

## International

# Sudan protesters threaten civil disobedience after army delays

## Alliance concerned military dragging the process out

**KHARTOUM:** Sudanese protest leaders yesterday threatened to launch a nationwide campaign of civil disobedience after accusing the country's military rulers of delaying the transfer of power to a civilian administration. Thousands of people remain camped outside the military headquarters in Khartoum nearly four weeks after the armed forces toppled autocratic president Omar Al-Bashir as demanded by a months-long protest movement. The two sides are grappling over whether an overall ruling council that would replace the existing army council - made up solely of generals - should have a civilian or military majority.

Last week the Alliance for Freedom and Change protest group handed over its proposals for a civilian structure, including executive and legislative bodies, that it eventually wants to rule Sudan after replacing the generals. The 10-member military council late on Tuesday said it agreed to the overall proposals, but had "many reservations". The protest leaders said yesterday that the military council was delaying the entire transfer of power.

"The military council's response to the proposals of the Alliance for Freedom and Change was disappointing and risked putting the country in jeopardy," protest leader Khalid Omar Yousef told reporters. Responding to a journalist's question on what steps demonstrators would take after the

army expressed reservations, Yousef threatened "escalatory measures". "The measures of escalation for us are defined - they are continuing with the sit-in, and we are now preparing for a civil disobedience" campaign across the country, he said.

The alliance also expressed concerns about the military dragging the process out. "The military council's response... is moving in the direction of extending the negotiations and not in the direction of a transition" of power, it said in a statement.

### 'Kidnap the revolution'

On Tuesday the military council said the alliance had remained silent in its proposals on ensuring that Islamic sharia remains the bedrock of Sudanese legislation. The protest leaders said the generals "raised irrelevant issues including the language and sources of legislation in a tedious repetition of the biddings of the former regime". "We call on the military council to reach an agreement to transfer power," they said in the statement.

The Alliance for Freedom and Change is made up of several political groups, leaders and activists, many of them of the view of building a new secular Sudan. Sudanese media and websites have often reported that for the protest leaders the issue of legislation and Islamic law is something that can be discussed later, but they first want a civilian body

established in order to govern the country. The protest movement said the military council is acting in a way that seems to "kidnap the revolution and control its outcome". "The only choice for our people is comprehensive peaceful resistance until the revolution's demands are achieved."

Thousands of protesters have been encamped outside the sprawling military headquarters in central Khartoum since April 6. Initially they gathered there to seek the army's support in ousting Bashir. But now they continue to hold their sit-in against the army council, demanding that it step down and transfer power to a civilian authority. The military council and protest leaders have differed on several issues and not just the composition of an overall ruling council.

### 'Full civilian authority'

The military council wanted a two-year transition period as opposed to four years proposed by protest leaders. The council was also of the opinion that declarations of emergencies be in the hands of a "sovereign" authority rather than the cabinet as sought by protest leaders. Protest leaders have often called the military rulers the "remnants of the regime" of Bashir.

The council also revealed on Tuesday that Sudan's former head of the feared National Intelligence and Security Service, Salah



**KHARTOUM:** Khalid Omar Yousef, a Sudanese protest leader, speaks to the press yesterday. — AFP

Ghosh, had been put under house arrest. It was Ghosh who oversaw security agents' sweeping crackdown on protesters before the fall of Bashir. Protest leaders however insist their key demand remains the same - a full

transfer of power to civilians. "The solution and success of the revolution lies on transfer of power to a full civilian authority," protest leader Mohamed Naji Al-Assam said on Tuesday. — AFP

## Protesters slam Sudan state media for blackout

**KHARTOUM:** Grasping an empty plastic bottle that stands in for a microphone, young Sudanese protester Abu Bakr Marghani pretends to be a journalist interviewing demonstrators at Khartoum's sit-in outside the army complex. The would-be correspondent is cheered by his small crew each time he thrusts the device in front of a peer and asks a question. "We mean to poke fun at Sudanese state media who did not take our side during the protests," said Marghani, 18.

"They did not cover it at all - only foreign media did," he said, as one of his buddies holds a wooden stick with a plastic cup dangling from one end, in a creative attempt to mimic an adjustable boom mic. Another friend carries a cardboard box on his shoulder as if it's a video camera, complete with the scribbled name of a foreign TV network. Since Dec 19, Sudan has been rocked by protests that finally led last month to the ouster of president Omar Al-Bashir, who was in power for three decades.

Protesters remain encamped outside the military complex, demanding that the generals who toppled Bashir on April 11 be

replaced by a civilian administration. State media's complete blackout of the months of demonstrations prior to his ouster - including a failure to report the deaths of dozens at the hands of security forces - left protesters fuming.

