



Myanmar police fire rubber bullets as UN envoy breaks ranks

By targeting schools, Nigerian kidnappers put country at risk

Page 6

Page 7



ALGIERS: Algerian anti-government protesters take part in a demonstration in the capital on Friday. —AFP

Algeria anti-govt protesters hit streets

Hirak pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after year-long hiatus

ALGIERS, Algeria: Thousands of anti-government protesters took to the streets across Algeria on Friday, as the "Hirak" pro-democracy movement gathers renewed momentum after a year-long hiatus due to the coronavirus pandemic. Despite a ban on gatherings over COVID-19, crowds rallied in several neighborhoods of the capital Algiers in the early afternoon after Friday prayers and marched toward the city center.

"It's awesome. It's like the big Friday Hirak protests," one demonstrator said. The Hirak protests were sparked in Feb 2019 over president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, and the long-time leader was forced from power in April that year. Demonstrators kept up weekly protests after Bouteflika's resignation, demanding a sweeping overhaul of a ruling system in place since Algeria's independence from France in 1962.

They only suspended protests last March due to coronavirus restrictions, but calls have recently circulated on social media for a return to the streets. On Thursday, rallying cries online also included calls for everyone to wear masks at the protest, after many had not at a Monday demonstration to mark the second

anniversary of the Hirak protests that also drew thousands. Many people still went unmasked on Friday.

Familiar slogans

Protesters were met by security forces with truncheons and fired tear gas when a crowd forced its way through a police barrier to reach the Grand Post Office, the main Algiers rallying point of the Hirak protests, footage posted on the Interligne news site showed. From the morning, police vans had taken up positions near main squares in the city center and roadblocks were set up on several major roads leading into the capital.

As if no time had passed since the last Friday demonstration in 2020, the crowds were full of the same flags and slogans. Cries rang out of "The people want the fall of the regime", "Free and democratic Algeria" and "Civil state, not military state"—referring to the military establishment that holds sway over Algerian politics. "Neither Islamist nor secular, but Hirakist," read a banner carried by protesters, with others shouting "peaceful", underlining the non-violent nature of the movement.

"We will not go backwards," called out a group of women on the margins of the march in Algiers, before the demonstrations broke up calmly in the late afternoon. Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune - elected in Dec 2019 on a very low turnout in a poll boycotted by the protest movement - has made several bids to head off renewed rallies.

On the eve of the Hirak anniversary on Monday, he announced a limited government reshuffle and signed a decree dissolving parliament, clearing the way for early elections, though no date has yet been set. In another gesture of appeasement last week, he announced pardons that have led so far to the release of dozens of pro-democracy activists, including journalist Khaled Drareni, who has become a symbol of the struggle for a free press.

'Determination and commitment'

Hirak supporters were unimpressed by his call for early polls and the reshuffle, seeing the new government as little different from the one Bouteflika headed for two decades. "You have stirred in our hearts a

revolution that can only be extinguished with your departure," demonstrators chanted on Friday. For Algerian League for Human Rights vice-president Said Salhi, the new march "confirms the irreversible return and willingness to continue the Hirak with the same determination and commitment to the demands, including... a genuine change of the system."

Outside the capital, rallies were also held in the cities of Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou in the northeastern Kabylie region, as well as in eastern Bordj Bou Arreridj and northwestern Oran, where human rights activist and academic Kaddour Chouicha was arrested, according to prisoners' rights group CNLD. He was released later in the day.

Salhi said in a Facebook post nearly 500 people had been arrested across the country, of which the majority were later released. Amnesty International this week accused the Algerian authorities of a coordinated strategy to silence critics, based on an investigation it carried out on the cases of 73 activists who were "arbitrarily arrested" and prosecuted. —AFP

Negev Bedouin: Israel's vaccine blind spot

TEL ARAD: Deep in the Negev desert, Bedouin residents of a village deemed illegal by Israel say more houses have been demolished than people vaccinated, despite the Jewish state's world-beating coronavirus inoculation drive. "No one is vaccinated here," said Adnan Al-Abari, a maintenance worker at the school in Tel Arad. Israel is a global leader in coronavirus vaccinations per capita, having administered both recommended jabs of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine to roughly a third of its nine million citizens.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said authorities are on track to fully inoculate the entire over-16 population by the end of next month. But in the "illegal" Bedouin villages in the arid Negev desert of southern Israel, the vaccination rate is around two percent, according to official data. Tel Arad residents say they have not been visited by a single health worker since the pandemic began. But demolition orders have continued to arrive, targeting houses built without impossible-to-obtain permits. "Here there are more houses destroyed than people vaccinated by Israel," Abari said.

'It does not exist'

Bedouin have lived in the Negev desert for generations, but under Israeli rule have become marginalized and often live in poverty. The Jewish state's effort to transfer Bedouin to recognized towns has fuelled tensions. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel says Tel Arad, which has no electricity or running water, is just one of dozens of unrecognized Bedouin villages in the region.

"Everything that currently exists in the village is



NEGEV: A woman collects firewood in the unrecognized Bedouin village of Tel Arad, which has no electricity or running water, in the Negev desert on Feb 24, 2021. —AFP

illegal and cannot be legalized because the law alleges that it does not exist," the association said. "Residents of the unrecognized villages cannot receive building permits, and the structures in the villages are accordingly designated as 'unauthorized,'" it added.

Abari said that a neighbor's house was recently torn down, reduced to a pile of dust and twisted metal. "Look at this house," he said, pointing to a separate canary-yellow cottage he said had also received a recent demolition notice. "It will be demolished next month." The father of five told AFP that Israel had not sent "anyone to explain the (coronavirus) crisis or to help us."

