

International

In buckets and gardening gloves, Iraq protesters dress for tear gas

Rivals face off on a main bridge of the Iraqi capital

BAGHDAD: The row of tense Iraqi police readied their tear gas canisters to disperse swelling crowds. Facing the officers, demonstrators donned their equipment too - plastic buckets, soda cans and gardening gloves. The rivals faced off on a main bridge of the Iraqi capital, with protesters advancing from Tahrir Square and itching to reach government offices across the river in the Green Zone. Black-clad riot police held them back, unleashing wave after wave of tear gas, but not using live rounds.

After a week of protests early this month that a national rights watchdog says ended with at least 157 dead, demonstrators came ready with their own improvised defenses. Some had gathered plastic trash bins from the streets and chased down the canisters, capping the devices with bin lids to diminish the debilitating effect of the gas. Others put the buckets on their heads in an attempt to ward off cans that could hit them in this sensitive area.

A few donned thick gardening gloves, to pick up the searing hot containers and toss them straight back at the police, while others just kicked them away. The best-equipped protected themselves with navy blue face masks normally used by painters. Their less fortunate comrades fashioned makeshift devices, shearing the top off a can of Pepsi and taping it to a paper mask covering their mouth and nose. "Now if I get hit with the gas, my eyes water a little from the gas but I won't

suffocate," one protester told AFP.

Even the rainy weather was in their favor, with occasional showers and cool breezes clearing clouds of lingering gas. The chemical agent in tear gas canisters causes severe irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, prompting coughing fits and breathing difficulties. Soda, lemon juice and milk have been used for years by protesters around the world to lessen the symptoms. A few Iraqis on Friday loaded up their cars with crates of soda, driving as close to the rallies as they could before security forces stopped them.

They popped open their trunks and waved over other protesters, who hoisted the crates and continued on foot to where the crowds were facing off against riot police. "Take these to our protesting brothers," they said. Some two dozen protesters died on Friday across Iraq, according to the Iraqi Human Rights Commission, including several hit by tear gas canisters. Over 1,700 more were wounded across the country, most of them affected by the gas itself.

The renewed protests come after the week of rallies earlier this month, when most of the 157 who died were killed by live rounds in Baghdad, according to the rights watchdog. This time around, security forces in the capital appeared to have orders to rely on tear gas over gun shots. "We know how to handle this tear gas now," one protester said early on Friday. "But we'll be afraid if they start using live rounds," he had cautioned. —AFP



BAGHDAD: An Iraqi protester wears an anonymous mask backwards near the capital Baghdad's Al-Jumhuriyah Bridge during an anti-government protest. —AFP

A better Beirut? protests spur city innovation

BEIRUT: At dawn, 16-year-old Michel sweeps Beirut's pavements of discarded bottles and cigarette butts from a protest the night before. The secondary school student has joined mass demonstrations that have swept Lebanon for more than a week, railing against a political elite accused of plundering state resources in a nation already in deep economic crisis. But Michel wants to fix more than just the country's politics: he is one of what activists say are rising numbers of young people harnessing the protests to crowdsource improvements to the capital city.

Street clean-ups, pro bono legal clinics, open-air raves in car parks and the revival of abandoned buildings are all signs of a push to change the face of Beirut as well as its leaders, according to researchers and activists. The city's residents are "realizing that they need to take care of the space they live in," said Mona Fawaz, a professor of urban studies and planning at the American University of Beirut. "When you're politically engaged and mobilized you're redefining your role as... an engaged citizen," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"No one's going to clean (the streets) for you; you have to clean it." For protesters like Michel, "it's not like we just come here, party, revolt, and leave our trash behind." "I'm just trying to show that although we're doing a revolution, the Lebanese people are still civilized and clean," he said. What started with a handful of volunteers roaming the streets with garbage bags and brushes, morphed into an organized force offering their own trucks and warehouses to support local NGOs helping the clean-up effort.

Rotting waste

The push to clean the city has its roots in a waste crisis that erupted in Lebanon in 2015 when authorities closed a major landfill site near Beirut. The protests that ensued as huge mounds of rotting waste filled the streets started to change public attitudes towards recycling, said Joslin Kehdy, founder of Recycle Lebanon, a charity. "The waste crisis changed a lot of people's mindsets towards recycling," she said.



TRIPOLI: Lebanese anti-government protesters stand behind a burning barricade during a demonstration in Beddawi town on the outskirts of the northern Lebanese port city of Tripoli yesterday. —AFP

"(The change) is not overnight."

In downtown Beirut, motorbike taxis have offered free lifts to residents to get around traffic and through roadblocks. Beirut's Grand Theatre, shuttered for years, was overrun by protesters for days this week who draped above its vast colonial entrance a banner reading "reclaiming public property". Lebanon has only recently passed a law to protect historic buildings and many have been demolished to make way for modern apartment buildings and offices.

