

Lebanon summons US envoy over criticism of Hezbollah

BEIRUT: Lebanon's foreign ministry has summoned the US ambassador over remarks criticizing Hezbollah, a day after a judge slapped a controversial ban on local media covering her statements, state media said Sunday. In an interview with Saudi-owned news channel Al-Hadath aired on Friday, Dorothy Shea said the United States had "grave concerns about the role of Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organization".

"It has syphoned off billions of dollars that should have gone into government coffers so that the government can provide basic services to its people," she said. "It has obstructed some of the economic reforms the Lebanese economy so desperately needs," she added. On Saturday, a judge in the southern city of Tyre issued an order banning local and foreign media working in the country from airing or publishing locally comments by Shea for a year because of her remarks on Hezbollah.

The Lebanese Shiite movement and its allies command a majority in parliament and the cabinet. Judge Mohamad Mazeh said Shea's comments incited sectarian strife and served to "turn the Lebanese people against each other". State-owned National News Agency (NAA) said media that violate the ban would be fined \$200,000.

But Lebanese media ignored the ruling. In one of several media appearances on Sunday, Shea told broadcaster MTV that a senior government official had assured her the court did not have the authority to order the ban, and that the government would take steps to reverse it. She described the ruling as a "really pathetic" attempt to silence the media, and said the government should focus more on implementing economic reforms. "I would suggest that we all try to put this chapter behind us," she said.

Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah on Sunday condemned the ambassador's "hostile behavior", saying her remarks constituted an "attack" on the country's "sovereignty and dignity". He called on Lebanese authorities, and especially the foreign ministry, to "compel the ambassador to respect international treaties that define the duties of diplomats".

The State Department issued a fiery response to the judge's order on Saturday, stating: "Hezbollah's attempt to silence the Lebanese media is pathetic." In Lebanon itself, Information Minister Manal Abdel Samad dismissed the judge's order, saying: "No one has the right to ban the media from covering the news."

Local broadcaster LBC said it would not abide by the ruling, calling it a "non-binding and unenforceable" decision that violated press freedom. A senior judicial source told AFP that Mazeh had "overstepped his prerogatives as a judge". Mazeh responded to the criticism on Sunday, saying his "conscious is clear" and that he was "fully convinced" he had made the right decision. He was prepared, however, to resign if there was a judicial review.

On Sunday afternoon, hundreds of people demonstrated in Beirut's southern suburbs, a Hezbollah stronghold, expressing anger at the US and support of the judge. They brandished the flags of Hezbollah and its Shiite ally Amal, as well as signs with slogans that read: "We'd rather die than be humiliated" and "We are all Mohamad Mazeh".

The dispute comes as Lebanon grapples with its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The Lebanese pound has nosedived against the dollar on the black market, sending prices soaring. The Iran-backed Hezbollah has blamed



BEIRUT: Supporters of Lebanese Shiite movements Hezbollah and Amal brandish flags and placards as they protest a statement made by the US ambassador at a rally in the southern suburbs of the capital on Sunday. — AFP

Washington for the economic downturn, accusing it of preventing dollars from entering the cash-strapped country. The United States and Israel have long designated Hezbollah a terrorist group

and urged allies to follow suit. Hezbollah is the only group to have kept its weapons since the end of Lebanon's civil war on the grounds of defending the country against Israel. — Agencies

Trump under pressure to adopt mask

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump faced mounting bipartisan pressure Sunday to set an example by wearing a face mask, as his health secretary warned the "window is closing" to gain control of an explosion of infections in conservative-led US states. New coronavirus cases have been surging in more than half of US states, reaching record new highs after months of mitigation efforts applied unevenly across the country and sometimes contradictory messaging from the government.

Hardest hit have been southern and western states that pushed for early economic reopenings. But the latest upsurge, pushing the nation's total of declared cases over 2.5 million and its death toll

past 125,000, has prompted a growing chorus of calls for much tougher rules and enforcement. "This is a very, very serious situation and the window is closing for us to take action and get this under control," Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said on CNN.

'A unique position'

Azar was asked why Trump has refused to set an example by wearing a protective mask in public — even when standing next to mask-wearing health advisors — and reiterated the White House explanation that the president is tested daily and is "in a unique position" as a world leader. But many Republicans who are normally reluctant to criticize the president have been calling more insistently for mask use, with some urging a clearer example from the nation's leader.

"If wearing masks is important, and all the health experts tell us that it is... it would help if from time to time the president would wear one to help us get rid of this political debate that says if you're for Trump, you don't wear a mask, if you're against Trump, you do," Republican Senator Lamar

Alexander said Sunday on CNN.

In some areas, mask-wearing has taken on a political edge rather than being seen as a straightforward health choice. Among Republicans calling strongly for mask-wearing are Senator Marco Rubio of Florida — which has set daily records of new COVID-19 cases; Senate leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky; and Governor Greg Abbott of Texas, another state that has seen a major uptick in cases after moving aggressively to reopen its economy.

In Phoenix, Governor Doug Ducey wore a mask on Thursday when he warned fellow Arizonans that "we are getting hit hard right now." The best defense against COVID-19, he told local media, is to wear protective masks.

'Long overdue'

Liz Cheney, a member of the House leadership, has tweeted a picture of her father, the former US vice president, wearing a mask under the words: "Dick Cheney says WEAR A MASK #realmen-wearmasks". Vice President Mike Pence has sometimes worn masks in public but stopped short of

advocating mask-wearing when he chaired the first briefing in two months of the White House coronavirus task force on Friday.

Pence travelled Sunday to Texas for a briefing with Governor Abbott on the pandemic response, but has cancelled upcoming events in Arizona and Florida "out of an abundance of caution". Asked why the administration hasn't pushed harder for masks, Pence told CBS on Sunday that "we believe that every state has a unique situation" and that "we want to defer to governors" to decide on rules for their own states.

