

Heroic Beirut nurse reunited with babies she saved from port explosion

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BEIRUT: A nurse hailed as a national hero for rescuing three premature babies from a hospital wrecked by the explosion at Beirut's port a year ago was reunited with them on Wednesday, the first anniversary of the blast.

Pamela Zeinoun was working at St. George Hospital University Medical Center, less than a kilometer from the port, when the massive explosion sent a devastating shock wave through the city.

Without knowing what had happened, she instinctively scooped up a twin brother and sister and a third baby from their cots in the damaged neonatal intensive care unit on the hospital's fourth floor and carried them to safety.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing," Zeinoun told Arab News. "The feeling of holding again the babies who I had saved a year ago was indescribable – so warm and empathetic."

The twins, Ali and Sidra, and the third baby, Noah, were brought by their families to the hospital, which was forced to close because of the damage caused by the explosion but has partly reopened, to meet Zeinoun. Noah's family left Lebanon after the explosion

A photo of the reunion was taken at the spot where a news photographer

captured one of the most enduring images of the disaster: a dust-covered Zeinoun clutching the three babies, cradling a phone with her neck.

"It was so heartwarming and emotional, especially when I tried to carry them in one go," said Zeinoun who recalled how tiny they were 12 months ago and how they have grown since. "They looked so cute, funny and lovable to play with. I felt I was giving them the same warmth I had given them on Aug. 4 in 2020."

She said it felt great to see the children are growing up healthily, safely and away from danger.

Zeinoun described the explosion as a "heartbreaking catastrophe" and said she sympathized with all the families and victims who lost loved ones. In her hospital alone, the blast killed 22 people.

"When I see the casualties' families trying to find answers to what happened, I feel like their daughter ... I just wish that justice would prevail and we find out who is behind what happened," she added.

Describing the scene inside her ward after the explosion, she said the ceiling had collapsed and the room was littered with debris, furniture and toppled medical equipment.

Amid the confusion, as she held the three infants she stopped to answer a ringing telephone in the emergency room, a moment that was captured by Lebanese photojournalist Bilal Jawich. His photo went viral worldwide, appearing on news sites and TV channels and social media platforms.

A new father who was visiting his newborn baby on the day of the explosion, helped Zeinoun by lifting metal shelves that had fallen onto incubators so that she could rescue the infants. Despite all the damage, chaos and broken elevators, the nurse managed to carry the newborns down four floors and out of the hospital to safety.

She then walked with them in her arms for nearly 5km through streets littered with rubble and wreckage before the driver of a car took them to another hospital.

On Wednesday's anniversary, the people of Lebanon mourned those who were killed and injured in what was one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in history. More than 200 people died, more than 6,500 were injured and an estimated 300,000 were left homeless.



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[Turkey refuses to serve as 'waiting room' for US-bound Afghan refugees](#)

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ANKARA: Ankara on Tuesday slammed a US move to offer potential resettlement to Afghan migrants who have US affiliations, saying it would cause another

“migration crisis” in the country.

Under the new program announced by the US State Department on Monday, the US will open its doors to thousands of Afghans who are fleeing the Taliban violence, but with certain preconditions.

Ahead of the formal withdrawal of US soldiers at the end of this month, the Priority Two refugee program will cover Afghans who worked for US-funded projects and US-based NGOs and media outlets.

Afghans who do not qualify for the Special Immigration Visa program are among those eligible for this program. However, they should be referred by a US agency or the most senior US citizen employee of an NGO or media outlet that is based in the US.

In the meantime, they must wait in a third country after they leave Afghanistan, and this waiting time can last for 12 to 14 months before their application is processed.

Ankara fears this may trigger potential refugee inflows to the country as Afghans mostly use Turkey as a transit country to reach Europe and the US.

“It is unacceptable to seek a solution in our country without our consent instead of finding a solution among the countries in the region,” Tanju Bilgic, a spokesperson for the Turkish Foreign Ministry, said on Aug. 3, adding that Turkey cannot handle another migration wave on behalf of a third country.

Hundreds of Afghans have recently crossed into Turkey over the passing week, fueling anti-immigrant sentiment in the country and raising concerns about further influx as the country already hosts more than 4 million refugees, mostly Syrians and Afghans.

On Aug. 3, 264 Afghans were held after being found inside a truck in the eastern province of Van, where the country has begun building high walls to stop infiltrators from Iran.

“If the US wants to take these people...it is possible to transfer them directly to their country by planes,” Bilgic said.

Fahrettin Altun, communications chief for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told Bloomberg on Wednesday: “Turkey does not, and will not, serve as any country’s waiting room.”

A great majority of Afghan asylum seekers will probably remain in Turkey because the number of people who are eligible under the US program is limited, while the UN only resettled 20,000 asylum seekers from Turkey this year.

Deniz Senol Sert, a migration expert from Ozyegin University, said the migration wave following the US decision will mainly comprise highly educated Afghans.

