

International

Residents, activists cry foul over stinking garbage in Tunisia's Sfax

Mountains of uncollected garbage litter the streets

SFAX: Residents and activists in Tunisia's industrial hub of Sfax are warning of an "environmental catastrophe" as mountains of uncollected garbage litter the streets of the Mediterranean port city. "The situation is catastrophic," Mohamed Boujalabane, a resident of Sfax, Tunisia's second city with a population of over one million said. "We can't have a normal life any more, there's garbage everywhere and we're afraid for the health of our children and families," he said, a mask covering his face. For the past 40 days, the trash has piled up in the streets, attracting clouds of flies, even around hospitals and schools.



SFAX, Tunisia: Photo shows a view of sacks and boxes of garbage piling up along the side of a street in the centre of the coastal city of Sfax, about 270 kilometers southeast of Tunisia's capital. — AFP



'Environmental catastrophe'

And the stench is unbearable. "We've complained to the municipality but so far they've done nothing!" Rabeh Abid, a butcher, said angrily. Hamdi Chebaane, a waste management expert and environmental activist with Tunisie Verte, said the garbage woes started after authorities closed the province's main landfill at Aguerieb in late September. Since then, he said, "the municipality has refused to collect the rubbish unless the government" finds a solution. As a result, the region faces "an environmental catastrophe", warned Chebaane.

'Toxic waste'

Local media reports said the landfill was closed

following protests by residents who charged that "toxic waste" was also being dumped at the site, where only household rubbish is allowed. Environment Minister Leila Chikhaoui travelled to Sfax in October to discuss the crisis with city officials. She proposed the toxic waste be moved to a temporary landfill away from urban and residential areas in Sfax. But local residents rejected any such temporary solution. Tunisia, which is home to 12 million people, has repeatedly struggled with waste management problems.

Around 2.5 million tons of waste is collected annually, international experts say, and the majority is dumped in landfills without being treated, recycled or incinerated. According to a recent World Bank report,

just 61 percent of waste in the capital Tunis is collected and most ends up in open-air landfills. Authorities have tried since Tunisia's 2011 revolution to try to crack down on illegal waste dumps but they have limited means to enforce rules.

Divisions among cabinet ministries have also sparked rows between the government and local officials, especially over who should collect toxic waste from places such as hospitals. In 2020, the North African nation was hit by a scandal involving hundreds of containers of waste shipped from Italy. They were declared to be carrying plastic for industrial recycling — but were instead filled with mixed, putrid household waste, which is barred from import under Tunisian law. — AFP



OUIJDA, Morocco: Moroccans gather along the border with Algeria in the region of Oujda. Algeria has accused its arch-rival Morocco of killing three Algerians on a desert highway, as tensions escalate between the neighbors over the contested Western Sahara. — AFP

Morocco king says Western Sahara 'not negotiable'

RABAT: Morocco's King Mohamed VI said Saturday that Western Sahara is "not negotiable", as tensions flared with Algeria over the disputed territory. "Today as in the past, Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara will never be up for negotiation," the king said in a televised speech. Morocco sees the former Spanish colony as its own sovereign territory while Algeria backs Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement in the conflict. "If we engage in negotiations, it is essentially in order to reach a peaceful solution to this artificial regional conflict," the king said.

On Wednesday, Algeria accused Morocco of killing three Algerian civilians on a desert highway through a Polisario-held area of the territory in a strike on their trucks. Morocco has not officially commented on the accusation, but an informed source from the kingdom said "it has never targeted and will never target Algerian citizens, regardless of the circumstances and the provocations". "If Algeria wants war, Morocco doesn't," said the source, who requested anonymity.

The Western Sahara, 80 percent of which is con-

trolled by Morocco, boasts extensive phosphate reserves and rich Atlantic fishing grounds. Algeria has long hosted and supported the Polisario Front, which seeks full independence for the territory and has demanded a UN-supervised self-determination referendum as provided for in a 1991 ceasefire deal. In November, the Polisario declared the truce "null and void" after Moroccan forces broke up a blockade of a highway into Mauritania, that the independence movement said was built in violation of the ceasefire.

