

Tunisian PM says implementing economic reforms top government priority

Tue, 2021-10-12 22:38

TUNIS/WASHINGTON: Tunisian prime minister said on Tuesday that fixing public finances and implementing economic reforms will be a priority – the first sign of the government’s intention to launch reforms demanded by lenders – as Tunisia suffers a financial crisis.

Tunisia’s president unveiled a new cabinet government on Monday, but gave no hint when he would relinquish his near total control after seizing most powers in July.

Under rules President Kais Saied announced last month when he swept aside much of the constitution, the new cabinet will ultimately answer to him rather than Prime Minister Najla Bouden.

Meanwhile, the US on Tuesday praised the appointment of the new Tunisian government as a positive step and encouraged further action three months after a presidential power grab.

“The new government, which includes 10 female ministers, is a welcome step forward toward addressing the significant economic, health and social challenges facing the country,” State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters.

“We look forward to further announcements to establish a broadly inclusive process for a rapid return to constitutional order,” he said.

Bouden was named Monday as the North African country’s first female prime minister and vowed that she would put a priority on fighting corruption.

Saied in July suspended parliament and sacked a government supported by Islamist-inspired party Ennahdha, following months of growing public anger over an economic crisis and the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(With Reuters and AFP)



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[UN 'extremely worried' about plight of migrants in Libyan detention centers](#)

Tue, 2021-10-12 21:20

NEW YORK: UN human rights experts are “extremely worried” about the suffering of migrants and asylum seekers held in detention centers in Libya. Detainees are subjected to “a myriad of daily violations and abuses at the hands of both state and non-state actors,” they said.

Marta Hurtado, spokesperson for the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, on Tuesday highlighted a spike in the number of raids on

migrants and asylum seekers, resulting in deaths and injuries, and an increase in the numbers of people being detained in dire conditions.

She also noted a growing number of expulsions from the country without due process in violation of the principle of non-refoulement, the practice of not forcing refugees and asylum seekers to return to a place where they might face persecution or death.

Hurtado gave as an example the death of one person and the detention of 4,000 people during a raid by Ministry of Interior officials on a settlement in Gergaresh, west of Tripoli, that housed migrants and asylum seekers awaiting the completion of the resettlement process. During the raid women, children and men were arrested and handcuffed, she said.

“Security forces used unnecessary and disproportionate force to detain them, including shooting and beating those who resisted or tried to escape,” she added.

Detainees were transferred to a government-run detention center in Tripoli and detained in “extremely overcrowded cells, (in) unsanitary conditions (and) with little access to food or water,” Hurtado said.

Those who tried to escape from the center were fired on by guards using live ammunition, she added. At least four were killed and many more were injured, although the true number of casualties “remains unknown.”

“This series of horrific events over a period of eight days is just the latest example of the precarious, sometimes lethal, situation facing migrants and asylum seekers in Libya,” Hurtado said.

“They are criminalized solely for their migration status, are routinely detained in abhorrent conditions, are frequently subjected to extortion and abuse, and in some cases killed.”

A recent report by the Independent Fact-finding Mission on Libya determined that the “systematic violations” inflicted on migrants could amount to crimes against humanity.

Although the OHCHR acknowledged a promise by the Libyan government to release some of the migrants, it said that “they should not have been detained in the first place” and reminded the authorities of their “obligation to protect everyone on their territory, including migrants and asylum seekers.”

It urged Libyan officials to order an independent investigation into allegations of disproportionate use of force by the security forces and affiliated armed groups and to hold them accountable for their actions. The office also called for the release of all arbitrarily detained migrants and asylum seekers, a halt to raids on their settlements, an end to deportations, and the provision of safe accommodation with adequate access to healthcare, food and water.

The OHCHR statement comes after UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the agreement reached in Geneva on Friday by the 5+5 Libyan Joint

Military Commission on a process for the withdrawal of mercenaries and foreign fighters from the country.

Guterres said the action plan is “a cornerstone in the implementation of the October 2020 ceasefire agreement,” as he called on Libyan and international authorities to act on it.

“The secretary-general trusts that the deployment of an initial team of United Nations ceasefire monitors will contribute to creating the conditions for successful implementation of the action plan,” said spokesperson Stephane Dujarric.



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Cairo: Renaissance Dam talks almost stalled

Tue, 2021-10-12 18:51

CAIRO: Negotiations over Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam are almost at a standstill, said Egypt's Minister of Water Resources and Irrigation Mohamed Abdel-Aty.

Cairo demands a clear mechanism, a specific timeframe and international observers with regard to reaching a fair agreement on the filling and operation of the dam, he added, stressing the need for Ethiopia to prove its seriousness.

"Egypt won't wait for severe damage to occur, and whoever causes the damage bears the responsibility," he said.