“These people will come to Turkey following visa procedures, and they will not cross the border by land but, most likely, by plane. However, Afghanistan’s passport still ranks as the world’s least powerful,” she told Arab News.

According to Sert, Afghan migrants who have already applied for asylum will have to wait at least one year before their procedures finish.

“It is still unknown whether we have the capacity to handle all these migrants. This wave will continue for months depending on the moves of the Taliban, although Turkey has traditionally faced an influx of Afghan migrants in the summer,” she said.

Neva Ovunc Ozturk, a law expert working on transnational migration at Ankara University, said: “The US ranks among the countries that make the most settlements. It is not the first time that the US resettles Afghan migrants under this procedure. This time, it is focusing on Afghans who are affiliated with the US,” she told Arab News.

According to Ozturk, such settlement programs have served as pull factors in the past for immigration waves.

“However, Turkey already has a legal framework for conditional refugee status for those who will be resettled in third countries. Therefore, legally speaking, we have already been serving as a waiting room for some categories of refugees,” she said.

However, experts underline that the latest US decision should accompany diplomacy that promotes fair burden-sharing among countries that are neighboring war-torn Afghanistan.

“The UN High Commissioner for Refugees can encourage states to increase their refugee resettlement quotas. The US may also encourage countries close to Afghanistan, like Pakistan and Bangladesh, to host a certain number of refugees fleeing the Taliban,” Ozturk said.



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Wed, 2021-08-04 01:56

UNITED NATIONS: Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says in a new report that the threat to international peace and security from extremist group Daesh is rising, pointing to an “alarming” expansion of its affiliates in Africa and its focus on a comeback in its former self-declared “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq.

The report to the UN Security Council, which was circulated Tuesday, said Daesh and other terrorist groups have taken advantage of “the disruption, grievances and development setbacks” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, both on

the ground and online.

While lockdowns in non-conflict areas suppressed terrorist activity, in conflict areas where pandemic restrictions have less impact the threat from Daesh "has already increased," Guterres said.

"As pandemic-related restrictions gradually ease, there is an elevated near-term threat of Daesh-inspired attacks outside conflict zones by lone actors or small groups that have been radicalized, incited and possibly directly remotely online," he said.

The UN chief said this exemplifies a wider and evolving risk from the accelerated use of digital technologies during the pandemic, and the potential for "new and emerging technologies to be used for terrorist purposes."

In assessing Daesh's threat, Guterres said its leader, Amir Muhammad Sa'id Abdal-Rahman Al-Mawla, "remains reluctant to communicate directly with supporters," and "the group's command and control over its global affiliates has loosened, even though it continues to provide guidance and some financial support."

He said the autonomy of regional affiliates has strengthened especially in West Africa and the Sahel, East and Central Africa, Afghanistan and South Asia. This evolution will be an important factor in Daesh's future global impact, he quoted unidentified UN member states as saying.

Member states also assess that the extremist group "will continue to prioritize regrouping and seeking resurgence" in Iraq and Syria as its core area of operations, he said.

The 16-page report, prepared by Security Council counter-terrorism committee and by experts monitoring sanctions on Daesh, said the group remains active in wide swaths of Syria, where it is seeking to rebuild its combat capabilities and expand its insurgency.

Guterres said Daesh wages hit-and-run operations against checkpoints from hideouts on both sides of the Euphrates River in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor and continues operations against government forces and in the Syrian desert.

In Iraq, Daesh remains under constant counter-terrorism pressure but continues to carry out hit-and-run operations "seeking to undermine critical infrastructure projects, inflame sectarian divisions and communal grievances and generate media coverage," he said.

As for the extremist group's finances, the UN chief said estimates of financial reserves available to Daesh in Iraq and Syria range between \$25 million and \$50 million, with one unidentified UN member state saying most funds are in Iraq.

The secretary-general said the most striking development in the first half of 2021 has been the expansion of Daesh in Africa, where terrorist groups have inflicted the largest number of casualties.

He said some of the most effective Daesh affiliates are spreading their influence and activities from Mali into Burkina Faso and Niger, from Nigeria into Niger, Chad and Cameroon, and from Mozambique into Tanzania.

"It highlights that the interplay between terrorism, fragility and conflict has grown stronger, and underscores the need for an urgent, global response to support African countries and regional organizations," Guterres said.

In Afghanistan, he said, the Daesh affiliate has expanded its presence in several provinces and in and around the capital Kabul, "despite leadership,

human and financial losses during 2020.” In Kabul, most of its attacks have targeted minorities, civil society actors, government employees and security forces, he said.

In Daesh’s efforts to regroup and rebuild in Afghanistan, Guterres said the group has prioritized the recruitment and training of new supporters and hopes to attract Taliban members and other militants who reject the US-Taliban agreement as well as fighters from Iraq.

Estimates of Daesh strength in Afghanistan range widely, from 500 to 1,500 fighters, with one unidentified UN member state saying its strength may rise to 10,000 in the medium term, he said.

