

Venezuelan president sent letter to Khamenei accrediting US fugitive

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-23 01:26

BEIRUT: A Colombian businessman was carrying a letter from Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro accrediting him to Iran's supreme leader when he was arrested on a US warrant last year, according to a new court filing in a politically charged corruption case ratcheting up tensions with the South American nation.

Attorneys for Alex Saab made the filing in Miami federal court on Thursday just hours after prosecutors in the African nation of Cape Verde said they granted the 49-year-old Colombian house arrest as he fights extradition to the US to face money laundering charges.

US officials believe Saab holds numerous secrets about how Maduro, his family and top aides allegedly siphoned off millions of dollars in government contracts amid widespread hunger in the oil-rich nation. He was detained last June when his jet made a refueling stop on a flight to Tehran, where he was allegedly sent to negotiate deals to exchange Venezuelan gold for Iranian gasoline.

Lawyers filed a motion seeking to dismiss the US charges, arguing Saab is immune from prosecution as a result of the many diplomatic posts he has held for Maduro's government since 2018.

As evidence, they presented letters signed by Maduro's foreign minister purportedly accrediting Saab as a special envoy for humanitarian aid as well as a resolution – signed last month – naming him Venezuela's alternate permanent representative to the African Union in Ethiopia.

There is also a letter, addressed to Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in which Maduro asks the Iranian supreme leader to help Saab obtain an "urgent" shipment of 5 million barrels of gasoline following the arrival of several previous shipments from Iran.

Another apparent diplomatic note, from the Iranian Embassy in Caracas, refers to Saab's upcoming "official" visit and a request for the delivery of Iranian-made medicines.



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Iran, pressured by power blackouts and pollution, targets Bitcoin

[Iran, pressured by power blackouts and pollution, targets Bitcoin](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-23 01:22

Iran's capital and major cities plunged into darkness in recent weeks as rolling outages left millions without electricity for hours. Traffic lights died. Offices went dark. Online classes stopped.

With toxic smog blanketing Tehran skies and the country buckling under the pandemic and other mounting crises, social media has been rife with speculation. Soon, fingers pointed at an unlikely culprit: Bitcoin.

Within days, as frustration spread among residents, the government launched a wide-ranging crackdown on Bitcoin processing centers, which require immense amounts of electricity to power their specialized computers and to keep them cool – a burden on Iran's power grid.

Authorities shuttered 1,600 centers across the country, including, for the

first time, those legally authorized to operate. As the latest in a series of conflicting government moves, the clampdown stirred confusion in the crypto industry – and suspicion that Bitcoin had become a useful scapegoat for the nation's deeper-rooted problems.

Since the US unilaterally withdrew in 2018 from Tehran's nuclear accord with world powers and re-imposed sanctions on Iran, cryptocurrency has surged in popularity in the Islamic Republic.

For Iran, anonymous online transactions made in cryptocurrencies allow individuals and companies to bypass banking sanctions that have crippled the economy. Bitcoin offers an alternative to cash printed by sovereign governments and central banks – and in the case of Iran and other countries under sanctions like Venezuela, a more stable place to park money than the local currency.

"Iranians understand the value of such a borderless network much more than others because we can't access any kind of global payment networks," said Ziya Sadr, a Tehran-based Bitcoin expert. "Bitcoin shines here."

Iran's generously subsidized electricity has put the country on the crypto-mining map, given the operation's enormous electricity consumption.

Electricity goes for around 4 cents per kilowatt-hour in Iran, compared to an average of 13 cents in the United States.

Iran is among the top 10 countries with the most Bitcoin mining capacity in the world – 450 megawatts a day. The US network has a daily capacity of more than 1,100 megawatts.

On Tehran's outskirts and across Iran's south and northwest, windowless warehouses hum with heavy industrial machinery and rows of computers that crunch highly complex algorithms to verify transactions. The transactions, called blocks, are then added to a public record, known as the blockchain. Iran's government has sent mixed messages about Bitcoin. On one hand, it wants to capitalize on the soaring popularity of digital currency and sees value in legitimizing transactions that fly under Washington's radar. It authorized 24 Bitcoin processing centers that consume an estimated 300 megawatts of energy a day.