Abdel-Aty added that Egypt is ready to deal with any emergency regarding the water sector, and that it believes in development for itself and all Nile Basin countries. State agencies are coordinating to deal with the issue of the dam, he said.



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Sudan warns Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam plans threaten the lives of 20

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Authorities issue fresh plea for rescue of civilians in Houthi-besieged district

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Mon, 2021-10-11 23:16

AL-MUKALLA: Local authorities in the central Yemeni province of Marib have issued a fresh appeal to international aid organizations and rights groups to rescue thousands of civilians trapped inside the Houthi-besieged district of Al-Abedia.

In a statement seen by Arab News, they warned that more than 35,000 people who lived in Al-Abedia could die of starvation as the Houthis tightened their grip on the district and “hysterically” bombarded residential areas and civilian facilities to force local fighters to surrender.

“We are appealing to the UN Security Council and the UN special envoy for Yemen to carry out their legal and ethical duties and take urgent action to meet the basic needs of the besieged in Al-Abedia in order to prevent a looming humanitarian catastrophe,” local authorities said.

The siege has been ongoing for more than 20 days after local tribesmen and government forces fought to prevent the Houthis from seizing control of the district.

Local aid workers told Arab News that the Houthis had blocked the distribution of humanitarian assistance to residents and even prevented the wounded and elderly from leaving the district.

The appeal came as fighting intensified between locals defending the district and the Iran-backed militia, local media reported on Monday.

Arab coalition warplanes have carried out dozens of air raids in support of the besieged people, targeting Houthi gatherings and military equipment.

Coalition spokesman Gen. Turki Al-Maliki said on Sunday that 118 airstrikes had killed 400 Houthis, destroyed 15 vehicles, and obstructed Houthi attempts to seize control of the district during the past 96 hours.

People with family members in Al-Abedia said they had lost contact with their relatives, with the situation deteriorating due to heavy Houthi shelling and shortages of drugs, food and fuel.

“The situation is very bad due to the suffocating siege and the Houthi attacks from all directions in an attempt to bring the district to its knees,” one person, who preferred not to be named, told Arab News.

One analyst believed the Houthis were trying to send a message to other cities and tribes that they would be harshly punished if they resisted the

militia's offensive on the central city of Marib.

"Al-Abedia has no military significance for the Houthis, but they want to suppress and humiliate the people of Al-Abedia and the people of Marib," Mohammed Al-Salehi, the editor of news website Marib Press, told Arab News on Monday.

He said that at least 70 people who had been wounded during fighting were trapped in the district and could die soon due to the siege.

"No aid organization has stepped in to rescue the wounded as if this humanitarian disaster does not concern them," Al-Salehi added.

Yemeni human rights activists and officials called on their government and military commanders to step up their attacks on the Houthis to break the Al-Abedia siege.

"It is the duty of every free Yemeni and the state's political, military and social figures to work on breaking the unjust siege on it and stop the brutal Houthi aggression against its residents," Mohammed Al-Omada, head of the Yemeni Network for Rights and Freedoms, tweeted.



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Arab coalition hits Houthi targets in Abdiya Egypt affirms support for political solution to Yemeni crisis

Can Arab Gas Pipeline plan enable Lebanon to keep the lights on?

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Mon, 2021-10-11 22:23

DUBAI: Lebanon was plunged into a total blackout this week after two of its main power plants shut down before the army stepped in to supply fuel from its stocks. It was the latest in a series of disasters to strike the country's public-services infrastructure in general, and the power sector in particular, in recent times.

Energy production reportedly dropped to less than 200 MW while the country requires around 3,000 MW. The blackout occurred less than a month after Electricite Du Liban, the state electricity corporation, warned that Lebanon was heading toward a "total and complete" power outage unless more fuel supplies were secured.

The collapse of electricity production also came just weeks after the energy ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria agreed on a road map for the delivery of Egyptian natural gas to Lebanon, which, if successfully implemented, could provide the country with up to 17 hours of electricity per day.

Millions of Lebanese currently endure power outages of up to 22 hours per day as their leaders struggle to secure the foreign capital needed to import fuel. Operators of private backup generators are being pushed to their limits as costs of diesel and repairs have skyrocketed.

"We hope that the import of gas will happen as soon as possible and the cooperation between the countries is considered natural because it is not the first time that cooperation between us has taken place," Raymond Ghajar, Lebanon's former energy minister, said last month.

Earlier this month, after a meeting with his Egyptian counterpart Tarek El-Molla in Cairo, Ghajar said Egypt had offered extra quantities of gas. Molla hinted that a deal could be finalized "within the coming weeks."

The plan is part of a US-coordinated effort to deliver natural gas via the Arab Gas Pipeline, which originates near Arish on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and extends through Jordan, Syria and into Lebanon.



