

## International

## Nigerians protest a year after bloody EndSARS crackdown

## ‘EndSARS, remember them, remember them’

LAGOS: Nigerian youths held memorial protests in Lagos and Abuja yesterday, one year after security forces violently suppressed mass protests against police brutality and bad governance. Under heavy police watch, dozens of protesters rallied in a procession of cars waving green and white national flags from windows at the Lekki tollgate in Lagos, the site of the crackdown on last year's #EndSARS demonstrations. Police briefly fired tear gas at the end of the protests at Lekki where they had allowed the car procession to pass through the tollgate with protesters blasting horns and chanting for justice.

“People united can never be defeated”

At least six people were arrested at Lekki, according to an AFP correspondent at the scene. “EndSARS, remember them, remember them,” shouted one man from inside a police van after he was detained. Last year's rallies began over brutality by the SARS special police unit but snowballed into protests over bad governance in the largest mass demonstrations in Nigeria's modern history. They came to a halt after October 20, 2020, when security forces shot at thousands of peaceful protesters gathered at the Lekki tollgate in Lagos.

Several dozen protesters also gathered in Abuja yesterday to mark the one-year anniversary, chanting “The people united can never be defeated”. “We came here for the memorial. It's very sad what happened. We are

here to tell Nigerians and the world that we are still in pain,” said actress Princess Joy, 23, at the Abuja rally. “We are not worried, this time is going to be peaceful, no fight, no quarrel, no nothing, except if the government wants.” At some southern cities including Port Harcourt and Nsukka, candle-lit marches are set for the evening.

## ‘Fallen heroes’

The crackdown at Lekki tollgate was live-streamed on social media and Amnesty International has since said it has confirmed that at least 10 people were killed. The Nigerian army denied shooting live rounds, telling a judicial panel only blanks were used to disperse a crowd that had violated a curfew. Information Minister Lai Mohammed yesterday dismissed what he called the “phantom massacre” at Lekki, criticizing Amnesty and US network CNN for “shamelessly” continuing to report unproven deaths. “One year later, and despite ample opportunities for the families of those allegedly killed and those alleging a massacre to present evidence, there has been none: No bodies, no families, no convincing evidence, nothing,” he told reporters.

The protest movement is named after the social media hashtag #EndSARS, a reference to the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit that was later disbanded. Nigerian singer Falz, who has over eight million followers on Instagram, was among those who planned rallies in Lagos. “It is impossible for us not to memorialize our fallen heroes,” Falz wrote. “We will never ever forget.” “Innocent Nigerian citizens waved flags and sang till they were shot at, injured and killed.”

Recent weeks have seen multiple warnings against more EndSARS protests by the authorities, who say they turned into rioting and pillaging last year. According to Amnesty, at least 56 people died nationwide during the weeks of protests in 2020. Police



ABUJA: Protesters gather with placards in their hand, during a protest to commemorate one year anniversary of EndSars, a protest movement against police brutality at the Unity Fountain in Abuja yesterday. — AFP

reported 51 civilians and 22 officers killed in and around the demonstrations, with 205 police stations and other buildings set ablaze or vandalized. In February, several dozen protesters gathered at the Lekki tollgate to demand justice for the victims of the crackdown. All the protesters were arrested.

## ‘Culture of impunity’

In a new report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said Tuesday that victims were still awaiting justice. It said it had interviewed 54 people, including victims and their family members, protesters, civil society members, doc-

tors and journalists. The rights group was unable to confirm a death toll but witnesses told researchers they saw “what appeared to be at least 15 lifeless bodies and that military officers had taken away at least 11.”

“Failure to pursue justice will strengthen the culture of impunity and reinforce the perceptions that brought protesters to the streets in the first place,” said HRW researcher Anietie Ewang. Nigeria set up the judicial panel last year to investigate the bloodshed and wider allegations of police abuses. Public hearings ended on Monday and its findings should shortly go to the government. — AFP



PORT SUDAN: Photo shows an elevated view of the southern port of Port Sudan along the Red Sea in the country's northeast, with the Agricultural Bank of Sudan Grain Silos (left). — AFP

## Sudan's Red Sea ports coveted by regional powers

SUAKIN: From Washington to Moscow, Tehran to Ankara, Sudan's strategic Red Sea ports, blockaded for a month by protesters, have long been eyed by global powers far beyond Africa's borders. Blessed with natural resources such as gold and rich in maritime biodiversity, the picturesque region of white sands and mangroves stretches some 714 kilometers - from Sudan's borders with Egypt in the north to Eritrea in the south.

“Sudan's Red Sea ports are a trade hub for neighboring landlocked countries like Chad, Ethiopia and central Africa,” Ahmed Mahgoub, head of Port Sudan's southern terminal, told AFP. But traffic through Sudan's main maritime nerve centre Port Sudan has been paralyzed since anti-government protests broke out in mid-September amid disenchantment with the region's political and economic marginalization.

So since October much of the trade has been rerouted via other regional ports, mostly in Egypt. The protests are just the latest chapter in decades of intense tribal and factional infighting driven in part by Sudan's shifting political alliances under ousted president Omar Al-Bashir. He was deposed in April 2019 after mass protests against his three-decade iron-fisted rule. Demonstrators say they oppose an October 2020 peace deal between Sudan's post-Bashir transi-

tional government and rebel groups as “it does not represent” them.

