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BEIRUT: Lebanese demonstrators raise a new giant sign of a fist that bears the Arabic word "revolution" on it in Martyr's Square on Friday, after the sign was burnt overnight by unknown perpetrators. —AFP

Lebanese celebrate 'real' independence day

Hezbollah accuses US of meddling in Lebanon crisis

BEIRUT: Lebanon marked 76 years of self-rule Friday, with protesters joining festivities nationwide instead of a military parade to mark what they say is a first year of "real independence". Christians and Muslims from across the political spectrum have for weeks marched together united in their rejection of a governing class they deem inept and corrupt. The youth-led movement has boosted a new cross-sectarian pride in the small Mediterranean nation that was torn by a bloody 1975-1990 civil war - a fresh sense of optimism that was on full display Friday.

"We're all here together to build a new Lebanon," said one reveler in the crowds in Beirut's central Martyrs' Square, Karl, a middle-aged cyclist with a national flag draped on his bicycle. As night fell, dance music boomed out from loudspeakers and thousands waved lighters, mobile phone torches and candles, while others lighted balloon lanterns and released them into the sky. Throughout the day, tens of thousands had massed across the country for outdoor festivities - the upbeat mood in stark contrast to the sober state ceremonies held in the morning. The street movement brought down the government last month, though a new cabinet has yet to be formed.

'Organic' independence

The demonstrations have brought together people from different religious and political backgrounds, who share the hope of sweeping out a system they say is broken and often unable to provide even basic services. "It's the first time Lebanese from all religious communities have protested en masse without a political party calling for it, and against all parties," said 21-year-old university student Tamara. "That's

real independence - one that's organic".

In a sign of defiance on Friday, demonstrators in Beirut replaced an iconic symbol of the protests, less than 24 hours after it was burnt down by an unknown perpetrator. After dark, dozens of demonstrators in Martyrs' Square hauled into place the giant cutout of a clenched fist, inscribed with the word "revolution".

In the afternoon, huge crowds cheered on an alternative civil society parade representing various groups, from students and farm workers to scouts, hikers and bikers. A team celebrating nature clutched flowers and tree branches, while elsewhere women were clanging saucepans, as they have done every evening to protest against the government. And a troop of expatriates - the Lebanese diaspora being famously widespread - pushed suitcases in front of them.

About 600 Lebanese expatriates were expected to be travelling in, from the Gulf, Europe, North America and as far afield as Australia, to join the party. "I hope this independence day will be a turning point," said Leila, a woman carrying cymbals in both hands. "Our pockets are still empty but we've found a new dignity," she told AFP, before zipping back into the crowd.

Wajed, a 26-year-old activist, also said this year's independence day gave him fresh hope. "We want to emancipate ourselves from the corrupt people governing us," he said. A revised version of the national anthem is making the rounds online to pay tribute to Lebanese women, many of whom have played a central role in the protests. Two people have so far been killed during the protests, a far cry from the hundreds

dead in similar demonstrations in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah accused the United States of meddling in the formation of a new Lebanese government on Friday, its strongest accusation yet of US interference in Lebanon's political and economic crisis. As Lebanon grapples with the worst economic crisis since its 1975-90 civil war, Hezbollah deputy leader Sheikh Naim Kassem told Reuters he did not see signs of a new conflict. Hezbollah would not be dragged into strife, he said.

He also said the economic crisis which has spread to the banking system was hitting the Shiite group's followers along with everyone else in Lebanon. Hezbollah backed putting corrupt officials on trial "regardless of who they are", he added. The protests led Saad Al-Hariri to quit as prime minister on Oct 29, toppling a coalition government that included the heavily armed Hezbollah.

"The first obstruction in the formation of the government is America, because it wants a government that resembles it and we want a government that resembles the Lebanese people," Kassem said. The crisis would continue, he said, until foreign parties gave up on trying to achieve their goals. US officials had been in direct contact with Lebanese politicians and officials, he said. "Let them leave us alone so we can reach an understanding among ourselves. The more they intervene the more they delay the solution."

Though they hold a parliamentary majority, Shiite Hezbollah and allies including the Christian Free Patriotic Movement continue to seek a deal with Hariri over a government which they say should include both politicians and technocrats. Asked why Hezbollah and its

allies had not opted to form a cabinet on their own, Kassem said the group preferred the prime minister be chosen through agreement with the main parties.

The position is reserved for a Sunni Muslim in Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system. Hariri is Lebanon's leading Sunni. "There are continuous contacts between Hezbollah and Prime Minister Hariri to pick the prime minister," Kassem said. The United States has said it stands by protesters who are demanding reforms and an end to corruption, and that it is ready to work with a new government that can build a stable, prosperous and independent Lebanon.

Sources close to Hariri have said he is sticking by his demand for a cabinet of experts because he believes it would be best placed to secure international support and steer Lebanon out of crisis. Kassem said the first step towards dealing with the crisis would be the formation of a government which should start by implementing an emergency economic plan after amending it if necessary.

The causes of the crisis included by bad policies and corruption, he said. "We support the people 100 percent in putting the corrupt on trial," he said. "The corrupt must stand trial in Lebanon regardless of who they are ... we support all measures that limit corruption and that recover looted wealth." The protests in Lebanon have been overwhelmingly peaceful despite occasional confrontations. "I do not see signs of a civil war in Lebanon. Hezbollah is determined not to fall into strife that America wants. But we have information of American attempts to create some security problems," he said. —Agencies

Iran warns regional states of consequences if they stoked unrest

DUBAI: Iranian Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri yesterday warned regional countries of unspecified dire consequences if it is proven that they meddled to stoke unrest in Iran, the semi-official news agency Fars reported. "Some countries in the region should know that they will not have an easy life in the region if clues are found that show they intervened to create unrest in Iran," said Jahangiri, quoted by Fars.

