

Renewed live fire in Baghdad as blackout and sit-ins persist

BAGHDAD: Iraqi security forces fired live ammunition at protesters in the capital yesterday as tensions rose elsewhere in the country between persistent anti-government demonstrators and paralyzed politicians. Mass rallies have continued in Baghdad and across Iraq's Shiite-majority south, despite a renewed internet blackout and violence that has left nearly 280 dead. The demonstrations broke out on Oct 1 in anger over corruption and unemployment but have morphed into demands that the entire ruling system be upended.

In Baghdad, protesters had been concentrated in the iconic Tahrir Square but have increasingly spilled over onto nearby bridges leading to the western bank of the Tigris. For days, they have faced off against security forces on the Al-Jumhuriyah bridge, which links them to the Green Zone where government offices and embassies are based. They then spread to Al-Sinek, which ends near the Iranian embassy, and Al-Ahrar, near other government buildings.

A group of protesters yesterday tried to cross a fourth bridge, Al-Shuhada, but were met with live rounds from security forces, an AFP correspondent said. Several protesters were seen being wounded in the fire. "The riot police hit us with batons on our heads and we threw rocks at them," said Mahmoud, a 20-year-old protester being treated by medics after trying to cross Al-Shuhada bridge. "But then they started firing live rounds on people." Security forces resumed their use of live rounds in the capital on Monday, after nearly two weeks of using volleys of tear gas, but no firearms, to push back protesters.

Even the tear gas usage has been deadly,

however, with medics and right group Amnesty International saying security forces appeared to be firing the canisters directly at protesters. A spokesman for Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi said security forces were instructed to use force if protesters got close to important government buildings including the central bank. On Wednesday, at least four people died of wounds sustained in earlier protests, medical sources told AFP.

At least 120 people have died since the protests resumed Oct 24, according to an AFP count, as officials have stopped giving precise tolls in recent days. The initial six-day wave of rallies in early October left 157 dead. Although the resumption has been less deadly, security sources have reported that protesters are being abducted by unidentified assailants to intimidate them.

A medical source also told AFP three doctors were abducted this week from Tahrir, in addition to female paramedic, Saba Mahdawi, who went missing Nov 2. The kidnappings, coupled with the renewed internet outage, has sparked worries of worse violence looming. "Cutting the internet is a sign that there will be bloodshed," a government official told AFP. Authorities had imposed an internet blackout for two weeks last month, later loosening it.

In the country's south, sit-ins closed schools and official buildings in Nasiriyah, Kut, Hillah, Diwaniyah and the holy city of Najaf, AFP correspondents said. On Tuesday night, protesters set fire to the homes of parliamentarians and local officials in Al-Shatra, a town north of Nasiriyah, according to security sources. A sit-in has shut the road to the Umm Qasr



BAGHDAD: Iraqi protesters wearing Guy Fawkes masks hold up a banner with revolutionary slogans in English during continuing anti-government protests in Tahrir Square yesterday. — AFP

port, which brings in most food and medical imports through Basra, for days.

In Basra city itself, protest tents burned after security forces fired searing-hot tear gas canisters at them yesterday. Protesters also shut down the access route to the Dhi Qar oil company and demonstrators shut down the Shanafiyah refinery in Diwaniyah, according to AFP correspondents. Oil-rich Iraq is OPEC's second biggest producer, but one in five people live in poverty and youth unemployment stands at 25 percent, according to the World Bank.

The United Nations' top official in Iraq Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert expressed "grave concern" over such disruptions, which she said was costing the country "billions". Her tweets were shunned by Iraqi protesters, who have so far been unmoved by pleas to return home, pledges of reform or talks to produce a solution to the crisis. President Barham Saleh has proposed early elections once a new voting law and commission are agreed, which would pave the way for a new prime minister.

But that suggestion appears to have angered Iranian officials trying to close

ranks around the current government. Iran holds sway across Iraq's political spectrum, and Saleh's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party has long been seen as close to Tehran. "Iran isn't happy with the role that Barham Saleh has played in the current crisis. He abandoned those who brought him to the presidency at the first fork in the road," a source close to top decision-makers told AFP. Mahdi cast the idea of an early vote as unrealistic on Tuesday in a rare recorded cabinet session that was later aired on television. — AFP



ADEN: A billboard bearing portraits of Saudi King Salman, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan is seen on a main road in this Red Sea Yemeni port city yesterday. — AFP

US navy prepares allies to 'protect...

Continued from Page 1

expertise in fighting mines, in order to protect navigation," he said. In June, the US Navy alleged that a mine resembling Iranian weaponry was used in an attack on the Japanese-owned Kokuka Courageous tanker, targeted as it passed through the Gulf of Oman. Then in July, Iranian Revolutionary Guards seized a British-flagged oil tanker, holding it for more than two months before releasing it.

