

## International

# Crisis-hit Lebanon hits new lows, years after mega-blast

## Lebanon's ruling class accused of misrule, graft and gross negligence

BEIRUT: Crisis-hit Lebanon marked two years Thursday since a massive port explosion ripped through Beirut, with victims' relatives planning protest marches and the country bracing for silos to collapse at the blast site. The dockside blast of haphazardly stored ammonium nitrate, one of history's biggest non-nuclear explosions, killed more than 200 people, wounded thousands and decimated vast areas of the capital. Yet an investigation into the cause has been stalled amid political interference and no state official has yet been held accountable over the August 4, 2020 tragedy, prompting rights defenders and some victims' families to demand an international probe.

Several heavily damaged grain silos that became a grim symbol of the disaster collapsed last week, and more are dangerously close to coming down, with chunks already falling on Thursday, AFP correspondents reported. French civil engineer Emmanuel Durand, who monitors the silos with sensors, told AFP that four more towers could come crumbling down "at any time". "I hope that seeing the silos fall will give people the will to fight for justice, to battle with us," said Tatiana Hasrouty, who lost her father in the blast.

Politicians "are doing everything in their power to stop the investigation" into the explosion, she said. The mega-blast was a nightmarish moment in the chaotic history of Lebanon, which is mired in its worst-ever economic crisis marked by blackouts, runaway inflation and widespread despair. When protesters from three separate marches converge at the port, they will smell the smoke wafting from the silos where fermenting grain is

smouldering in the blistering summer heat.

### 'A nightmare'

The enormous explosion two years ago was felt as far away as Zionist entity and Cyprus and sowed the kind of devastation normally caused by wars and natural disasters. It further scarred the crisis-tested population and accelerated a massive exodus that recalls the flight from the 1975-1990 civil war. Lebanon's ruling class, accused of misrule, graft and gross negligence, has however clung firmly to power even as the people endure shortages of fuel, medicines and clean water. "This ruling class is killing us every day," Hasrouty said. "If we did not die in the blast, we are dying of hunger, from a lack of basic human rights."

Power cuts last up to 23 hours a day, streets are dark at night and traffic lights out of service, leaving some districts illuminated mainly by the silo fires. Lara Khatchikian, 51, whose apartment was badly hit two years ago, has watched the blazes, calling the sight "a nightmare". "I have felt fear, we couldn't sleep," she said. "It takes superhuman strength to live when you are constantly reminded of the blast."

### 'Deliver justice'

The government in April ordered the silos' demolition, but this has been suspended, partially because of objections from victims' relatives who want them preserved as a memorial. Meanwhile, the probe is also at risk of falling apart, as officials close to the powerful Hezbollah movement have curtailed the work of the lead investigator Tarek Bitar with a series of lawsuits.

A judicial official close to the investigation said

nuclear program in exchange for a gradual lifting of sanctions.

But following the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018 under former president Donald Trump and the re-imposition of US sanctions, Tehran has backtracked on its obligations. Iran subsequently exceeded the JCPOA's uranium enrichment rate of 3.67 percent, rising to 20 percent in early 2021. It then crossed an unprecedented 60-percent threshold, getting closer to the 90 percent needed to make a bomb. The head of the UN nuclear watchdog, Rafael Grossi, on Tuesday warned Iran's program was "moving ahead very, very fast" and "growing in ambition and capacity".

Ahead of Thursday's talks, officials expressed cautious optimism, all the while cautioning that the parties remained far apart on key issues. These include sanctions, Iranian demands for guarantees and the end of a probe by the UN nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The head of the US delegation, Rob Malley, and the head of Tehran's representatives, Ali Bagheri, said on Twitter ahead of the talks that they were coming in good faith but put the onus on each other. Analysts meanwhile said reviving the JCPOA remained the best option. "The last thing the United States needs is a nuclear crisis with Iran that could easily escalate to a broader regional conflict," Suzanne DiMaggio, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said in a statement.

Ellie Geranmayeh, an analyst at the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), said that "at the end of the day, Tehran and Washington know the alternatives to a JCPOA collapse are terrible." "This is unlikely to be a meeting that resolves the outstanding issues" but "it could create the breakthrough necessary to push the talks towards a finishing line rather than a collapse," she said. — AFP

be observed. In this context, he hailed the IAEA's role and technical cooperation programs that contribute to building the national capabilities of developing countries and ensuring peaceful nuclear technology.

Proceeding from this fact, Kuwait has always attached special attention to technical cooperation activities, and has backed the IAEA's initiatives for peaceful nuclear usage and laboratory revamp. The Kuwaiti diplomat concluded by hoping that the review conference would promote conviction that open, constructive and fruitful dialogue should continue to ensure sustainable peace, security and stability, boost confidence and curtail nuclear proliferation hazards. — KUNA

"The operations are conducted in an unprecedentedly close range to the Taiwan Island," Meng Xiangqing, a military expert, stressed. "The operations will leave a deterrence effect that is stronger than ever before."