Tel Arad, where goats scour the rocky hillside for blades of grass, does not have reliable Internet access, making pandemic coping strategies like remote schooling impossible. Abari said his 12-year-old son Youssef had not had a lesson in more than a year. Yet the demolitions have continued.

Patchy web access hasn't stopped anti-vaccine conspiracy theories spreading via WhatsApp, text message or word of mouth. In Tel Arad, many fear that the job will alter their genes, make them sterile or even contain a microchip allowing Israeli security services to track their movements. —AFP

allegedly committed while behind bars. In a practice dubbed by the country's legal and activist community as "recycling" or "rotation", inmates can end up in detention indefinitely - even after a court has ordered their release.

Solafa Magdy, 33, a journalist, and her husband Hossam El-Sayed, a photojournalist, were arrested in November 2019 from a cafe in an upmarket Cairo suburb along with a mutual friend. All three were charged with joining a terror group and publishing false news. In August last year, Magdy was slapped with new charges of misusing social media while in custody, although she

Once ravaged by IS, Iraq's Sinjar caught in new tug-of-war

BAGHDAD: Nearly six years since Iraq's Sinjar region was recaptured from jihadists, a tangled web of geopolitical tensions risks sparking a new conflict that could prolong the dire situation of minority Yazidis. The Islamic State group overran Sinjar in 2014 and pursued a brutal, months-long campaign of massacres, enslavement and rape against Yazidis in what the UN has said could amount to genocide.

Sinjar is wedged between Turkey to the north and Syria to the west, making it a highly strategic zone long coveted by both the central government in Baghdad and autonomous Kurdish authorities of the north. The tensions have terrified the few Yazidis who returned to their ruined towns, only to face the specter of a new displacement.

"We're living in the middle of so many different threats," said one of them, 46-year-old Faisal Saleh. "Sinjar's people are terrified that clashes will break out," he told AFP as he drove from his hometown in Sinjar into the adjacent Kurdish region to rent an apartment in case he needed to flee an escalation.

Sinjar was retaken from IS in 2015 by fighters from the autonomous Kurdistan region's Peshmerga and from Syrian Kurdish units, backed by the US-led coalition. Iran-backed units from within the Iraqi Hashed al-Shaabi network of militias also took surrounding territory. This fractious patchwork of forces delayed Sinjar's revival: The federal government had barely any presence there and international aid groups were wary of investing.

In an effort to kick-start reconstruction and get displaced Yazidis home, the Sinjar Agreement reached in October stipulated that the only arms in the area should be those of the federal government. But it has yet to be implemented.

had no access to a phone.

"My daughter has been charged in two cases, which is a travesty in its own right. This is not normal," Taghreed Zahran, Solafa's mother and carer for the couple's son Khaled, told AFP. "I want this nightmare to end. We want to wake up and live our lives. What we're going through is surreal," she added, choking back tears.

Amnesty International has said Magdy was forced to undergo a pelvic examination which led to heavy bleeding and that she was strip-searched as well as violently beaten by prison guards. "My heart breaks for her all the

'Explosion at any time'

"The reality on the ground is stronger than let these agreements. No one in Sinjar wants to let go of the influence they've earned there," said Yassin Tah, an analyst based in the region. "Sinjar today is a zone that brings together all the conflicting agendas and rival parties of the region. It's in a very complicated and tense situation - and that could lead to an explosion at any time," he told AFP.

On the one hand, the autonomous Kurdish regional government (KRG) claims Sinjar is within its zone of control. The KRG is irked by the presence of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a rival faction operating in north Iraq for decades and whose Syrian branch helped fight IS in Sinjar. The PKK's role also infuriates Ankara, which calls it a "terrorist" group for its decades-long insurgency in Turkey and has crossed into Iraq to bomb the PKK. "Turkey is watching Sinjar - and it's seeing the PKK grow more powerful there," said Tah, the analyst.

In January, Ankara upped the ante, bombing a mountainous region close to Sinjar and hinting it could invade. "We may come there overnight, all of a sudden," warned President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan's veiled threat, in turn, gave an excuse to pro-Iran Hashed factions to insist on staying in Sinjar. The Hashed swiftly announced sending new fighters to Sinjar while one of its hardline members, Asaib Ahl al-Haq said it would "block any aggressive behavior" by Turkey.

Tah said the quick mobilization was an effort to defend the Hashed's crucial smuggling route between Iraq and Syria, which crosses through Sinjar. A top Iraqi military official in Nineveh province, where Sinjar is located, even admitted the rivalries, saying Turkey, armed groups and rival Kurds were all trying to "secure their interests via Sinjar". Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has rushed to defuse the tensions, with a top official in his office telling AFP there was ongoing contact with Turkey to try to hold off an incursion. —AFP

time," Zahran said, bemoaning the open-ended system of pre-trial detentions that keeps people behind bars for years. "How is it that a mother enters prison and her son is seven years old, then when she's supposedly freed he'll be a teenager?"

Rights groups estimate about 60,000 political prisoners are being held in Egyptian jails, in a crackdown on dissent. Mai El-Sadany, legal director at Washington-based think-tank Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, sees the trend of extended pre-trial detention as "a punitive measure" by security forces to silence opposition. —AFP

Egypt detainees languish in jail with 'no end in sight'

CAIRO: Already faced with the prospect of spending several years in overcrowded and often violent jails, Egypt's political prisoners are often charged with crimes they