On the other hand, the government worries about limiting how much money is sent abroad

and controlling money laundering, drug sales and internet criminal groups.



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Iran: Oil product exports hit record high despite US sanctions

[Rivals' accord paves way for Palestine coalition](#)

Sat, 2021-01-23 00:26

AMMAN: Fatah and Hamas leaders appear to be moving closer to setting up a unified list that will be the basis of a Palestinian coalition government, a draft agreement between the rival factions reveals.

The agreement, seen by Arab News, was a key factor in the decision to hold elections – Palestine's first in 15 years – on May 22.

Details of the accord were discussed at meetings in Istanbul and Cairo, and became the basis of an exchange of letters between Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

Compromises appear to have been made by both sides, but particularly by

Hamas, which accepts that "the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) is the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and is responsible for all external political issues and negotiations as well as all issues related to war and peace."

However, Fatah, which has effectively controlled the PLO for decades, acknowledges that the organization requires reform and strengthening so it can better represent all Palestinian groups and in order for its decisions to be mandatory.

By agreeing to be part of the PLO and under its political umbrella, Hamas can avoid the problems it faced in 2006 when it refused to recognize Israel. The PLO exchanged letters of recognition with Israel in 1993.

Hamas and Fatah also agreed to share surplus votes in elections for a national unity government that will run affairs in Gaza and the West Bank, and have total control over all Palestinian areas.

Both sides agreed that the new government "will work on unifying laws and institutions, and have security control over all areas."

A coalition government appears to give the people of Gaza a chance to exercise freedom of movement and benefit from rebuilding work in the enclave.

According to the agreement, one of the main goals of a coalition government seeking to revive Gaza's battered economy will be a long-term cease-fire with Israel to prepare the groundwork for extensive rebuilding.

The agreement also calls for Gaza airport and all crossings to be permanently restored along with the establishment of a security corridor between Gaza and the West Bank.

Hamas and Fatah also appear to agree on the need for a change in the role of the Palestinian president, with calls for an overhaul of Palestine's political structure, "especially the roles of the president, government and legislative council."

"It is either a presidential structure or a parliamentary one," the accord said. "The hybrid is a source of conflict."

Changes should take place before the presidential elections due on July 31, it adds.

The two factions also agreed that the "election campaigns must be civilized, respectful, and avoid abuse and libel from all sides."

According to the agreement, election results "will be recognized no matter what they are."



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Agreement between Fatah and Hamas paves way for Palestine coalition
Fatah and Hamas agree to hold general elections in Palestine

[Another record daily high as UAE confirms 3,552 new cases of COVID-19, 10 deaths](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-01-23 00:11

DUBAI: The UAE on Friday announced 3,552 new confirmed cases of COVID-19, as the number of infections once again hit new daily high. An additional 10 people died of conditions related to the disease.

Officials from the Ministry of Health and Prevention (MoHaP) said the total number of cases in the country has reached 270,810, while the death toll stands at 776. A total of 243,267 patients have recovered from the disease,

including 3,945 in the past 24 hours.

Health authorities said they have administered 2.34 million doses of the vaccine, including 93,004 in the past 24 hours. With 23.65 doses administered per 100 people, the UAE has the second-highest vaccination rate in the world, after Israel. The country is aiming to vaccinate 50 percent of the population by April.

Dubai's Supreme Committee of Crisis and Disaster Management announced changes to social-distancing rules that require the distance between tables at restaurants and cafes to be increased from two to three meters, and the number of people allowed to sit at a single table to be reduced from 10 to seven in restaurants, and four in cafes.

It also announced a new rule that limits the number of people permitted to attend weddings, social events and private parties to a maximum of 10 first-degree relatives. The rule, which will take effect from Jan. 27, applies to events in public venues such as hotels and in people's own homes.

Dubai Economy and Dubai Sports Council have directed gyms and fitness centers to increase the distance between sports equipment, and between customers, from two to three meters.