'Hostile actions'

The Polisario has since launched multiple attacks on Moroccan forces, killing six Moroccan soldiers, according to an informed Moroccan source. Tensions between Morocco and Algeria further escalated in August, when the latter broke off diplomatic ties with Rabat citing "hostile actions" — charges denied by Morocco.

In December last year, Morocco normalized diplomatic ties with Israel as part of the so-called US-backed Abraham Accords while the administration of president Donald Trump recognized the kingdom's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Last Sunday, Algeria ordered state energy firm Sonatrach to stop using a pipeline that traverses Morocco for gas exportations to Spain. To stake Morocco's claim, the current king's father, Hassan II, sent 350,000 civilian volunteers on the iconic Green March into the territory in 1975. Saturday's speech by the king marked its 46th anniversary. — AFP

Why is Western Sahara conflict heating up?

TUNIS: The long-frozen Western Sahara conflict pitting Morocco against the Polisario Front independence movement has flared in recent months, worsening already tense relations between the kingdom and its Polisario-backing neighbor, Algeria. The killing of three Algerians on a highway through the territory, in what Algiers says was a Moroccan strike, has raised fears of escalation. So what is at stake, and what are the risks?

How do things stand?

A former Spanish colony with extensive phosphate reserves and rich Atlantic fishing grounds, the Western Sahara is seen by Morocco as its own sovereign territory. To stake Morocco's claim, the current king's father, Hassan II, sent 350,000 civilian volunteers on the iconic Green March into the territory in 1975 - 46 years ago this Saturday. Shortly afterwards, Spain withdrew, leaving Morocco and fellow claimant Mauritania to fight it out with the Polisario Front, which proclaimed a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, with support from Algeria, a state with strong anti-colonial roots.

A 15-year war ensued during which Mauritania sued for peace but Morocco gradually overran 80 percent of the territory before a UN-monitored ceasefire took effect in 1991. The ceasefire deal envisaged a UN-supervised self-determination referendum for the territory with all options on the table but Morocco has since rejected any vote that includes independence as an option, offering only limited autonomy instead.

In December last year, Morocco normalized diplomatic relations with Israel and as a quid pro quo, the US administration of Donald Trump recognized the kingdom's sovereignty over Western Sahara. That came just weeks after the Polisario declared the 1991 ceasefire null and void, after Moroccan forces entered no man's land to break a blockade by Sahrawi activists of a highway linking Moroccan-controlled territory with Mauritania. The Polisario says that both the highway and the military incursion violated the decades-old truce. "We are facing a pattern of escalation," said Dalia Ghanem, a resident scholar and Algeria specialist at the Carnegie Middle East Center. — AFP



LOURDES: Catholic Church bishops kneel as a sign of penance during a ceremony at the sanctuary of Lourdes towards victims of pedocriminality in Lourdes, south-western France. — AFP

France's bishops kneel in penance of Church abuse

LOURDES, France: Senior members of France's Catholic hierarchy knelt in a show of penance at the shrine of Lourdes Saturday, a day after bishops accepted the church's responsibility for decades of child abuse. But some of the victims of the abuse - and lay members supporting them - said they were still waiting for details of compensation and of a comprehensive reform of the church. In Lourdes, a place of pilgrimage for Christians worldwide, some 120 archbishops, bishops and laymen gathered at the unveiling of a photo showing a sculpture representing the head of a weeping child.

At the request of the victims, the clerics did not wear their religious clothing for the ceremony. The wall featuring the photograph will serve as a "place of memory" for the victims. The photo itself was taken by one of the victims of abuse, and the suffering he had endured was detailed in a passage read out by another survivor. At Saturday's ceremony, Hugues de Woillemont, spokesman for the Bishops' Conference of France, said: "We want to mark this place of Lourdes for a first visual testimony that commemorates so much violence, drama and attacks."

