



India showcases military might in Republic Day parade

Deadly Russian missiles hit Ukraine energy infrastructure

Page 7

Page 6



BEIRUT, Lebanon: Relatives of victims killed in the 2020 Beirut port explosion, rally outside the palace of justice in the Lebanese capital, to support the judge investigating the disaster, on Thursday, after he was charged by the country's top prosecutor in the highly political case. —AFP

Beirut blast victims' relatives rally for embattled probe judge

'We had faith in justice, but the mask has now fallen'

BEIRUT: Families of the victims of the deadly 2020 Beirut port explosion rallied Thursday to support the judge who has resumed work on the politically-charged case in a daring challenge to Lebanon's entrenched ruling elite. Experts have warned that the battle between investigative judge Tarek Bitar and top prosecutor Ghassan Oueidat, who has charged him with insubordination, will be a critical test for the faltering justice system of the crisis-hit Mediterranean nation.

Bitar this week defied Lebanon's ruling class to charge several powerful figures—including Oueidat, the prosecutor general-in connection to the blast, and revived a probe that was suspended for over a year amid vehement political and legal pushback. Oueidat in turn charged Bitar for insubordination and for "usurping power", ordered the release of all those detained in the case, and slapped a travel ban on them and the judge.

Bitar was called for questioning on Thursday, a summons he did not attend. Security was tight at the palace of justice in Beirut, where dozens of family members of the victims gathered "to support the

investigation" led by Bitar, some carrying posters of those who died. "We had faith in justice, but the mask has now fallen," said protester Abdo Matta, 54, who lost his son in the explosion. "We will never stop, we want to know who killed our children."

One of history's biggest non-nuclear explosions, the August 4, 2020 blast destroyed much of Beirut's port and surrounding areas, killing more than 215 people and injuring over 6,500. Authorities said hundreds of tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer haphazardly stocked in a port warehouse since 2014 had caught fire, causing the explosion.

'Legal hysteria'

No official has been held accountable, and relatives of the victims and rights groups have blamed the disaster on a political class widely seen as inept. Lawmaker Melhem Khalaf, who represents 1,400 people affected by the blast, said he will meet Thursday with the justice minister and the chief of the Supreme Judicial Council, which is set to convene later in the day. Khalaf called on the justice minister to "find solutions" so that the probe can

proceed, describing the situation as "judicial and legal hysteria".

Bitar was forced to suspend his probe for 13 months after a barrage of lawsuits, mainly from politicians he had summoned on charges of negligence. Lebanon has a history of political assassinations, and authorities are now "entirely responsible for the judge's safety," the families warned, referring to the move against him as a "coup d'etat". A defiant Bitar told AFP Wednesday he will not step down from this case, adding that the chief prosecutor "has no authority" to intervene.

The judicial arm-wrestling between Bitar and Oueidat risks deepening Lebanon's mounting woes, and some warn it may be the last nail in the coffin of a notoriously politicized justice system. "The future of this case is fraught with danger," said legal expert Paul Morcos. The complex case is subject to "immense political pressure that Lebanon's justice system cannot surmount, creating this huge rift," he added.

'Total collapse'

The powerful Iran-backed movement Hezbollah has

repeatedly called for Bitar's dismissal, and this week expressed support for Oueidat. Hezbollah lawmaker Ibrahim Al Moussawi described Oueidat's decision as "a step in the right direction to restore confidence in judges and the judiciary after it was destroyed by some of its members." But Samy Gemayel, a lawmaker opposed to Hezbollah, warned the judicial battle "could lead to the total collapse of the justice system", and called on citizens to defend Lebanon against "a mafia and an armed militia".

Among those ordered released by Oueidat were dual American-Lebanese citizen Ziad Al-Ouf, who his lawyer Sakher Al-Hashem said had already "arrived in the United States, and will not return to Lebanon". A judicial official said that the United States had lobbied for his release.

On Wednesday, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to "urgently pass a resolution to create an impartial fact-finding mission" into the port explosion. "The Lebanese authorities have repeatedly obstructed the domestic investigation into the explosion," the joint statement said. —AFP



TEHRAN, Iran: Iranian shoppers walk through the bazaar of Tajrish in northern Tehran. —AFP

Iran minister urges tolerance for women over headscarves

TEHRAN: An Iranian minister has called for greater tolerance towards women not wearing mandatory headscarves, amid months of protests triggered by the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, media reported Thursday. Tourism and Heritage Minister Ezzatollah Zarghami, speaking after a government meeting on Wednesday, referred to the fact that increasing numbers of women were being seen without wearing a hijab since the September 16 death of Amini. "Closed-mindedness unfortunately exists in the country, but we can no longer be hard on the people," Zarghami said, the ISNA news agency and several newspapers reported. "To develop tourism and improve social life, you have to open up space, understand the people and not be strict with them," he added.