A spokesman for the municipality was not immediately available for comment. Beirut's mayor announced a plan in April to build bike lanes throughout the city where air pollution is three times levels deemed a hazard by the World Health Organization, according to

2014 data. Few small businesses still operate in the downtown area, which used to host the city's market but is now largely reserved for wealthy fashion chains and expensive malls.

However, traders such as flavored tobacco vendors and corn on the cob sellers have in recent days flocked to the area to ply their trade in the revitalized centre of town, while deserted buildings have been repurposed for community initiatives. The push to transform and take ownership of the city has united people who often find themselves divided along political or sectarian lines, said Fawaz. But whether the momentum can outlast the mass dissent remains to be seen. "I'm sure people are going to get influenced by this," said Michel, the student. "It's going to lead to a better future." —Reuters

Cyber attack shuts Johannesburg City authority's network

JOHANNESBURG: Hackers have shut down the cyber network of Johannesburg City Council, targeting computers of local government employees in South Africa's economic hub, city officials said on Friday. The hackers allegedly demanded ransom in the form of bitcoins in exchange for reactivating internet and email links to the city's billing systems, local media reported.

The City of Johannesburg said it could not confirm the authenticity of the ransom demand and that its forensic and IT units were investigating the attack. Johannesburg is home to 5 million residents and contributes 16% to the country's total \$326 billion national economy. Officials said the attack on Thursday afternoon via employee computers had affected its call centres, website and online electronic platforms.

"You're sitting as an employee and then boom, a message appears on your computer screen and it turns blue. You try to reboot, switch off and nothing. Some messages demand money, other threatened to attack employees (physically)," City of Johannesburg spokesman Ntahtise Modingwane said. "We picked it up quickly and shut the whole system down," Modingwane said. "We're working around the clock and the system should be back up during the weekend."

The city's electricity distribution company City Power suffered a similar attack in July when a ransomware virus planted in its cyber systems by unknown hackers hit its pre-paid customers, according to local news website News24. United Kingdom-based tech firm Mimecast said in a report there was 19% increase in ransomware attacks targeting South African companies between 2018 and 2019. Ransomware is a type of malware that encrypts a victim's files, with the hacker typically demanding payment to restore access. —Reuters

Tech-savvy activists debunk fake news engulfing protests

BAGHDAD: From accusations long-dead soldiers shot protesters to jihadist statements backing the rallies, fabricated news has swirled around Iraq's protests - sending tech-savvy youth into debunk overdrive. While their compatriots hit the streets in anti-government rallies, dozens of anonymous activists from Iraqi NGO Tech 4 Peace hunker over laptops, using virtual private networks to circumvent a social media ban.

Those in Iraq coordinate with fellow activists across the Arab world, Europe and even North America to discern the real from the ridiculous. Did the Islamic State group really call for demonstrations? No - that's a fake statement, writes Tech 4 Peace on its popular Facebook page. Was a young protester shot dead this morning? No, his friends confirm he's still alive. Did the family of ex-dictator Saddam Hussein back the rallies? Another no.

One of the most common forms of fallacy spread online is the misidentification of security personnel who shot at protesters, said a Tech 4 Peace verifier identifying himself as Sami. "Pictures of people accused of killing demonstrators have been circulating for days," Sami said. They included photographs of Iraqi soldiers who had in fact

died fighting the Islamic State group several years ago. "We've also debunked dozens of claims of people accused of being jihadists, with their names and photographs circulated online, who have nothing to do with terrorism," he added.

'Alert! Fake news!'

Protests erupted in Iraq's capital and further south on October 1, first demanding more jobs and an end to corruption before evolving into calls for an overhaul of the entire political system. Authorities swiftly imposed internet restrictions, first banning some social media before imposing a total blackout.

But activists at Tech 4 Peace were just as fast: by the second day of protests, they were trawling through online platforms full of inaccurate or totally fabricated claims. "We found videos with false titles or bad sourcing, posted by people, pages or other social media accounts that sometimes don't even know they're distributing false information," said Sami. He and his colleagues also often find falsified government decrees, which they repost on the group's Facebook page with a red watermark saying: "Alert! Fake news!"

Iraq has a plethora of television stations and newspapers, but most people use Facebook or messaging application Whatsapp to share news. That makes it easy for unverified information - including mistaken rumors of deaths - to spread. "A former president even issued his condolences for an artist who was still very much alive," said Saad Al-Kaabi, an Iraqi blogger. "Authorities sometimes even launch test runs, spreading rumors on the internet to see the street's reaction," he said. —AFP

CONDOLENCE



The Management, Principal,
Staff and Students of
GULF INDIAN SCHOOL
deeply mourn the sad demise
of their beloved student
MADHAV MAJU
(CLASS - VIII)
(03.09.2006 - 20.10.2019)
and offer heartfelt condolences
to the bereaved family.

May his soul attain peace
in his Heavenly Abode

CONDOLENCES

The owners
and Management of



AI-RASHED
INTERNATIONAL SHIPPING Co.

Express their heartfelt
Condolences
on the sudden demise of
**Shamsudheen
Ponnambathayil**
Diversey Division
Support Staff
on 26th October 2019

May his soul Rest in Peace