

International

Lebanon protesters block roads to keep revolt alive

Angry protesters defy pleas from Lebanon's top leaders

BEIRUT: Lebanese demonstrators set up barricades and parked cars across key roads yesterday to protest corruption and press their demands for a radical overhaul of their country's sectarian political system. Defying pleas from Lebanon's top leaders, protesters sought to keep the country on lockdown for a 12th consecutive day by cutting off some of the main thoroughfares, including the main north-south highway.

The protesters are demanding more freedom, better services and an end to corruption and sectarian politics, among other things. Their unprecedented mobilization - sparked by a proposed tax on voice calls via messaging apps on October 17 - has quickly morphed into a massive grassroots push to drive out a political elite which has remained virtually unchanged in three decades.

Lebanon's political leaders have appeared shell-shocked, trying simultaneously to express sympathy for the protest movement while warning of chaos in the case of a power vacuum. "If the corrupt ruling class doesn't feel like the country is crippled we will not see any results," said 21-year-old Ali who was among a group of demonstrators blocking a key road in the capital yesterday morning.

Couches & footballs

A poster urging motorists to block roads with their cars started circulating on social media on Sunday night. By the next day, some major routes were closed off by hundreds of angle-parked vehicles, others by groups of protesters sitting on the road. Schools and banks have been closed for more than a week. The Lebanese security forces had been expected to make a new attempt at reopening the roads as the country faced more paralysis. The army and the country's top security agencies had agreed at the weekend to a mili-

tary-led plan to clear roadblocks, but their efforts have been met with resistance from demonstrators. In the southern city of Sidon, the army scuffled with protesters blocking the city's northern entrance yesterday morning, injuring three, said an AFP correspondent.

In Beirut, activists converted a main artery in the centre of the city into an open-air living room, furnished with couches and rugs. They shot footballs across streets which on a regular yesterday would have been jammed with motorists streaming in from Beirut's northern suburbs. Most residents have backed road closures, and business owners on Sunday night called for a general strike in solidarity, but political officials and flustered motorists have in recent days accused demonstrators of robbing people of their livelihoods.

No going back

"We are not closing all the roads. There are always side roads people can use," said Yusra, a 16-year-old in central Beirut. "We don't want to stand against the people but we also don't want to go back to the way things were before the revolution," she said. So far, the unprecedented protest movement has been relatively incident-free, despite tensions with the armed forces and attempts by party loyalists to stage counter-demonstrations.

In one of the most serious incidents, the army opened fire on Friday to confront a group of protesters blocking a road in the northern city of Tripoli, wounding at least six people. On Sunday, tens of thousands of protesters joined hands nationwide to form a 170-kilometre human chain stretching from Tripoli to Tyre in the south. The event drew Lebanese of all ages and backgrounds, many of them draped in the national cedar flag. Organizers said the event symbolized a national civic identity that has emerged since the start of the



BEIRUT: Lebanese anti-government protesters wave a national flag on a blocked avenue in the center of the capital yesterday. —AFP

protests on October 17.

The rallies have been remarkable for their territorial reach and the absence of political or sectarian banners, in a country often defined by its divisions. The leaderless protest movement is driven mostly by a young generation of men and women born after the 1975-1990

civil war. Lebanon's reviled political elite has defended a belated package of economic reforms and appeared willing to reshuffle the government, but protesters have stayed on the streets. More than a quarter of Lebanon's population lives in poverty, according to the World Bank. —AFP

Army declares curfew in Baghdad after student protests

BAGHDAD: The Iraqi army yesterday announced it would impose an overnight curfew in the capital as students and schoolchildren joined spreading protests to demand an overhaul of the government. Swathes of Iraq have been engulfed by demonstrations over unemployment and corruption this month that have evolved into demands for regime change. The rallies have gathered despite temporary curfews, threats of arrest and violence that has left nearly 240 people dead, including five protesters in Baghdad yesterday.

The military said cars and foot traffic would be barred in the capital for six hours starting at midnight. The move sparked concern security forces want to clear out main gathering places like the capital's Tahrir Square, occupied by demonstrators for four consecutive nights. Security forces there have relied heavily on tear gas to keep protesters from storming the Green Zone, which hosts government offices and foreign offices.