"One of the biggest reasons for us being out here is to build international relations," said US Navy lieutenant Jonathan Phares who was among 300 personnel from the US, France and the Gulf on the Cardigan Bay. Those aboard showed off diving gear, underwater imaging kit and speed boats during a tour of the gun-metal grey vessel, while others demonstrated mine detection equipment. But they were tight-lipped about tensions with Iran. "We've been used more than in the past," said a US

mines expert who declined to be named.

In response to the string of incidents in the region's vital shipping routes, the US formed a naval coalition to protect navigation in a waterway that is critical to global oil supplies. Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, joined the US-led naval coalition in August. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates followed suit in September. The United Kingdom and Australia are the main Western countries to have agreed to send warships to escort commercial shipping in the Gulf.

Animosity between Tehran and Washington and its allies has soared since the US unilaterally abandoned a multinational deal on curbing Iran's nuclear program last year and reimposed heavy sanctions on the Islamic republic. On Sept 14, drone strikes targeted two Saudi oil facilities, causing catastrophic damage and temporarily knocking out half of the kingdom's oil production.

The attacks were claimed by Yemen's Houthi rebels who are battling a Saudi-led coalition, but Washington and Riyadh blamed Iran, saying the strikes were carried out with advanced missiles and drones. Most European states have declined to participate in the naval coalition, fearful of undermining their efforts to save the nuclear accord with Iran, which was badly weakened by the US withdrawal. — AFP

Eight injured in Jordan stabbing...

Continued from Page 1

The Jordanian health ministry confirmed that eight people had been wounded, with Sartawi saying earlier that they had "been transported to hospital for treatment". He said the assailant had been arrested but did not specify his nationality, noting that the motive was as yet unknown. Jordanian tour guide Zouheir Zreiqat was at the scene and told AFP that the attack happened "just before midday when around 100 foreign tourists" were at the site.

"A bearded man in his twenties wearing black and brandishing a knife started to stab tourists," according to Zreiqat. He said others started to shout for help and he, along with three other tour guides and three tourists managed to stop the assailant. "We chased him until we could grab him and get him on the ground," Zreiqat said. "We took the knife from him. He stayed silent, without saying a word until the police arrived and arrested him."

Meanwhile, two Jordanians, whose detention without charge by Israel led Jordan to recall its ambassador, returned home yesterday in a handover deal that defused a diplomatic crisis, officials said. Hiba Labadi,

24, was arrested in August after crossing into the occupied West Bank to attend a family wedding. She subsequently went on a hunger strike and was hospitalized after her health deteriorated. Separately, Abdelrahman Merhi, 29, was arrested in September after he also entered the West Bank to visit relatives.

Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said on Monday the two would return to Jordan "before the end of the week" without saying how their release had been secured. Safadi however said King Abdullah had ordered the government to do everything necessary to bring them back "whatever that may cost".

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the handover was agreed after talks between Israeli and Jordanian security chiefs. It said Jordan's ambassador would return to his post "in the coming days". Israel's deputy foreign minister, Tzipi Hotovely, said last month both detainees were suspected of security offences, without being more specific.

Diplomats say the deal defused a crisis following Safadi's warning that Jordan would take further diplomatic measures if Israel did not release the two detainees, who he said were illegally held without charge. Jordanians, many of whom are of Palestinian origin, oppose normalization of relations with Israel, despite a 1994 peace treaty. In announcing the decision to release Labadi and Miri, Israel said it viewed its relations with Jordan as "a cornerstone of stability in the Middle East". — Agencies

Riyadh has 'open channel' with Yemen rebels

RIYADH: Riyadh has an "open channel" with Yemen's Iran-backed rebels with the goal of ending the country's civil war, a Saudi official said yesterday, weeks after the rebels offered to halt attacks on the kingdom. The comment comes after Saudi Arabia separately brokered a power sharing agreement between Yemen's internationally recognized government and southern separatists, which observers say could pave the way for a wider peace deal.

"We have had an open channel with the Houthis since 2016. We are continuing these communications to support peace in Yemen," a senior Saudi official told reporters. "We don't close our doors with the Houthis." The official, who declined to be named, did not describe the nature of the communication but the development came after rebel missile and drone attacks on Saudi cities spiked over the summer, followed by a lull in recent weeks.

There was no immediate comment from the Houthi rebels, who seized the capital Sanaa and much of northern Yemen in 2014, sparking a Saudi-led military intervention the following March. Washington too is in talks with the Houthis, Assistant Secretary of Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker said during a visit to Saudi Arabia in September. He did not say whether the Americans were holding talks separately with the rebels, but analysts say they were likely happening in consultation with Saudi Arabia, a key ally of Washington.

