

Fresh Lebanon protests as economic crisis spirals



TRIPOLI: Lebanese anti-government protesters clash with soldiers in this northern port city late Saturday amid fresh protests over a spiralling economic crisis. — AFP

BEIRUT: Hundreds of demonstrators angered by a deepening economic crisis rallied Saturday across Lebanon for a third consecutive day, after violent overnight riots sparked condemnation from the political elite. Protesting against the surging cost of living and the government's apparent impotence in the face of Lebanon's worst economic turmoil since the 1975-1990 civil war, protesters in central Beirut brandished flags and chanted anti-government slogans.

"We are here to demand the formation of a new transitional government" and early parliamentary elections, Nehmat Badreddine, an activist and demonstrator told AFP near the Grand Serail seat of government. In the northern city of Tripoli, young men scuffled with security forces, who fired rubber bullets to disperse crowds. The clashes there left more than 120 people injured, according to figures released by the Red Cross and local medical services.

The stand-off began after young men blocked a highway to prevent a number of trucks carrying produce destined for Syria from passing through, according to the official National News Agency. The World Food Program issued a statement to say that it had sent a convoy of 39 truckloads of food aid to Syria.

Prime Minister Hassan Diab in a speech condemned Friday night's violence and what he termed efforts to mount a "coup" against the government and "manipulate" the value of the Lebanese pound. "The state and the people are being subjected to blackmail," he said, vowing to defeat corruption in the country.

Lebanon is caught in a spiralling economic crisis, including a rapid devaluation of the Lebanese pound, which has triggered a fresh wave of demonstrations since Thursday. Local media said the exchange rate had tumbled to 6,000 Lebanese

pounds per dollar on the black market at one point Friday, compared to the official peg of 1,507 in place since 1997.

Symbolic funeral

In Martyrs' Square, the epicentre of protests in downtown Beirut, demonstrators dressed in black and with their faces whitened carried a coffin draped with the Lebanese flag in a symbolic funeral Saturday for their crisis-ridden country. President Michel Aoun has announced that the central bank will implement measures from today including "feeding dollars into the market", in a bid to support the Lebanese pound.

Despite the pledges, some 200 young men gathered on mopeds in central Beirut on Friday night, some of them defacing shop fronts and setting fire to stores. Security forces fired tear gas to disperse them and some of the young men threw stones and

fire crackers back. People also took to the streets in the cities of Saida and Kfar Remmaneh, in the south, to denounce the economic crisis.

Diab called on officials to assess damage in central Beirut. Former premier Saad Hariri toured the area, condemning vandalism and riots. Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi said security forces would find those responsible for damaging property in the capital. Lebanon — one of the most indebted countries in the world, with a sovereign debt of more than 170 percent of GDP — went into default in March.

It started talks with the International Monetary Fund last month in a bid to unlock billions of dollars in financial aid. Dialogue is ongoing. Unemployment has soared to 35 percent nationwide. The country enforced a lockdown in mid-March to stem the spread of the novel coronavirus, dealing a further blow to businesses. — AFP

Fears of second wave amid new...

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At least 429,000 people worldwide have died from the respiratory illness, nearly halfway through a year in which countless lives have been upended as the pandemic ravages the global economy. The total number of confirmed cases has doubled to 7.7 million in slightly over a month and the disease is now spreading most rapidly in Latin America, where it is threatening healthcare systems and sparking political turmoil.

Brazil has the second-highest number of virus deaths after the United States, surpassing Britain's toll, and the Chilean health minister resigned on Saturday amid a furore over the country's true number of fatalities. There is still no treatment for COVID-19, but pharmaceutical group AstraZeneca said it has agreed to supply an alliance of European countries with up to 400 million doses of a possible vaccine. German government sources told AFP a vaccine could be developed by the end of the year.

Many European nations are further lifting painful lockdowns that have saved lives and forced case-loads down, but have also withered economies and caused misery for millions. The EU has recommended that member states fully reopen their frontiers with each other on June 15, but the border reopenings have been far from harmoniously coordinated.

Some like Poland have done so already, with

people from other European Union countries allowed to visit, and Germany said it would end land border checks today. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis travelled to picturesque Santorini island on Saturday to open his country's tourism season. "Greece is ready to welcome tourists this summer by putting safety and health as our number one priority," he said in English in front of a spectacular sunset. France has said it will gradually reopen to countries outside the borderless Schengen zone from July.

In another joyful return to semi-normality, football superstar Lionel Messi took to the pitch again in Spain as Barcelona resumed their La Liga title challenge and thumped Real Mallorca 4-0 in an empty stadium. Live sport also returned on Saturday to New Zealand, which has gone 22 days without new coronavirus cases, as 20,000 rugby fans watched the Otago Highlanders edge the Waikato Chiefs. But even in the much-awaited global sporting revival, there are wobbles — Australian rugby league officials postponed a top-level game yesterday hours before kick-off due to a coronavirus scare.

The World Health Organization said this week the pandemic is accelerating in Africa, and Botswana's capital Gaborone was locked down Saturday after new cases were detected. And in the US, which has seen the most COVID-19 deaths with over 115,000, more than a dozen states — including populous Texas and Florida — reported their highest-ever daily case totals in recent days. The rise comes as huge anti-racism protests rage across America and the world, with many demonstrators wearing masks to protect against the spread of the virus. — AFP

\$40 to \$55 a day, transporting tourists to and from the site on the back of his donkey. "We'll be in a real pickle" if the tourist industry doesn't pick up, he said, adding that since mid-March he has been working for a livestock seller.

Farajat said he hoped visitors would return quickly to "countries less affected by the pandemic" like the kingdom. But tour guide Nawafleh was worried some tourists, particularly the elderly and pensioners, may be reluctant to return. With a population of around 10 million, Jordan has officially recorded just over 800 cases of COVID-19 and nine deaths.