The manoeuvres are taking place along some of the busiest shipping routes on the planet, used to supply vital semiconductors and electronic equipment produced in East Asian factory hubs to global markets. Taiwan's Maritime and Port Bureau has issued warnings to ships to avoid the areas being used for the Chinese drills. And the Taiwanese cabinet said the drills would disrupt 18 international routes passing through its flight information region (FIR).

Taiwan's 23 million people have long lived with the possibility of an invasion, but that threat has intensified under President Xi Jinping, China's most assertive ruler in a generation. Analysts said the Chinese leadership is keen to project strength ahead of a crucial ruling party meeting this autumn at which Xi is expected to be given an unprecedented third term. "China's announced military exercises represent a clear escalation from the existing baseline of Chinese military activities around Taiwan and from the last Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995-1996," said Amanda Hsiao, senior analyst for China at the International Crisis Group.

"Beijing is signaling that it rejects Taiwan's sovereignty." Nevertheless, analysts have told AFP that China is not aiming to escalate the situation beyond its control - at least for now. Titus Chen, an associate professor of political science at the National Sun Yat-Sen University in Taiwan, said: "The last thing Xi wants is an accidental war." — AFP



BEIRUT: Activists and relatives of the 2020 Beirut port blast victims carry pictures of casualties, in the Lebanese capital's port area on August 4, 2022, on the day that crisis-hit country marks two years since a giant explosion ripped through the capital. — AFP

judge Bitar's work had been paused since December 23. Hezbollah, which has repeatedly accused Bitar of bias, on Thursday condemned what it described as a two-year "intense political and media campaign, which contained false accusations" against it, and called for a "fair" investigation.

UN chief Antonio Guterres on Thursday reiterated his call for an "impartial, thorough and transparent investigation into the explosion". UN experts

and groups including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch had earlier relaunched an appeal to the United Nations to send a fact-finding mission. The rights groups jointly declared that "it is now, more than ever, clear that the domestic investigation cannot deliver justice". Aya Majzoub of HRW said that an international investigation "may be the only hope for the millions of Lebanese people... to get the answers they deserve". — AFP

## Iran nuclear talks set to restart in Vienna

VIENNA: Negotiators kicked off a fresh round of talks over Iran's nuclear program in Vienna on Thursday, seeking to salvage the agreement on Tehran's atomic ambitions. Officials from world powers and Iran were meeting in the Austrian capital for the first time since March, when negotiations, which began in 2021 to reintegrate the United States into the agreement, stalled. In late June, Qatar hosted indirect talks between Tehran and Washington in the hope of getting the process back on track - but those talks failed to make a breakthrough.

In a last-ditch effort, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell submitted a compromise proposal last month and called on the parties to accept it to avoid a "dangerous nuclear crisis". Borrell said the draft text includes "hard-won compromises by all sides" and "addresses, in precise detail, the sanctions lifting as well as the nuclear steps needed to restore" the 2015 pact. Bilateral talks began on Thursday at Vienna's luxury Palais Coburg hotel under the auspices of the European Union's representative Enrique Mora.

The Iranian and Russian delegations, which have traditionally been close in the negotiations, held a separate meeting. Britain, China, France, Germany, Iran, Russia and the United States signed the JCPOA in July 2015. Delegations from all will partake in Thursday's talks, but officials from the US and Iran are not expected to meet face to face. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action aims to guarantee the civilian nature of Iran's

## UK city marks 50 years since Uganda expelled Asians

LEICESTER: Fifty years ago, brutal dictator Idi Amin announced his intention to expel Uganda's thriving community of British South Asians. They were given 90 days to leave or be rounded up into concentration camps. More than 27,000 ethnic Indian and Pakistani holders of UK passports made their way to Britain, which reluctantly took in its former colonial subjects. Many of them came to the English Midlands city of Leicester, and many arrived penniless after Idi Amin expropriated their wealth in a purported drive to give "Uganda back to ethnic Ugandans".

Overcoming English racism and weather, the refugees rebuilt their lives from scratch, as chronicled in a new exhibition marking the anniversary of Idi Amin's incendiary decree of August 4, 1972. "Nobody used to assist us, everybody was against us," retiree Madhukumar Madhani told AFP on a visit to the exhibition at Leicester Museum. "But through sheer hard work, a lot of people have put a lot into the community," he said, noting the prosperity on display in the city's "Golden Mile" - a stretch of road rich in Asian-owned businesses.

Exhibition curator Nisha Popat pointed to parallels today in Britain's generosity, or lack of, towards refugees. "We are in a world where there is a lot of conflict and there's refugees," she said. The intention was about "showing the impact of refugees, but what they went through, and the impact they can have on a

place". The family of British Home Secretary Priti Patel, responsible for refugee policy now, were Gujarati Indians from Uganda who fled to Britain in the 1960s when anti-Asian prejudice was already rife.

