

Lebanon's president says new maritime claim needs government approval

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BEIRUT: Lebanon's president said on Tuesday a draft decree expanding its maritime claims in a dispute with Israel must be approved by the caretaker government, rejecting a request to grant it swift presidential approval. The dispute with Israel over the maritime boundary has held up hydrocarbon exploration in a potentially gas-rich area of the eastern Mediterranean. The decree, approved by Lebanon's caretaker prime minister, defense minister and minister of public work on Monday, would add around 1,400 square km (540 square miles) to an exclusive economic zone in the eastern Mediterranean claimed by Lebanon.

Caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab's office said the decree should be approved by President Michel Aoun so that the new maritime coordinates setting out Lebanon's claim could be submitted to the United Nations.

But the presidency said it should be approved by Diab's full cabinet, even though the government resigned eight months ago following a devastating explosion in Beirut, because of the gravity of the issue.

The draft decree "needs a collective decision from the council of ministers..., even under a caretaker government, due to its importance and the consequences," a statement from Aoun's office said.

Aoun's decision could significantly delay the process. Since the government resigned in August it has referred all issues for exceptional approval by the president, leaving them to get formal endorsement when a new government is finally agreed.

Negotiations were launched in October to try to resolve the dispute with Israel yet the talks, a culmination of three years of diplomacy by the United States, have since stalled.

Israel already pumps gas from offshore fields but Lebanon has yet to find commercial gas reserves in its own waters.

Israeli Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz said on Monday Lebanon's expanded claim would derail the talks rather than help work toward a common solution, warning that Israel would implement "parallel measures."

Lebanon, in the throes of a deep financial meltdown that is threatening its stability, is desperate for cash as it faces the worst economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war. But political leaders have failed to bridge their differences and form a new government.



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[Ramadan in Lebanon limited due to high inflation, virus restrictions](#)

Tue, 2021-04-13 21:37

BEIRUT: The social events, traditions and gatherings usually celebrated during Ramadan will be very different this year in Lebanon as the country continues to grapple with unprecedented economic collapse and a coronavirus (COVID-19) surge.

Leading up to the holy month, preparations for Ramadan were slight in Beirut as only a few signs reminding people to donate could be seen in the city's main streets. Charity foundations usually rely on the month of Ramadan every

year to collect donations but the country's ability to give is fleeting.

"More than 50 percent of the Lebanese now live under the poverty line," World Bank Group Vice President for Middle East and North Africa Farid Belhaj said on April 4.

In an attempt to combat the spread of the virus, the National Disaster Management Operations Room imposed a new curfew that applies during Ramadan from 9 p.m. until 5 a.m. It has also banned all iftar events.

Charitable organizations can distribute food to houses, but only after obtaining a permit from the electronic platform. The capacity of worshippers at mosques will be limited to 30 percent while restaurants and cafes, which have already endured several months of lockdown, will be closed again during the holy month.

The price inflation has become a daily nightmare for the Lebanese, and with the arrival of Ramadan, the prices of essential goods, like vegetables and fruits, have increased even further due to the high demand.

"The price of one kilo of beef has increased to between 60 and 70,000 pounds and a kilo of taouk chicken was sold at 50,000 pounds on the first day of Ramadan," Abbas Ali Salim, a butcher shop owner in Beirut's southern suburbs, told Arab News.

"People ask me about the prices, and when I answer, they seem very unhappy. Some even beg me to give them lower prices. But the truth is, I am one of these people. I am suffering just like them. The black market is trading the state-subsidized meat, monopolized by traders who are controlling the prices."

Due to inflation, the cost of a typical iftar meal – lentil soup, fattoush salad, a main dish of chicken and rice, a half a cup of yogurt and a single date – has reached more than 60,000 Lebanese pounds, according to the crisis observatory at the American University of Beirut.

By those estimates, a full month of iftar meals for a family of five would cost 1.8 million pounds, which is much higher than the Lebanese minimum wage of 675,000 pounds. This cost does not even cover the juices, desserts, gas, electricity or cleaning material used for cooking.

Researchers at the observatory said a fattoush salad for a small family that cost 6,000 pounds during Ramadan last year, now costs 18,500 pounds. This means that the cost of a daily salad during this year's Ramadan would be about 82 percent of the minimum wage.