Just a day earlier, following a vote at their annual conference, France's bishops finally formally accepted that the Catholic church bore an "institutional responsibility" in the many thousands of child abuse cases. The abuse, stretching back to the 1950s and affecting at least 216,000 minors, was detailed in an independent report released a month ago, which spoke of the "veil of silence" cast over the scandal. The conference also acknowledged that the church had allowed the abuses to become "systemic", said Eric de Moulins-Beaufort,

president of the France's Conference of Bishops of France (CEF). One victim of abuse, Veronique Garnier, said she had been moved by the ceremony. Garnier, who has worked closely with the CEF, said it was important that justice be done for the victims. But Father Jean-Marie Delbos, who as a child was a victim of abuse, angrily dismissed the ceremony. "The repentance, it's a sham," the 75-year-old priest said of the ceremony. Speaking to journalists he called for the priest who had abused him to be punished and defrocked. — AFP

News in brief

Iran sentences pair to death

TEHRAN: Iran's Supreme Court has upheld death sentences for adultery against a 27-year-old and his 33-year-old lover after the man's father-in-law denied them clemency, a reformist newspaper reported Saturday. The man's wife, who presented police with video evidence of her husband's infidelity early this year, had asked the courts to spare the pair the death penalty, the Shargh daily said. But her father demanded that the death sentence be imposed and the court found in his favor, the paper added. Iranian law provides that if a victim's family forgives the accused in a capital crime, the convict can be either pardoned or given a jail sentence. Under the interpretation of Islamic sharia law in force since Iran's 1979 revolution, adultery is punishable by stoning. But Tehran changed the law in 2013 to allow judges to order an alternative method of execution, usually hanging. — AFP

150 Houthis rebels killed

RIYADH: The Saudi-led military coalition in Yemen said Saturday it has killed more than 150 more Houthi rebels in the past 24 hours in raids around the northern pro-government bastion of Marib. The coalition, which backs Yemen's internationally recognized government, has reported near-daily strikes over the past month against the Iran-backed Houthis, each time claiming high losses. The rebels, who have for months waged an offensive against Marib, rarely comment on losses. AFP cannot independently verify the Saudi tolls that total more than 2,000 dead in air strikes since October. "Fourteen military vehicles were destroyed and more than 157 terrorist elements eliminated" in the latest raids, the coalition said in a statement carried by the Saudi state news agency SPA. — AFP

Six dead in mine blast

ALMATY: Six workers died and two more were in "critical condition" yesterday after a methane explosion at an ArcelorMittal mine in Kazakhstan, the company and the emergencies ministry said. A sudden blast took place yesterday morning at the Abaiskaya coal mine operated by ArcelorMittal Temirtau, a Kazakh unit of the steel giant in the Central Asian country's industrial Karaganda region. Sixty four workers were in the mine at the time of the accident, and 56 were able to get out. "Six people died (and) two were injured," the emergencies ministry said in a statement. ArcelorMittal said the accident had taken place due to an "outburst" of gas and coal. The company said the two injured workers were in "critical condition." A government commission headed by Emergencies Minister Yury Ilyin was dispatched to the scene. — AFP

US orders diplomats out

ADDIS ABABA: The US said it had ordered all of its non-essential diplomats and their families to leave Ethiopia, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed urged people to make sacrifices to fend off rebels threatening to advance on the capital. Nine rebel groups said on Friday they would join forces in an alliance built around the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which has been locked in a year-long war that has killed thousands and pushed many more into famine-like conditions. Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, sent troops into Tigray in November last year to topple the TPLF, accusing them of attacking military bases. The US State Department said it had "ordered the departure of non-emergency US government employees and their family members" on Friday, and it was also urging all other US nationals to leave. — AFP

Sudan protesters block streets

KHARTOUM: Sudanese anti-coup demonstrators built street barricades in and around the capital overnight Saturday following calls for civil disobedience to protest last month's military coup. Activists were seen working in darkness to pile up bricks and large slabs to block streets in Khartoum and neighboring cities, according to witnesses and AFP correspondents. Their preparation followed calls for civil disobedience made by the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), an umbrella of unions which were instrumental in the 2018-2019 protests which ousted the longtime autocratic president Omar Al-Bashir. The SPA circulated its appeals via text messages to bypass internet outages since October 25, the day of the putsch. "The Sudanese people have rejected the military coup," the SPA said on Twitter, vowing "no negotiation, no partnership, no legitimacy". — AFP