The Saudi-led coalition intervened in Yemen in 2015 as the rebels closed in on second city Aden, prompting President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi to flee into Saudi exile. Riyadh had reportedly hoped for a quick win against the Houthis, but instead waded into a quagmire that has cost it billions of dollars and hurt its reputation, while devastating the Arab world's poorest country.

Yesterday's confirmation comes amid the slow imple-

Investors hope Qatar dairy will...

Continued from Page 1

The company now meets more than 90 percent of the country's fresh dairy needs from its farm 55 km north of Doha. Rows of cows are gently cooled through a system of giant fans and vents that spray a fine mist as they move between feeding and milking barns. The herd, now grown to 18,000 strong, is fed hay imported from Europe and the United States.

With Baladna's growth, Qatar is now looking to its nascent dairy industry to play a role in the drive to diversify the economy away from oil and gas. Baladna stock will initially only be on offer to Qatari individuals and companies, but bosses are still hoping to raise around \$390 million for three-quarters of the company's shares. Foreigners will be able to own up to 49 percent of shares from an unspecified future date.

The sale is dwarfed by neighboring Saudi Arabia's plans to list part of oil giant Aramco, expected to be the biggest ever stock market flotation, but it represents an important landmark for Qatar's fledgling dairy industry. Khayyat told AFP the listing would make Baladna "more sustainable, even for the future after the illegal blockade is eased". But the embargo enforced by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain shows no signs of abating, prompting Baladna to expand its product range to include juices, cheeses and yoghurt in recent months.

mentation of a landmark ceasefire deal for the key aid port of Hodeida, which was agreed between Yemen's government and the rebels in Sweden late last year. The deal was hailed as Yemen's best chance so far to end the four-year conflict, which has pushed much of the population to the brink of famine. But it appears to be hanging by a thread with breaches reported by both sides.

"If the Houthis (are) serious to deescalate and accept to come to the table, Saudi Arabia will support their demand and support all political parties to reach a political solution," the Saudi official said. The Houthis, on their part, have offered to halt all attacks on Saudi Arabia as part of a wider peace initiative, later renewing their proposal despite continued air strikes by the Saudi-led coalition.

The offer came after the Houthis claimed responsibility for attacks on Sept 14 against two key Saudi oil installations that temporarily knocked out half of the OPEC giant's production. Riyadh and Washington, however, blamed Iran for the attacks - a charge denied by Tehran. "Saudi Arabia still believes that there is significant risk from the Houthi rebels, but it has not managed to get consistent international support for its intervention in Yemen," Fatima Abo Alasar, a scholar at the Middle East Institute, told AFP. "It would appear wise for the Saudi kingdom to continue seeking diplomatic channels with the Houthis directly."

Yemen's Riyadh-backed government signed a power sharing deal with southern separatists on Tuesday, in a bid to end fighting that had distracted the coalition from its battle against the Houthis. The so-called Riyadh agreement, hailed as a stepping stone towards ending the wider conflict, would see Yemen's government return to Aden and place armed forces from both sides under the authority of the defence and interior ministries.

"The deal prevents a collapse of the fragile alliance of Yemeni forces that Saudi Arabia has supported since intervening in Yemen in March 2015 to prevent Houthi rebels from taking over the country," Peter Salisbury, an analyst at the International Crisis Group, said in a report. "The question now is whether the agreement can act as a bridge to a nationwide political settlement or if it simply marks a pause before another round of violence." — AFP

The Riyadh-led alliance has accused Doha of backing Islamist groups and Iran, issuing a raft of terms Qatar must accept before it will lift the embargo that includes a ban on direct air, land or sea trade. Doha strongly denies the allegations and has refused to meet the demands that also stipulate the closure of its flagship state-run Al Jazeera broadcaster.

Qatar, with a population of 2.7 million, has also turned to countries including Turkey, Iran and Morocco to replace supply chains severed by the embargo. "There's great interest from strategic investors - they've taken 23 percent," said a source briefed on the IPO. They include Qatar's government pension fund and a subsidiary of the sovereign wealth fund. Qatar's industry ministry will hold a "golden share", allowing it to appoint some directors and veto certain decisions. Baladna's founders will hold the quarter of the company not on offer.

The company hopes the remaining 52 percent of shares will be snapped up in the final days of the purchase window, which closes today. Trading will begin on Dec 11. Market-watcher M R Raghu said the company's growth prospects, "underpinned by strong regulatory support in addition to its discounted valuation", made the stock an attractive prospect. "Supportive government policies are expected to put the company at an advantage to competitors," added Raghu, head of research at the Kuwait Financial Centre (Markaz), referring to subsidized land, among other measures.

The IPO, expected to be the only such indigenous offering this year, has been heavily publicized. Glossy ads have appeared on YouTube showing truckloads of cattle being transported from Qatar Airways cargo planes to their vast desert barns. — AFP