But protesters had otherwise been

allowed to set up tents in Tahrir and taken over multi-storey buildings there since Thursday in a marked departure from the response to protests during the first week of this month. They were joined in the past 24 hours by a huge contingent of students, who joined despite stern warnings by the higher education minister and the prime minister's office that they should "stay away."

"No school, no classes, until the regime collapses!" boycotting students shouted yesterday in Diwaniyah, 180 km south of the capital. Diwaniyah's union of universities and schools announced a 10-day strike on Monday "until the regime falls", with thousands of uniformed pupils and even professors flooding the streets. Young protesters still gathered yesterday morning in the southern cities of Nasiriyah, Hillah and Basra. In Kut, most government offices were shut for lack of staff.

'No nation, no class'

In Baghdad, demonstrators gathered on campuses and in Tahrir Square. "Qusay Al-Suhail (the higher education minister) said not to come down into the streets. But we say: no nation, no class!" one student protester said. "All we want is for the government to immediately submit its resignation. Either it resigns, or it gets ousted." About 60 percent of Iraq's 40-million-strong population is under the age of 25.

But youth unemployment stands at 25 percent and one in five people live below



KARBALA: Iraqis wave national flags as they take part in an anti-government demonstration in the Shiite shrine city of Karbala, south of Iraq's capital Baghdad yesterday. —AFP

the poverty line, despite the vast oil wealth of OPEC's second-largest crude producer. Anger at inequality and accusations that government corruption was fuelling it sparked protests in Baghdad on Oct 1 that have since attracted growing numbers of young people. Yesterday, a small group of students brought kits to Tahrir Square to treat people affected by tear gas along with cans of Pepsi - believed to alleviate discomfort when splashed on the face. "It's my first day at the protests. I told my mom

I'm going to class, but I came here instead!" a girl with curly hair told AFP.

In the province of Diyala, which had so far been calm, two members of the provincial council resigned in solidarity with the rallies. Even in the holy city of Najaf, dozens of young clerics-to-be took to the streets. The protests are unprecedented in recent Iraqi history for their ire at the entire political class, with some even criticizing traditionally revered religious leaders. —AFP

Barisha: Syrian village where Baghdadi died

BARISHA: Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the elusive leader of the Islamic State group and the world's most wanted man, met his demise near a small village in north-western Syria called Barisha. This is what we know about the area:

Geography

Barisha is located less than five kilometers from Turkey and close to Bab al-Hawa, one of the main border crossings between the two countries. The house targeted in the overnight US special forces raid that US President Donald Trump says killed Baghdadi was on the edge of the village. The area is mountainous and sparsely populated, about 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) north of Idlib city, the capital of the province.

It lies barely five kilometers east of Qalb Lozeh, which is one of a scattering of ancient villages listed as world heritage by UNESCO and hosts a Byzantine

church that is thought to have inspired the design of Notre Dame in Paris. The agricultural area, like many others in Idlib province, is home to small informal settlements of displaced people from other parts of Syria. Barisha's population of some 7,000 inhabitants is impoverished, with many relying on aid, local television station Aleppo TV said in a report on the village in January.

Control

The area where Barisha lies is nominally under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, an outfit that includes ex-members of Al-Qaeda's former Syria affiliate. But IS sleeper cells and the Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Deen group are also present in the area, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor says. The village is near the border with Turkey but far from the regions where US forces were deployed and used to operating. The mountainous region is known for snuggling and porous enough for other armed groups than HTS to operate in.

The IS fighters who managed to flee the Kurdish-led offensive that eradicated their "caliphate" in eastern Syria earlier this year scattered in different directions. Some are thought to have slipped across



BARISHA: An aerial view taken shows the site that was hit by helicopter gunfire which reportedly killed nine people near the northwestern Syrian village of Barisha in the Idlib province along the border with Turkey. —AFP

the borders with Iraq or Turkey, while others headed to the Badia desert and the Palmyra region. Several other reports at the time of the fall of Baghouz in early

2019 also mentioned that convoys of operatives had snuck into Idlib province, despite IS's bitter rivalry with Al-Qaeda and its HTS offshoot. —AFP