Some Democrats want Trump not only to set an example but to mandate mask-wearing nationwide — including Trump's White House rival Joe Biden who says he would seek to make masks compulsory in public spaces. Asked on ABC if she would support such a move, House speaker Nancy Pelosi called it "definitely long overdue." "We have the worst record of any country in the world. And the president says we're making progress." She added, "The president should be an example. Real men wear masks. Be an example to the country and wear the mask." — AFP



A picture taken from the Israeli settlement of Naale in the occupied West Bank northwest of the Palestinian city of Ramallah shows the skyline of the Israeli coastal city of Tel Aviv on June 17, 2020. — AFP

Outrage mounts over India police...

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Jignesh Mevani wrote that the "George Floyds of India are far too many". "Will Indians march on streets in thousands like in America?" he tweeted.

Rahul Gandhi, a leader of the opposition Congress party, described it as a "tragedy when our

protectors turn into oppressors". Several reports by human rights groups in India have detailed cases of alleged torture of suspects in custody, with deaths often blamed by police on suicide or natural causes.

According to the National Human Rights Commission, 3,146 people died in police and judicial custody in 2017-18. "Custodial violence and torture is so rampant in India that it has become almost routine," it said in a report. "It represents the worst form of excesses by public servants entrusted with the duty of law enforcement." Convictions in such cases are extremely rare, according to activists. — AFP

Prosecution seeks to probe 2...

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Separately, the prosecution also asked the Assembly to lift the immunity of MP Majed Al-Mutairi regarding a problem with a police patrol. Meanwhile, Kuwait is preparing to move into the second phase of easing coronavirus restrictions

today as malls, restaurants and cafes, in addition to public parks, are due to reopen following a closure that exceeded three months.

Curfew hours will be relaxed to start from 8 pm instead of 7 pm and end at 5 am. Malls will be allowed to operate until 6 pm. Restaurants and cafes can operate but dine-in is not allowed. Government offices will reopen partially at a capacity not exceeding 30 percent. The second phase is scheduled to continue for 30 days. MP Ali Al-Deqbasii protested yesterday at the government's continued lockdown of Jleeb Al-Shuyoukh and Mahboula, claiming he did not understand the logic behind the lengthy closure.

Israel annexation plans 'illegal': UN rights chief

GENEVA: Israel's aim to annex parts of the occupied West Bank was clearly "illegal", the UN's human rights chief said yesterday, warning that the consequences could be "disastrous". Just days before Israel intends to kick-start plans to annex its West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley, Michelle Bachelet added her voice to the chorus urging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to drop the proposal.

"Annexation is illegal. Period," the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights said in a statement. "Any annexation. Whether it is 30 percent of the West Bank, or five percent," she said, urging Israel to "listen to its own former senior officials and generals, as well as to the multitude of voices around the world, warning it not to proceed along this dangerous path."

International condemnation of the possible Israeli annexations has mounted ahead of July 1, when the Jewish state could take its first steps toward implementing part of a US-proposed Middle East peace plan. US President Donald Trump's proposals, rejected outright by the Palestinians, pave the way for annexing key parts of the West Bank, including settlements long considered illegal by the majority of the international community.

Bachelet urged Israel to shift course, warning that "the shockwaves of annexation will last for decades, and will be extremely damaging to Israel, as well as to the Palestinians". "The precise consequences of annexation cannot be predicted," she said. "But they are likely to be disastrous for the Palestinians, for Israel itself, and for the wider region."

The UN rights chief warned that "any attempt to annex any part of the occupied Palestinian territory

will not only seriously damage efforts to achieve lasting peace in the region, it is likely to entrench, perpetuate and further heighten serious human rights violations that have characterized the conflict for decades."

Her statement cautioned that such a move would almost certainly lead to increased restrictions on Palestinians' right to freedom of movement, as their population centers would become enclaves. In addition, significant tracts of private land would likely be illegally expropriated, and even in cases where this does not occur, many Palestinians could lose access to cultivate their own lands.

And Palestinians who found themselves living inside the annexed areas would likely experience greater difficulty accessing essential services like healthcare and education, while humanitarian access could also be blocked.

Bachelet's office warned that Palestinians inside the annexed area would come under heavy pressure to move out, pointing out that entire communities currently not recognized under Israeli planning would be at high risk of "forcible transfer". And settlements, which are already recognized as a clear violation of international law, would almost certainly expand. "This is a highly combustible mix," Bachelet said.

"I am deeply concerned that even the most minimalist form of annexation would lead to increased violence and loss of life, as walls are erected, security forces deployed and the two populations brought into closer proximity." The UN rights chief warned that "the existing two-tier system of law in the same territory will become embedded, with devastating impacts on the lives of Palestinians who have little or no access to legal remedy".

Bachelet said illegal annexation would not change Israel's obligations under international law as an occupying power towards the occupied population. "Instead, it will grievously harm the prospect of a two-state solution, undercut the possibilities of a renewal of negotiations, and perpetuate the serious existing human rights and international humanitarian law violations we witness today." — AFP

Six killed in attack on Pak ...

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pool of blood near the exchange. Karachi was once a hotspot for crime and violence, with heavily armed groups tied to politicians frequently gunning down opponents and launching attacks on

residential areas. But the situation has largely stabilized in recent years following operations by security agencies against armed political outfits and Islamist militants.

Militant groups still retain the ability to launch periodic attacks in many rural areas and occasionally in urban centers. Yesterday's attack comes more than a week after a grenade was thrown at a line of people waiting outside a government welfare office in the city, killing one and injuring eight others, according to a statement from municipal authorities. — AFP