To much controversy, Patel is trying to push a policy today that would send asylum-seekers entering Britain illegally on to Uganda's southern neighbor Rwanda, for processing and permanent settlement. The government says it is acting to stop a deadly trade in migrants crossing the Channel from France, and points to its welcome for holders of a type of British passport from Hong Kong, and to refugees from the war in Ukraine. In 1972, the then Conservative government dragged its feet initially, seeking to send some of the Ugandan Asians to other countries before agreeing to honor their passport rights.

They largely succeeded in their new lives, rebuilding the small businesses and shops that were the mainstay of their middle-class prosperity in Uganda. They fared better than Idi Amin, who was overthrown in a 1979 coup and ended up a refugee himself, dying in well-heeled exile in Saudi Arabia, in 2003. His eight-year reign of terror, chronicled to powerful effect in the 2006 film "The Last King of Scotland", resulted in the deaths of an estimated 300,000 people.

Idi Amin was "really very bad with the Asian people", agreed Bhikhulal Pragji Chohan, another retiree in Leicester. "We all, Asian people, all like to do our jobs, and everything they left there and (they) come here without anything," he said. As well as the exhibition, Leicester's Curve Theatre is staging three plays to mark the anniversary. "The story of the Ugandan South Asian exodus to Leicester is one that begins with trauma and upheaval for so many," Curve chief executive Chris Stafford said. "Fifty years on, it is undoubtedly a story of resilience and triumph over adversity." — AFP

## Kuwait restates unswerving...

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However, he regretted, the conference was not held due to the absence of the political will and earnestness on the part of all concerned parties. He underlined that all parties have the right to develop research and studies, and possess and use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, but legal commitments and agreements concluded with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) must

## China deploys warships, fires...

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Taipei did not say where the missiles landed or whether they flew over the island. AFP journalists on the border island of Pingtan saw several small projectiles flying into the sky followed by plumes of white smoke and loud booming sounds. On the mainland, at what is said to be China's closest point to Taiwan, AFP saw a batch of five military helicopters flying at a relatively low altitude near a popular tourist spot. Beijing has said the drills will last until midday on Sunday.

Beijing has defended the drills as "necessary and just", pinning the blame for the escalation on the United States and its allies. "In the face of this blatant provocation, we have to take legitimate and necessary countermeasures to safeguard the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a regular briefing Thursday. Military analysts told Beijing's state broadcaster CCTV that the goal was to practice a possible blockade of the island and contain its pro-independence forces.

"The purpose is to show that the PLA is capable of controlling all the exits of the Taiwan Island, which will be a great deterrent to 'Taiwan independence' secessionist forces," Zhang Junshe, a senior researcher at China's Naval Research Institute, said.

## Taliban: No info about Zawahiri...

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instructed the intelligence agencies to hold a comprehensive and serious investigation." Taliban officials had previously conceded that a US drone strike had taken place in an upmarket Kabul suburb, but gave no details of any casualties. Washington said earlier this week that Zawahiri's presence was a clear violation of the Doha agreement signed in 2020 that paved the way for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan a year ago.

The Taliban, in turn, said Washington had breached the accord. "The fact that America invaded our territory and violated all international principles, we strongly condemn the action once again," the statement said. "If such action is repeated, the responsibility of any consequences will be on the United States of America." The Taliban said in their statement that there was "no threat" to any country from Afghanistan's soil. In announcing Zawahiri's death, Biden declared "justice had been delivered" to the families of victims of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

US officials said Zawahiri was on the balcony of a

three-storey house in the Afghan capital when targeted with two Hellfire missiles early on Sunday. The drone attack was the first known over-the-horizon strike by the US on a target in Afghanistan since Washington withdrew its forces from the country on August 31 last year, days after the Taliban swept back to power. The house targeted in the strike was in Sherpur, one of Kabul's most affluent neighborhoods, with several villas occupied by high-ranking Taliban officials and commanders.

Zawahiri took over Al-Qaeda after bin Laden was killed, and had a \$25 million US bounty on his head. News of his death comes a month before the first anniversary of the final withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan and the return to power of the Taliban. No country has yet recognized the new government, which has slowly reintroduced a harsh interpretation of Islamic law that characterized the Taliban's first stint in power.

While the insurgency has ended, the country has been plunged into economic turmoil, with Afghanistan's assets abroad frozen, aid curtailed, and sanctions on key Taliban leaders. "Even if the Taliban face no new sanctions, lifting the existing ones will be harder after Zawahiri's discovery and killing in downtown Kabul," said Nishank Motwani, fellow at Harvard University's Kennedy School. "As a consequence of Zawahiri's killing... it is likely that fragmentations within the Taliban will widen that could result in internal violence." — AFP



PANJSHIR: A Taliban fighter keeping a watch at an outpost in Tawakh Village of Anaba district, Panjshir Province. — AFP