Iran has blamed "thugs" linked to exiles and foreign foes - the United States, Israel and Saudi Arabia - for stirring up unrest following hikes in gasoline prices which led to the detention of about 1,000 demonstrators and some of the worst violence in a decade. Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia and its arch-foe Israel have backed US moves to reimpose sanctions that have crippled Tehran's economy, after Washington withdrew from the Islamic Republic's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Iranian troops and members of the elite Revolutionary Guards helped police quell violent unrest in Kermanshah province this week, Iranian officials said yesterday, accusing "US agents" of being among the armed protesters. Rights group Amnesty International said at least 30 people were killed in the western province, making it the worst-hit by days of protests over gasoline price rises in which more than 100 people were killed nationwide. Iran rejected the death toll figures as "speculative". The unrest appears to be the worst violence at least since Iran stamped out a "Green Revolution" in 2009, when dozens of protesters were killed over several months. "All the forces of the Revolutionary Guards, the (paramilitary) Basij, the Intelligence Ministry, police, and the army took part actively in controlling the situation," Parviz Tavassolizadeh, the head of the judiciary in Kermanshah, was quoted as saying by the Fars agency. Tavassolizadeh said the rioters were armed and burned public property, Fars reported.

Death toll

Meanwhile, Amnesty International updated its estimated death toll in the unrest to 115 from 106. "We believe that the real figure may be much higher. We are continuing to investigate," Katy Pownall, Amnesty's deputy head of news, told Reuters in an email. Bahman Reyhani, the Revolutionary Guards' commander in Kermanshah, said "the rioters belonged to anti-revolutionary (exiled opposition) groups and America's intelligence services," the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported.

Reyhani did not name the groups. Armed Iranian Kurdish militants have long operated near the province's border with Iraq. The Guards said calm had returned across Iran on Thursday. Guards spokesman Brigadier General Ramezan Sharif said the protests had been initiated by royalists seeking the return of the Pahlavi dynasty toppled by the 1979 revolution, and the exiled Mujahideen Khalq armed opposition group, Tasnim reported.

He said "secessionist" groups were also involved, apparently referring to ethnic Arab and the Kurdish militants. Protests began in several areas on Nov 15 after the government announced gasoline price hikes of at least 50 percent and imposed rationing. The unrest spread to at least 100 towns and cities as demonstrators demanded senior officials step down. Iran condemned a US decision to impose sanctions on the Iranian information minister on Friday for his role in a nationwide Internet shutdown meant to help stifle the protests. —Reuters

The end of King Bibi?

JERUSALEM: Benjamin Netanyahu's indictment on corruption charges prompted speculation that the end of his decade-long tenure was nigh, though several key allies expressed support for the beleaguered Israeli premier. The Jewish state woke up to an indicted sitting prime minister for the first time, after the attorney general announced late Thursday he had charged the 70-year-old with bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

After months of speculation Avichai Mandelblit's decision was the worst possible outcome for Netanyahu, hitting him with the most serious charges. Israel's longest-serving premier swiftly hit back, vowing to fight on and accusing the police and legal system of bias against the right-wing in an often angry speech. Any trial is likely to be months away, and if Netanyahu is found guilty - a final conviction exhausting appeals could take years.

In a video statement posted online Friday Netanyahu said he would abide by any ruling. "We will accept the decisions of the court, there is no doubt about that" and "we will act in accordance with the rule of law," he said. Netanyahu's political authority is now under more intense scrutiny than ever. Israel has been without a functioning government for nearly a

year, with Netanyahu, nicknamed 'King Bibi', staying on as interim premier after two inconclusive elections in April and September.

Parliament now has less than three weeks to find a candidate who can gain the support of more than half of the 120 lawmakers, or a deeply unpopular third election will be called. Columnist Amit Segal, writing in the Yediot Achronot daily, said Mandelblit had ended any chance of Netanyahu reaching the threshold. "The prime minister's political situation is painfully clear: his chances of reaching 61 seats are almost non-existent."

Netanyahu's centrist rival Benny Gantz will now seek to encourage defections either from within the PM's Likud party or from allied right-wing parties. But a number of the PM's key allies said they would stand by him for now, stressing that he had not yet been convicted of anything. Among them was Education Minister Rafi Peretz, whose Jewish Home party is an ally of Netanyahu's, as well as Foreign Minister Israel Katz and Culture Minister Miri Regev from inside Likud.

Gantz, leader of the Blue and White coalition, late Thursday called on Netanyahu to step down and focus on the corruption allegations - a scenario that would see the premier out of power for the first time in ten years. But he appeared primed to continue fighting the charges while clinging onto office. "What is going on here is an attempt to stage a coup against the prime minister," Netanyahu declared in a televised response to the charges.



JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gestures as he speaks during a meeting of the rightwing bloc at the Knesset on Nov 20, 2019. —AFP

'End is clear'

In Tel Aviv Friday, around 70 anti-Netanyahu campaigners demanded that he step down, an AFP journalist said. "The corrupted, go home, Bibi, go home," signs read. A smaller counter demonstration chanted slogans in favor of the PM. Under Israeli law, while ministers cannot remain in place after being indicted, a premier is not legally

required to resign unless convicted and with appeals processes exhausted. In addition to the premiership, Netanyahu holds portfolios including agriculture and health, positions he will likely have to vacate in the coming days. The charges against him range from receiving gifts worth thousands of dollars to a deal to change regulation in favor of a media group in exchange for positive coverage. —AFP