### 'Cooking shows'

Instead, state-run Sudan TV broadcast Bashir's rallies, government business and light viewing. "People were dying for four full months and all the Sudanese media broadcast was cooking shows," blasted Marghani. The pro-regime newspapers stuck to reporting day-to-day government activities. "They only started siding with us after Bashir was toppled." Sudan TV said it had to comply with government directives. "The news broadcast was within the limits allowed by the government at the time," Sudan TV news director Mozamel Suleiman told AFP. "We are owned by the state and our narrative had to conform to the state's general policy."

Angry protesters have since on several occasions forced state media journalists out of the sit-in when they come to report on it. Marghani stopped a protester to ask his view of the ruling army generals. The quick response was "fall or no fall, we are staying" - a rallying cry of the protest movement. During Bashir's long tenure, the press was severely curtailed, according to media activists. The country's feared National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISS) cracked down regularly on journalists who questioned Bashir's policies.

"News related to his regime, prominent



**KHARTOUM:** In this file photo taken on April 27, 2019 a Sudanese boy uses a false camera made of cardboard and acts like he is filming during a sit-in outside the army headquarters. — AFP

opposition figures or conflict-torn areas in Sudan were problematic" for those who reported them, said leading Sudanese journalist Faisal Saleh. NISS agents regularly confiscated entire print-runs of newspapers for publishing articles deemed critical of Bashir's policies. "Officers (of NISS) used to go to newspapers' headquarters to check and cross out whatever they didn't want published," said Saleh. "From sports news to political affairs, anything was subject to scrutiny." The confiscation of entire

print-runs was a tactic to inflict maximum losses on publishers, said Osman Mirghani, editor-in-chief of independent newspaper Al Tayyar. "It cost us a lot of money," said Mirghani, whose editions were confiscated some 80 times under Bashir's rule. The editor was detained for more than a month during the peak of the protests against Bashir. Media watchdog Reporters Without Borders recorded at least 100 cases of journalists being arrested during the protests. — AFP

## News in brief

### 500 IS members convicted in Iraq

**BAGHDAD:** The Iraqi judiciary has tried and sentenced more than 500 foreigners since the start of 2018 for joining the Islamic State group, the country's Supreme Court announced yesterday. It said "514 verdicts were issued, for both men and women, while another 202 accused are still being interrogated and 44 are still being tried". Another 11 were acquitted and released, it said. The statement referred to "different nationalities" but did not list any specific countries. It said interrogations were taking about six months for those simply accused of IS membership, but anyone accused of actively taking part in the group's operations could be questioned for up to a year. — AFP

### Qatar accuses UAE at world court

**THE HAGUE:** Qatar accused the United Arab Emirates yesterday of a "campaign of violence and hatred" against its citizens, urging the International Court of Justice to quash a case brought by Abu Dhabi. The Gulf states are locked in a battle at the UN's top court, where the UAE on Tuesday asked judges to stop Qatar "severely aggravating" a two-year-old crisis between Doha and other countries in the oil-rich region. Qatar's lawyers however hit back, saying in fact it was Abu Dhabi who continued with "discriminatory policies that severely impacted Qatari citizens". "It is the Qatari people who are the true victims in the racial discrimination case, not the government of the UAE," Qatar's representative Mohammed Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi said. — AFP

## AKP veterans criticize Istanbul election re-run

**ANKARA:** Two former heavyweights of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party have criticized a decision to re-run the Istanbul mayoral election, expressing concern the decision would damage the state's reputation. They have added their voices to a chorus of criticism from abroad. Former prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu on Tuesday said the decision to annul the results of the March 31 election, which was won by the main opposition, "caused damage to one of our fundamental values". "The biggest loss for political movements is not losing elections but the loss of moral superiority and social conscience," he wrote on Twitter.

The top election body on Monday ordered a replay of the Istanbul mayoral election. The shock victory of the main opposition in the election was a blow to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). Abdullah Gul, former president and co-founder of the AKP, also criticized the ruling, saying it showed the party had not "made any headway" since past constitutional spats. Both men have fallen out with Erdogan since their time in office and there have been persistent rumors over the years that they may set up their own parties.

Gul, who has lately kept his distance from daily politics, compared the situation to a 2007 ruling by the country's top court that prevented him from becoming president without a two-thirds majority in parliament. "What I felt in 2007... that is what I felt yesterday when another high court, the Supreme Electoral Council, took its decision. It is a pity that we have not made any headway," he tweeted.