Zarghami said he advised a "man who behaves

harshly" towards a woman not wearing headscarf to "close his eyes if looking at her excites him". Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, died in custody after being arrested by morality police for allegedly breaching the country's strict dress code. Zarghami was strongly criticized by ultra-conservatives in October after reportedly criticizing the morality police.

Since the outbreak of the protests, the morality police unit charged with enforcing the hijab rules has been less visible and women have taken to the streets without mandatory headscarves. But authorities signaled less tolerance since the start of the year, with police warning that women must wear headscarves even in cars.

Earlier this month, the prosecutor general issued a directive in which "police were ordered to firmly punish any hijab violations", and that courts should sentence and fine violators, with "additional penalties such as exile, bans on practicing certain professions and closing workplaces". Iran says hundreds of people, including security personnel, have been killed and thousands arrested in connection with the protests, which they generally describe as "riots". —AFP

Migrants in Morocco limbo as they cling to Europe dreams

CASABLANCA, Morocco: Oumar left home in Guinea five years ago in search of a better life in Europe, but today he inhabits a daily purgatory of hunger, cold and police violence in Morocco. "Just surviving every day is a battle," said the 25-year-old. "It's exhausting not eating enough, not sleeping under a roof, not feeling safe, experiencing racism." He spends his nights camped out on the pavement outside a Casablanca bus station, the makeshift home of hundreds of sub-Saharan Africans whose dreams of reaching Europe are on hold in Morocco. "We get chased away early in the morning by the police. Then we wander around and come back to the same place at the end of the day," said Oumar.

Like the other migrants interviewed in this report, Oumar's name has been changed.

He has tried several times to reach Spanish territory from Morocco but has so far been unsuccessful. Oumar sits killing time opposite the Ould Ziane bus station with a few dozen, mostly Guinean migrants. Some cook in a makeshift kitchen while others lie exhausted on the pavement. Someone has hung clothes and blankets on a nearby wall to dry. Bakary, also from Guinea, said he had been living here for three years.

"This is our sad reality but nobody wants to see it," the 18-year-old said. The migrants set up this makeshift camp on the edge of the coastal port city of 4.2 million people because of its proximity to the bus station, a major transport hub. Today, the down-at-heel neighborhood sees repeated flare-ups with the authorities. This month, six migrants were arrested following clashes during a police operation to evict people camping on the site of a tramway extension. —AFP

Myanmar opium farming booming after coup: UN

BANGKOK, Thailand: Opium poppy production in Myanmar ramped up dramatically following the 2021 military coup, the UN's drugs office said Thursday, as political and economic turmoil drove farmers to cultivate the crop. The country's economy has been paralyzed following the military power grab in February 2021 and subsequent fighting between the junta and anti-coup rebels.

The area of land used for opium poppy cultivation expanded by a third to just over 40,000 hectares in 2021-22 — the first full growing season since the coup-according to a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report released Thursday. The potential output also shot up by nearly 90 percent compared with the previous year, to 790 tons. The results show that there is a "significant expansion" of Myanmar's opium economy, the UNODC report said.

"Economic, security and governance disruptions that followed the military takeover of February 2021 have converged, and farmers... have had little option but to move back to opium," UNODC regional representative Jeremy Douglas said. "The growth we are witnessing in the drug business is directly connected to the crisis the country is facing." The report, based on satellite imagery and fieldwork, said the downward trend in opium production seen from 2014 to 2020 had gone into reverse.

The UNODC estimates Myanmar's opium economy is worth around \$2 billion—the equivalent of up to three percent of the country's GDP in 2021. Despite the spike in production, farm gate prices for opium have also soared to around \$280 a kilo, the report said—a 69 percent rise on the previous year. This compares with a farm gate price of around \$203 in Afghanistan, the world's leading opium producer.

But the report said higher incomes from opium are not translating into greater buying power for farmers, because of higher petrol and fertilizer prices as a result of the Ukraine war. A combination of the pandemic and the aftermath of the coup hammered Myanmar's economy with an 18 percent contraction in 2021, according to the World Bank. —AFP