Tourism earned Jordan \$5.3 billion last year, according to Abed al-Razzaq Arabiyat, head of the Jordan Tourism Board. But revenues have almost completely dried up, he said, promising measures to help salvage the season, including a focus on domestic tourism.

Meanwhile, for Petra's 45 hotels, the situation is grim. At the three-star La Maison, a lonely receptionist eyed the entrance, with no guests in sight. "The pandemic came at the peak of our tourist season," said owner Tarek Twissi, who is also the head of the Petra hotels association. "Reservations were at over 90 percent and in less than a week they were all cancelled," he said. "The occupancy rate at my hotel is now at zero." — AFP

Officials linked to Bangladesh...

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9 pm instead of 6 pm to 6 am and the lockdown on some areas, mainly Hawally, is expected to be eased.

The Cabinet will also review two grillings against the ministers of education and finance, expected to be debated on June 16 or 17. The Assembly is

expected to resume its regular sessions on Tuesday following several weeks of suspension due to the coronavirus, and is scheduled to debate a large number of issues.

MPs have sent a letter demanding that all issues related to expats and the population structure should be sent to the Assembly's human resources committee, whose main function is to find jobs for Kuwaitis. MPs have demanded that drastic measures are taken to reduce the number of expats in the country and have submitted draft laws to achieve this target. But such issues require a long time to carry out.

Delhi virus fears rise as...

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Some local Delhi councils say the real death toll is twice the number given by the regional government. Indian media has been full of tragic stories of people dying after being turned away by hospitals. One pregnant woman died as she was being shuttled between hospitals. A 78-year-old man petitioned the Delhi High Court for a ventilator bed but died before the matter could be taken up. India has now recorded more than 300,000 coronavirus cases with nearly 9,000 fatalities.

Several families have used social media to recount their harrowing experiences after being refused hospital beds. Jain's family had joined a noisy, nationwide tribute to health workers, banging pots and pans from rooftops and balconies after a nationwide lockdown started in March. Now they feel abandoned. "The government is doing nothing. They are just playing with our feelings," Kashish said.

Jain's devastated relatives are now waiting to get tested themselves but the Delhi government allows that for only high-risk and symptomatic family members. The city government has estimated that it could need 80,000 beds by the end of July, and warned hotels and wedding venues that they are likely to be turned into hospitals.

Currently government hospitals have 8,505 designated pandemic beds while private hospitals have 1,441. But families say they are being forced to spend a small fortune for the few beds that are available. Suman Gulati, whose father is a coronavirus patient, said she was asked for one million rupees (\$13,200) by a private hospital for a bed. "Once I paid the money getting a bed was not a problem. But arranging such a huge amount of money at such a critical time was," she told AFP. "What if I fall sick next, what will I do? Should I sell my property, my jewellery?"

A sting operation by the Mirror Now TV channel showed five Delhi hospitals asking coronavirus patients to pay up to \$5,250 in order to be admitted. Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has accused private hospitals of lying about available beds and promised tough action if they were found extorting money. — AFP

Petra a ghost town as virus...

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country's GDP, employing about 100,000 people. A father of six, Nawafleh used to earn some \$70 a day. "In the past, the number of visitors varied according to the upheavals in the region. But today, there are no tourists at all. It's never happened before," he said. Jordan was already in a precarious situation before the pandemic, with unemployment at 19.3 percent in the first quarter of 2020.

Bordering conflict-torn Syria and Iraq, and lacking the oil wealth of some of its neighbors, the kingdom has worked to revive its tourism industry. Petra, an immense 264,000-sq-m site south of Amman, saw a record "1.13 million visitors last year, including a million from abroad", said Suleiman Al-Farajat, responsible for tourism and development in Petra.

About 80 percent of the region's roughly 38,000 people who are mainly nomadic Bedouins, depend on tourism directly or indirectly, he said. Like Nael Nawas, 41, a father of eight, who earned between

helicopters to armored vehicles, worth around \$8.6 billion, to more than 8,000 federal, tribal and local police forces, according to the US Congress. In 2015 President Barack Obama severely limited the program, but his successor Donald Trump restored it in 2017.

That year alone, some 500 million pieces of military equipment were transferred to the country's police services under the 1033 program. But the recent anti-police protests have recharged efforts to stop it. Last week around 200 lawmakers in Congress, mostly Democrats, sponsored a bill, the "Stop Militarizing Law Enforcement Act", to again reel in the program.

The bill, in the House of Representatives, would strictly limit the transfer of guns, ammunition, grenades, explosives, certain kinds of vehicles, and drones and other aircraft designed for the battlefield. A parallel bill is being prepared in the Senate, pushed by Democrat Brian Schatz, who has fought against over-arming the police for years.

"It is clear that many police departments are being outfitted as if they are going to war, and it is not working in terms of maintaining the peace," Schatz told The New York Times. "Just because the Department of Defense has excess weaponry doesn't mean it will be put to good use." — AFP

Militarization of cops stoked...

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nestled near the scenic Glacier National Park, received a landmine-resistant armored vehicle, one year after taking delivery of a military transport. The 10-person (two only part-time) police department in Ada, Oklahoma, population 16,000, got their mine-resistant armored car in July 2019, after stockpiling 34 M-16 assault rifles over the years.

In a country where many people have their own guns and where schools have suffered mass shootings, even local education districts are taking advantage of the Pentagon's handouts. The 47 primary and secondary schools of the Bay District in Panama City, Florida acquired no less than 27 assault rifles and two mine-resistant armored vehicles in 2012 and 2013.

The "1033" Pentagon surplus program has existed for years. Since 1997, the US military has distributed used and new equipment ranging from handguns to