15 killed in northern Burkina Faso attack

OUAGADOUGOU: Gunmen killed 15 civilians in northern Burkina Faso over the weekend, security and local sources said yesterday, in the latest deadly attack as the impoverished West African country battles a jihadist revolt. "On Saturday night numerous armed individuals attacked the village of Pobe-Mengao and kidnapped several residents, ransacked shops and carried away equipment," a local source

said. A security source said "the lifeless bodies of 11 people were found on Sunday morning... probably the bodies of those abducted the day before in Pobe-Mengao by an armed terrorist group". The local source said that "after the attackers departed, the population started to leave the village to take refuge in Djibo - particularly after the bodies were discovered."

Djibo, the capital of the Soum province, is 25 kilometers (15 miles) from Pobe-Mengao. The gunmen returned to Pobe-Mengao on Sunday morning, where they "shot in the air for several hours before leaving," said the source, who is a Djibo resident, quoting testimonies from the displaced villagers. Four more bodies were found after the second

onslaught, the source told AFP, bringing the death toll to at least 15. The security source said that reinforcements had been sent to patrol the area. Soum is one of a swathe of provinces in northern Burkina Faso that have been battling with a four-year-old wave of jihadist violence that came from neighboring Mali. The attacks - typically hit-and-run raids on villages, road mines and suicide bombings - have claimed around 640 lives nationally, according to an AFP toll. Nearly 500,000 people have been internally displaced. More than 10,000 people marched in the capital Ouagadougou on Saturday to express their support for the country's security forces, which are badly-equipped, poorly trained and under-funded. —AFP

Russia guarded over Baghdadi killing as IS fight goes on

WASHINGTON: Russia offered guarded praise yesterday after President Donald Trump announced that US forces had killed Islamic State leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, but world leaders warned that the fight against the militant group was not over yet. Trump said on Sunday that Baghdadi had died "whimpering and crying" in a raid by US special forces in Syria, fulfilling his top national security goal.

Baghdadi, who had led the jihadist group since 2010, killed himself by detonating a suicide vest after fleeing into a dead-end tunnel as US forces closed in, Trump said in a televised address from the White House. "He was a sick and depraved man and now he's gone," said Trump. "He died ... whimpering and crying and screaming." Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov declined to say if the United States had told Russia about the operation in advance. But he added: "If this information is confirmed we can talk about a serious contribution by the president of the United States to the fight against international terrorism."

World leaders and security officials welcomed Baghdadi's death but said the campaign against Islamic State was not over, with so-called lone wolves likely to seek revenge. French President Emmanuel Macron said Baghdadi's death was a major blow against Islamic State but "the fight continues to finally defeat this terrorist organization". British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said: "We will work with our coalition partners to bring an end to the murderous, barbaric activities of Daesh (Islamic State) once and for all."

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told reporters: "This is a many-headed monster ... As you cut one off, another one inevitably arises." In Southeast Asia, an important focus for Islamic State, officials said security forces were preparing for a long battle to thwart the group's ideology. The Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, home to some of Asia's most organized Islamist militants, said they were braced for retaliation by Islamic State loyalists, including "lone wolf" attacks by radicalized locals.

Capable and dangerous

Though Baghdadi's death will unsettle Islamic State, it remains capable and dangerous, said Delfin Lorenzana, defense secretary of the Philippines, where the group's influence has taken a hold in its troubled Mindanao region. "This is a blow to the organization considering al-Baghdadi's stature as a leader. But this is just a momentary setback considering the depth and reach of the organization worldwide," Lorenzana said. "Somebody will take his place." Islamic State has no declared successor as leader. But the group has in the past proved resilient, continuing to mount or inspire attacks in the region and beyond despite losing most of its territory in recent years.

Baghdadi had long been sought by the United States - which offered a \$25 million reward - as leader of a jihadist group that at one point controlled large areas of Syria and Iraq, where it declared a caliphate. Islamic State has carried out atrocities against religious minorities and attacks on five continents in the name of a fanatical version of Islam that horrified most Muslims. In their long hunt for Baghdadi, Iraqi intelligence teams secured a break in February 2018 after one of his top aides gave them information on how he escaped capture for so many years, two Iraqi security officials said. —Reuters