Guterres said UN member states have already warned “that Daesh could regain the ability to orchestrate international attacks if either its core or one of its regional affiliates became strong enough.”

“This scenario has only become more plausible,” the UN chief warned.



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8-year-old girl born under Daesh control to return to USEgypt officials say Daesh militants attack kills 5 troops in Sinai

Tunisian labor union urges new PM appointment to ease crisis

Author:

Tue, 2021-08-03 23:45

TUNIS: Tunisia's powerful labor union urged the president on Tuesday to rapidly announce a new government that should be small and led by an experienced premier, after he seized executive control in a move his opponents called a coup.

President Kais Saied has defended his actions as constitutional and said he will govern alongside a new prime minister during an emergency period, but nine days after his intervention, he has yet to name one.

"We can't wait 30 days for the announcement of a government," said Sami Tahri, a spokesman for the UGTT union, one of Tunisia's most powerful political forces.

UGTT chief Nouredine Taboubi said later on state television later on Tuesday that the cabinet should be small and headed by somebody with experience, sending a positive message to both Tunisians and international lenders.

"We must speed up the formation of the government to be able to face economic and health challenges," he said.

Saied's sudden intervention on July 25 appeared to have widespread public support but raised fears for the future of the democratic system that Tunisia adopted after its 2011 revolution that triggered the Arab Spring.

On Tuesday Saied removed Tunisia's ambassador to Washington, the latest in a string of dismissals of senior and mid-ranking officials over the past week including several ministers. He did not immediately name a replacement.

He is also still to announce a roadmap to end an emergency period that he initially set at one month but later announced could be two months.

A source close to the presidential palace in Carthage said earlier that Saied might announce the new premier on Tuesday. Sources have told Reuters that Central Bank Governor Marouane Abassi and two former finance ministers, Hakim Hammouda and Nizar Yaich, are contenders.

Saied's most powerful organized opponent, the moderate Islamist Ennahda party, has meanwhile been riven by internal splits over its response to the crisis and its longer-term strategy and leadership.

Tunisians had over the past decade grown ever more frustrated by economic stagnation, corruption and bickering among a political class that often seemed more focused on its own narrow interests than on national problems.

The coronavirus pandemic ripped through Tunisia over the past two months as

the state vaccination effort crawled, leading at one point to the worst infection and death rates in Africa. Pandemic counter-measures last year hammered the economy.

On Monday Saied replaced the finance, agriculture and telecoms ministers after having said last week that “wrong economic choices” had cost the country.

On Sunday he said there were contacts with “friendly countries” for financial assistance. (Reporting by Tarek Amara, writing by Angus McDowall; Editing by William Maclean and Mark Heinrich)



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Tunisia leader fires ambassador to US in rash of dismissals
Tunisians hope for better times ahead

Tunisia leader fires ambassador to US in rash of dismissals

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Tue, 2021-08-03 23:51

TUNIS, Tunisia: A day after naming a new economy minister, President Kais Saied on Tuesday added Tunisia's ambassador to the United States to a rash of dismissals.

Yet he has to say who will replace the prime minister he fired less than two weeks ago or when.

Saied, who took on executive powers July 25 and began ruling by decree, has also undertaken globe-spanning consultations, meeting Tuesday with the foreign minister of Egypt, a critical ally in the Middle East.

Local polls say there is large support for Saied's controversial actions, which importantly included freezing Tunisia's parliament,

The North African country has been cementing its democracy since chasing out its former autocratic ruler a decade ago, triggering the Arab Spring. Tunisia is the only success story to emerge from those chaotic times, and allies, from the United States to Europe and the Middle East, have worried about what comes next.

Tunisia is coping with economic, social and health crises, with the coronavirus pandemic overwhelming its hospitals. Saied, using an article in the constitution that allows a president to step in under grave circumstances, has said he did so to save the country.

In his meeting with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukry, the president highlighted "the correlation between Egypt's and Tunisia's security and stability," the official TAP news agency said.

Egypt's envoy said that Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi backed Saied's moves with "his full support for the historic steps" of the Tunisian leader, TAP added. "Egypt and Tunisia are working together to ensure stability not only in the two countries, but also across the region," the agency quoted the foreign minister as saying after the meeting.

The important Economy Ministry got a new acting minister Monday, with the dismissal of Ali Kooli, as did the Communications Technology ministry.

The rash of firings that began when Saied assumed all executive power continued Tuesday. Tunisia's ambassador to Washington, Nejmeddine Lakhal, was the latest dignitary terminated, the official news agency said. No explanation was given. Also Tuesday, the president fired the governor of the important Sfax region in eastern Tunisia.

Some lawmakers have not been spared, snared by judicial officials on complaints that could not be prosecuted earlier. The president lifted the immunity of the parliamentary body when he took on all powers, and a handful have been summoned to answer to charges they had escaped.



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Tunisians hope for better times aheadEgypt offers 'full support' for Tunisian president