The observatory feared that families might cope with the inflation by "cutting quantities or opting for cheaper alternatives to replace vegetables and meat, which would result in malnutrition."

Mohammad Chamseddine, a researcher from the independent studies and statistics company Information International, said: "The prices of basic goods in Ramadan have increased by between 25 and 100 percent, with a

significant reduction in sales, as the purchasing power of the Lebanese, especially those getting paid in Lebanese pounds, has eroded.”

Ramadan has also been affected by the country’s slow COVID-19 vaccination plan, which started in February. Lebanon’s Health Minister Hamad Hassan said on Tuesday that “over 20 percent of the Lebanese people have developed immunity, either through infection or vaccination.”



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On Lebanon's civil war anniversary, veterans warn: 'Do not repeat history'
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[Russia backs Egypt on Nile water rights](#)

Author:

Tue, 2021-04-13 21:00

CAIRO: Visiting Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has told Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi that Moscow will oppose any interference in Egypt's historical water rights in the Nile.

Ethiopia is building the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile River's main tributary, which Egypt and Sudan deem a major threat if it is filled and operated without a legally binding agreement.

In a meeting with the Egyptian leader on Monday, Lavrov highlighted Russia's firm position rejecting any interference in Egypt's historical water rights in the Nile, and rejected unilateral actions in this regard.

He also voiced appreciation for Egypt's efforts to resolve the issue.

Lavrov said that Russia is looking forward to reaching a solution for all parties, Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia, on the filling and operation of the dam through negotiations.

El-Sisi said the lack of resolution of this issue would affect the security and stability of the region.

El-Sisi also discussed the Egyptian efforts to support the new interim government in Libya at various bilateral, regional and international forums, stressing the need to clear Libya of mercenaries.

Illegal foreign interference in Libyan affairs is fueling the crisis, he said.

Lavrov underlined Cairo's role, especially the president's personal efforts, to prepare a political pathway in Libya.

He said that this underlined Egypt's role in regional security and stability,

adding that Russia seeks to continue cooperation and coordination with Cairo on the issue.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry briefed Lavrov on the recent consultations over the dam held in Kinshasa in the presence of the foreign ministers of Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia.

He said that communication will continue with Russia over the issue as it is an active member of the UN Security Council, and because of its diplomatic capabilities and its impact in the international arena.



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release of alleged human trafficker

Tue, 2021-04-13 20:17

ROME: Members of left-wing political party Sinistra Italiana expressed their dismay at Libyan authorities' decision to release a man considered by the UN to be one of the country's most wanted human traffickers.

Abd Al-Rahman Milad, known as Bija, was arrested on suspicion of being part of a criminal network operating in northwest Libya.

He was released less than four months after his arrest in Tripoli. The city's military attorney general dropped the charges against him "for lack of evidence."

Italian newspaper Avvenire reported that Bija and five other Libyans were placed under sanctions in 2018 by the UN Security Council for being directly involved in the sinking of migrant boats.

The newspaper reported that Bija had attended official meetings in Rome with Italian authorities during negotiations over illegal migrants. He was introduced there as "a commander of the Libyan coastguard."

Bija's release "is disturbing news," Sinistra Italiana leader Nicola Fratoianni said in Italy's Chamber of Deputies, asking the government to "clarify this obscure situation."

He added: "This man is accused of torture and other cruel criminal acts on human beings. The relationship between Italian institutions and this man, who was freed only a few days after the visit to Tripoli of Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, must be fully clarified."

Fratoianni told Arab News: "In Libya, migrants live in inhumane and atrocious conditions, as confirmed by all international organizations. The Italian government must do something."

Marco Minniti, Italy's interior minister at the time of the meetings attended by Bija, has denied any wrongdoing, saying Rome was unaware of the allegations against the Libyan.

Nello Scavo, the Italian journalist who first reported for Avvenire on Bija's presence in Italy, and Nancy Porsia, the freelance reporter who first wrote about the Libyan's suspected criminal activities in 2016, were given police protection after receiving threats.

In recent years, the EU has partnered with Libya's coastguard and local groups to try to halt the dangerous sea crossings via the Mediterranean to reach Italian shores.