Before last year's presidential and general elections there was speculation that Gul would run against Erdogan, but he never did. As well as protests from the country's opposition, a number of countries have expressed concern at the court's decision. Germany Foreign Minister on Tuesday described the decision as "incomprehensible", and the European Union has asked for an explanation. The replay of the Istanbul mayoral election is due to be held on June 23. — AFP



**ATME, Syria:** An aerial view shows displaced Syrians gathering in a field near a camp for displaced people in this village in Idlib province yesterday. — AFP

## Syrians destitute under olive trees after bombings

**ATME, Syria:** For nine days, Syrian matriarch Fatima Al-Masri has slept under olive trees near the Turkish border, after fleeing air strikes by the regime and its allies on her hometown. "We ran from the bombardment and the barrel bombs," said the 66-year-old, sitting cross-legged on a woven plastic mat surrounded by her grandchildren, just hundreds of meters from the frontier. "The planes were firing down so nothing would remain alive - not a tree, person or sheep," she told AFP, wearing a long purple faux velvet robe and a black scarf tied around her wrinkled face.

Her family is one of dozens to have set up camp in the fields of Atme, after escaping devastating bombing by the regime and its Russian ally in recent days on the jihadist-held region of Idlib in northwestern Syria. A September ceasefire deal between Russia and rebel backed Turkey was supposed to prevent a mass regime offensive on the region of some three million people.

But the militants of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham, dominated by members of a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, taking over the area in January has led to a spike in deadly air strikes and shelling. The United Nations says more than 150,000 people have fled their homes in just a week, escaping strikes and shelling

that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says has killed 84 civilians in the region. In the olive grove in Atme, Masri and dozens of other families have spent the night on thin mattresses or blankets laid out over rugs on the red earth. At the base of the trees they have chosen for shelter, they have stored the bare minimum for a life outdoors: bedding, a water cooler, a saucepan, or a cooking gas canister. They have hung up sheets between the trees for a little privacy, and one family has even brought a solar panel.

### 'No aid, nothing'

The families say most camps for the displaced in the area were full when they arrived, and the only one with enough space enforced gender segregation. Choosing to keep their families together, they set up camp between the olive trees instead. But Masri said they desperately need better shelter. "We're 35 families here. People want tents," said the matriarch from the town of Kafir Nabouda, an area in the north of Hama province that was overrun by regime forces on Wednesday, according to the Britain-based Observatory.

Nearby, Issam Derwish said he fled with his family to the Turkish border from the same town, hoping for safety but also help from aid organizations in the area. "We gathered our children and fled, coming here to Atme" four days ago, said the 35-year-old with a short black beard, dressed in a long brown tunic and trousers. But "there's no aid, nothing," said Derwish, who arrived at the frontier with his two wives, mother, sister-in-law and children. "We're just sitting here under the trees in the rain and cold." — AFP

## Activist says Norway warned him of threat

**OSLO:** A prominent Arab pro-democracy campaigner living in political asylum in Norway said he had been temporarily moved to a secure location by Norwegian police last month after a tip-off about a possible threat against him from Saudi Arabia. Iyad El-Baghdadi is a Palestinian human rights campaigner and writer who won prominence during the 2011 Arab uprisings and has written critically of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. He has lived in Oslo since 2015.

On April 25, Norwegian security services moved him for a period of time to a secure location because of a threat against his person, Baghdadi told Norwegian public broadcaster NRK. "They asked me to go with them. They said they have a secure location prepared. They have received information from a partner intelligence agency indicating that I am the target of a threat," Baghdadi told NRK late on Tuesday. "It is very clear to me that it is a Saudi threat ... We kind of brainstormed 6-7 reasons that put me on their crosshairs," he said, without elaborating.

The Norwegian security police service declined to comment. The Saudi embassy in Oslo was not immediately available for comment. Saudi Arabia's government communications office did not respond to a request for comment. The NRK and Britain's Guardian newspaper said that the US Central Intelligence Agency had alerted Norway to the possible threat against Baghdadi. The CIA declined to comment when contacted by Reuters. The Norwegian justice ministry, which is in charge of the security services, and the foreign ministry also declined to comment.

Baghdadi did not respond to requests for comment. Shortly after the NRK broadcast, he tweeted: "It is not clear at this time what the nature of the threat was, and there's no indication that it had translated into a specific plot." Saudi Arabia has come under increasing global scrutiny over its human rights record since the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi last year inside the kingdom's Istanbul consulate and the detention of around a dozen women's rights activists.

In a subsequent interview with Al Jazeera, Baghdadi said a large amount of his work over the past two years had focused on the rights situation in Saudi Arabia, particularly after Khashoggi's killing. He said the Norwegian authorities had told him they would provide him with police protection in Oslo but had asked him not to travel. — Reuters