Lebanon's former Energy Minister Raymond Ghajar, Jordan's Energy Minister Hala Zawati, Syria's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources Bassam Tohme and Egypt's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources Tarek El Mol. (Reuters)

"This is a good step in the right direction but more needs to be done," Laury Hayatyan, MENA director at the New York-based Natural Resource Governance Institute, told Arab News, citing the need for forming technical committees from each country to monitor the pipeline's condition.

According to Ghajar, Lebanon is in talks with the World Bank to secure financing for the import of Egyptian natural gas, which will provide the country with 450 megawatts of power.

"To produce 450 MW, Egypt has to provide Lebanon with around 1 billion cubic meters or 670,000 tons of gas," Marc Ayoub, an energy policy researcher at the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute, told Arab News. "Egypt can probably do that given its large gas discoveries in recent years."

The total energy production and the amount of gas needed will also depend on the efficiency of Lebanon's power plants, he said.

Lebanon currently has a maximum power generating capacity of 2,000 MW, far less than the 2017 summer peak demand of 3,400 MW. The power generating-capacity figure is misleading, however; some 50 percent of the output is wasted due to grid inefficiencies.

The biggest challenge facing the Arab Gas Pipeline is something else,

however: The state of the industrial infrastructure of each country.

Infrastructure in Syria, a country devastated by a decade-long civil war, is in urgent need of repair so that gas can reach Lebanon. Egyptian gas stopped flowing through Syria in 2010.

“They said that gas will be transported as soon as possible,” Hayatyan said. “But what exactly does this mean and how much time will it actually take to set up everything?”

Despite the US sanctions on Syria under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which prohibits financial transactions with the country’s institutions, Washington seems to have given its tacit approval to the pipeline proposal.



Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, was pushed into a total blackout in April after its main power stations went offline due to a lack of fuel. (AFP)

“There were signals from the US ambassador to Lebanon that initiated these proceedings, but we must wait for an official confirmation from the US Treasury,” Hayatyan said.

However, the exact payment terms must be agreed on, given that each point of entry charges a transit fee for gas to pass through. “For instance, before the civil war in Syria, they used to take part of the gas transported instead of cash payments,” she said.

In the past, the gas was transported to Lebanon’s Deir Ammar power plant. However, if the arrangement is to be revived, the plant will need to be refitted, having been run on liquid fuel for many years.

If the deal eventually goes ahead, it will not be the first time Lebanon has imported gas from abroad. "We used to import gas back in 2004 when the Arab Gas Pipeline was completed," Roudi Baroudi, an oil and gas expert, told Arab News.

"If Lebanon had fully benefited from that partnership and the Arab pipeline, most of its electricity problems would have been resolved."

Lebanon's government says net transfers to state power firm EDL amount to between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion per year, most of which is spent on fuel oil. In 2016, the International Monetary Fund said the accumulated cost of subsidizing EDL amounted to roughly 40 percent of Lebanon's entire national debt, which itself exceeded 150 percent of its GDP.

Had Lebanon made the most of its pipeline partnership, the state's treasury could have saved something in the region of \$5 billion over 18 years. "That is if we assume that the price of a barrel of oil ranges between \$50 and \$60," Baroudi said.

Egypt, Jordan, and Syria might be willing to extend credit lines to Lebanon, at least in the short term, Baroudi said, adding that "the most important thing now is to open diplomatic channels with all these countries."

To increase the productivity of the new pipeline supply, Baroudi said it would make sense for Lebanon to convert the rest of its power plants to run on gas. "The Zahrani, Jiyeh, and Zouk plants should be converted and connected to the grid," he said.



"We are now counting on the international community to fund vital projects in

the public and private sectors to revive economic life," Lebanese President Michel Aoun said.

In the meantime, Lebanon is looking to purchase excess capacity from Jordan, which could supply about three hours of electricity per day. "Jordan has been producing an excess of electricity in recent years after embracing renewables and is looking to sell that to neighboring countries," Hayatyan said.

Lebanon also struck a deal with Iraq in February to swap one million tons of Iraqi oil for derivatives that match its own power plants' specifications.

When precisely the Lebanese people will see any benefits is unclear. Grappling with the worst financial crisis in its history, Lebanon has gradually increased fuel prices in recent months because the cash-strapped central bank can no longer afford to fund fuel imports.

The latest price hike, expected to be followed by further increases in the coming weeks, is widely seen as a prelude to a final and definite lifting of fuel subsidies by the government.

Acute fuel shortages have brought the small Mediterranean country to the brink of humanitarian disaster, with hospitals across the country struggling to provide power to ventilators and other life-sustaining equipment.

To fill a medium-sized vehicle's tank, most Lebanese have to pay close to the monthly minimum wage of 675,000 Lebanese pounds, at a time when nearly 80 percent of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line.



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