Several NGOs, however, say those policies leave migrants at the mercy of armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuse.

An Associated Press investigation in 2019 revealed that militias tortured, extorted and abused migrants for ransom in detention centers under the nose of UN officials, often in compounds that receive millions in European money, paid to Libya's government to slow the tide of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.



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Italy arrests North African human traffickers over shipwreck deaths
Libya arrests 200 African migrants, human trafficker

[On Lebanon's civil war anniversary, veterans warn: 'Do not repeat history'](#)

Mon, 2021-04-12 21:40

BEIRUT: As Lebanon commemorates the 46th anniversary of its bloody civil war on April 13, public figures are warning that the country's worsening crisis could lead to new conflict.

Though the regional and international situation is now different, Lebanon still faces the same fault lines that lead to the eruption of war in 1975.

The country's unprecedented economic and social crisis, coupled with political gridlock, presents a situation that some are warning is reminiscent of pre-war Lebanon.

In 1990, fighting stopped after the signing of the Taif Agreement, which established a political settlement that has remained until today.

The brutal 15-year war killed more than 150,000 people and left 300,000 others with long-term injuries. On top of that, 17,000 people were missing by the end of the conflict, while more than 1 million Lebanese – one-third of the population – were displaced.

In March 1991, a general amnesty law was issued for all war crimes, with the exception of kidnappings, which were considered persistent crimes.

Militias were disbanded, except for Hezbollah, which kept its weapons under the rubric of resisting the Israeli enemy. Today, Hezbollah holds the largest arsenal of weapons in the country, an amount 10 times larger than that of Lebanon's army.

Nizar Saghieh, a lawyer and representative of the Committee of the Families of Kidnapped and Disappeared, told Arab News: "The war was based on the logic that the strong party rules by force of arms.

"We are still being ruled this way. No one is being held accountable and there is no recognition of the law."

He added: "It is true that military and war actions stopped with the end of the civil war, but in practice, the post-war system is one that restored all war values to control the country and reduced public policy to war leaders, and now we live in the midst of a system in which no one is held accountable.

"We are living in disaster after the Aug. 4 explosion and we are experiencing an economic collapse.

"This means that we are in the stage of systematic destruction of the state. The strong do not feel that there should be a law that embraces equality."

The fate of those who disappeared during the war remains relevant today, Saghieh said. "Those in power try to push people to forget the past and they want us to live by the same trick.

"Therefore, the mass graves were not revealed so that the system would not be exposed."

Saghieh added: "Closing the file of the missing requires determining their fate in order to know whether their murder was committed before or after the issuance of the general amnesty."

Progressive Socialist Party Secretary Zafer Nasser said that a political

settlement must be reached if Lebanon is to avoid repeating history.

"Our reality may take us to what is more dangerous than a war, and that is a state of chaos that makes it impossible to control where the country is headed," he said.

"Therefore, the party calls for and insists on the proposal of a settlement to avoid entering into chaos.

"As for the discussion about foreign interference in Lebanon and the possibility of it leading to war, what can be said is that Lebanon is so fragile that regional influences may pull it right or left."

On Hezbollah's weapons arsenal, Nasser told Arab News: "It is being debated and, in our opinion, will be resolved through a defense strategy and an internal dialogue among the Lebanese, because any other formula will lead to a problem.

"I do not think that disarming Hezbollah will happen soon, given the regional equation controlling a path of this kind."

Antoine Zahra, a former Lebanese Forces member who took part in the civil war, ruled out "any scenario for a new civil war in Lebanon."

He told Arab News: "The conditions Lebanon is going through today are not similar to those of the previous war, but we are in a situation that may lead us to something worse than a military war, and that is chaos.

"Hezbollah's weapons cannot be used inside Lebanon, but these weapons remain as a result of Hezbollah's regional links, as it is part of a project to control the region.

"Even if Iran is heading to negotiations, it still keeps Lebanon as a bargaining chip. And Hezbollah needs the Israeli enemy and will not abandon the argument of fighting the enemy.

"In my opinion, the solution is to end the Iranian project in the region, and until this is done, we are not able to devise solutions at home."



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