## Militarily strategic

The protests in the east have also triggered unrest in the capital Khartoum, where pro-military demonstrations erupted on Saturday demanding the dissolution of the embattled transitional government. But for foreign powers who covet Sudan's Red Sea coast, the region has strategic military dimensions. It hosted Iranian fleets for decades under Bashir, to the dismay of Tehran's regional rival Saudi Arabia, whose Red Sea port of Jeddah lies opposite Port Sudan on the other side of the waterway.

And in 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Bashir negotiated the building of a naval base in Port Sudan, to be staffed by up to 300 military and civilian personnel and to include nuclear-powered vessels. That same year Bashir also signed a 99-year lease for the island of Suakin with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a move that angered Egypt and other rival Sunni Muslim powerhouses worried about Ankara's spreading regional influence. The deal provides for building maintenance, docks for ships and renovating Ottoman-era edifices on the island.

Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II is said to have dubbed Suakin the “white city” as it is home to spectacular buildings made of porous coralline limestone quarried from coral reef. Suakin is one of many Red Sea islands held by Sudan which analysts see as “integral to the country's national security”. The islands cover a total area of 23,100 square kilometers, equivalent to the size of Djibouti, said Shaimaa Abdelsameea, a professor at the Red Sea University. — AFP

had an income of 120,000 SDG (\$300). Now I am struggling to buy food.”

The demonstrations began when key eastern tribes opposing the transitional government in Khartoum blocked roads and stopped shipments at the Red Sea port. They are calling for the cancellation of parts of an October 2020 peace deal signed between the government and rebel groups. The deal, which includes a section on east Sudan, is viewed by protesters as “not representing” them. Similar protests broke out in the past, but they were brief and on a smaller scale.

“Some 60 percent of trade passes through Port Sudan with an average of 1,200 containers daily,” said Ahmed Mahgoub, head of the southern terminal of Port Sudan. “We are losing hundreds of thousands of dollars by the day,” he told AFP. The government has said life-saving medicines, IV fluids and crucial commodities such as wheat and fuel are already running low. Local bakeries in Khartoum and elsewhere across Sudan have been shuttered due to the shortages.

Sudan has been grappling with deep economic woes that worsened following the April 2019 ouster of president Omar al-Bashir after mass protests against his rule, themselves triggered by financial hardship.

## Neglected eastern Sudan tribes in ‘quest for justice’

PORT SUDAN: Under the harsh rule of ex-president Omar Al-Bashir, Sudan's eastern tribes felt abandoned and neglected, even taking up arms against him. But two years after his ouster, they remain marginalized and economically deprived. For millennia, the tribes living between the borders with Egypt and Eritrea have enjoyed a unique culture, with traditional dress, houses and food.

Sudan's eastern communities largely belong to the ethnic Beja people who inhabit rocky terrains in the states of Gedaref and Kassala. They have followed a nomadic life as cattle herders and farmers, wandering the lands between the banks of the Nile to the west and the Red Sea coast to the east. “The Beja have always been averse to urban life,” said Moussa Saeed, a sociology professor at Red Sea University. Today around 90 percent still lead a rural existence living in simple huts covered with jute “despite its harshness”, he added.

For more than a decade under Bashir, the eastern communities were part of the armed struggle against his government protesting against economic neglect, marginalization and disenfranchisement. In late 2018, they joined nationwide demonstrations against Bashir's rule that eventually led to his ouster in April 2019. But in recent weeks, they have been among protesters blockading the country's main seaport in Port Sudan and a key route leading to Khartoum, severely straining the already struggling economy.



SAWAKIN: A Sudanese man walks beneath an arch at a dilapidated building in the abandoned ancient island of Suakin in eastern Sudan - home to spectacular buildings made of porous limestone quarried from coral reef. — AFP

Now many ordinary Sudanese citizens are struggling to make ends meet. “We spend hours looking for bread, but all the bakeries are closed because of short wheat supply,” said 17-year-old tea vendor Ashgan, outside a bakery in northern Khartoum. “This is the last thing we needed. We're already suffering”.

## ‘No plan to end crisis’

The knock-on effects have spread nationwide. On Sunday, protests erupted in South Darfur following bread shortages due to low wheat supplies linked to the Port Sudan closure. Sudanese economist Mohamed Al-Nayer blamed the government's failure “to promptly address the crisis in the east” exacerbating an already complex economic situation. “Like Bashir's regime, the government has no plan or even strategic reserves to cover the country's needs,” he added.

Port Sudan received only 27 ships in September, down from 65 in August, according to the country's cargo association. Other smaller ports in the east, including Osman Digna in Suakin city, have also been blocked. Last week, Trade Minister Ali Geddo told AFP that businessmen had been forced to redirect shipments to other ports since early October. Some

33,000 port workers and others who work in customs and shipping offices have had no income since the closure, the association added.

This has coincided with futile efforts by the transitional government to pull the country out of economic misery caused by decades-long mismanagement and US sanctions under Bashir. In recent months, it has embarked on IMF-backed economic reforms including scrapping diesel and petrol subsidies, as well as declaring a managed float of the Sudanese pound to stem a rampant black market. And the country is still reeling from a triple-digit inflation rate which only slightly eased in August and September.

Sudan has also been gripped by a bitter and deepening political divide among key factions steering the transition under an August 2019 power-sharing deal. On Friday, Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok described it as the “worst and most dangerous” chapter facing the transition. He cited splits among civilians and the military sharing the running of the sovereign ruling council, as well as factional infighting among themselves. Several civilian politicians have also blamed the military for the crisis in the east and a failed coup attempt in September. — AFP