, Carboni added.



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[soldiers in West Bank, shot dead](#)

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Tue, 2021-12-21 00:07

JERUSALEM: A Palestinian who tried to ram Israeli soldiers with his car in the Israeli-occupied West Bank late Tuesday was shot dead by the soldiers, the army and Palestinian sources said.

The man crashed his car into a military jeep after being shot, causing both vehicles to burst into flames, a statement from the military said of the incident near the northern West Bank city of Jenin.

The Palestinian health ministry later announced the death of a "citizen." The army said "a terrorist accelerated his car toward a manned military post adjacent to the community of Mevo Dotan" in the West Bank.

"IDF troops who were at the point operated to stop the assailant by firing toward the vehicle," the statement said.

"The vehicle crashed into a military vehicle that was in close proximity to the post. As a result, the vehicles caught on fire," it added.

An army spokesman told AFP the military believed the assailant had died as a result of gunshot wounds, but was unable to confirm this.



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