During daily inspection tours, officials from Dubai Economy issued fines to 17 commercial establishments over failures to adhere to COVID-19 precautions. They included businesses that specialize in used furniture, textiles and fabrics, meat and mobile phones, and a management center that supports labor services.

Dubai Municipality said that following visits by its inspectors, five businesses were ordered to close, four were fined and warnings were issued to 18 for not complying with precautionary measures.

Dubai Tourism said that a number of live events in the emirate on Friday – including concerts by Egyptian singer Amr Diab at the Dubai International Stadium and Algerian-French singer Enrico Macias at Dubai Opera – were going ahead as planned, with stringent safety protocols in place.

The authority said on Thursday that all previously issued entertainment permits “will be on hold effective immediately,” and that it will continue to evaluate the situation with health authorities.

Also on Thursday, Dubai Maritime City Authority ordered the temporary suspension of entertainment activities on floating restaurants and other vessels.

Lt. Gen. Abdullah Khalifa Al-Marri, the commander-in-chief of Dubai Police, called on the public to fully comply with all preventative measures mandated by the authorities. During an interview broadcast by Dubai TV, he said that “everyone was compliant by 100 percent” but that the recent spike in infections could be attributed to an increase in gatherings of families and friends for special occasions.

Meanwhile the Abu Dhabi Health Services Company (SEHA) said that a 100 year-old Emirati woman, Sabha Salem Al-Derei, has received her first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine. The company congratulated her and said that she is setting “an example for all citizens and residents.”

Elsewhere, Kuwait reported 533 new cases of COVID-19, raising the total in the country to 160,367. The death toll rose to 952 after one additional death was reported in the previous 24 hours.

تعلن [#وزارة_الصحة](#) عن تأكيد إصابة 533 حالة، وتسجيل 481 حالة شفاء، و حالة وفاة واحدة جديدة بـ [#فيروس_كورونا_المستجد](#) COVID-19 ، ليصبح إجمالي عدد الحالات 160,367 حالة pic.twitter.com/0dYpFkJyai

[January 22, 2021](#) (@KUWAIT_MOH) وزارة الصحة - الكويت -

In Bahrain the death toll stands at 366 after no new deaths were reported. The number of confirmed cases in the country increased by 332.

Out of 10318 COVID-19 tests carried out on 22 January 2021, 332 new cases have been detected among 153 expatriate workers, 168 new cases are contacts of active cases, and 11 are travel related. There were 308 recoveries from [#COVID19](#), increasing total recoveries to 95902 pic.twitter.com/zJWqBJmcPn

[January 22, 2021](#) (@MOH_Bahrain) وزارة الصحة | مملكة البحرين -



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[Lt. Gen. Abdullah Khalifa Al-Marri](#)

Saudi Arabia confirms 4 COVID-19 deaths, 213 new cases
UAE confirms record 3,529 new COVID-19 cases plus 4 more deaths

Top Lebanese hospitals fight exhausting battle against virus

Sat, 2021-01-23 00:02

BEIRUT: Death stalks the corridors of Beirut's Rafik Hariri University Hospital, where losing multiple patients in one day to COVID-19 has become the new normal. On Friday, the mood among the staff was even more solemn as a young woman lost the battle with the virus.

There was silence as the woman, barely in her 30s, drew her last breath. Then a brief commotion. The nurses frantically tried to resuscitate her. Finally, exhausted, they silently removed the oxygen mask and the tubes – and covered the body with a brown blanket.

The woman, whose name is being withheld for privacy reasons, is one of 57 victims who died on Friday and more than 2,150 lost to the virus so far in Lebanon, a small country with a population of nearly 6 million that since last year has grappled with the worst economic and financial crisis in its modern history.

In recent weeks, Lebanon has seen a dramatic increase in virus cases, following the holiday season when restrictions were eased and thousand of expatriates flew home for a visit.

Now, hospitals across the country are almost completely out of beds. Oxygen tanks, ventilators and most critically, medical staff, are in extremely short supply. Doctors and nurses say they are exhausted. Facing burnout, many of their colleagues left.

Many others have caught the virus, forcing them to take sick leave and leaving fewer and fewer colleagues to work overtime to carry the burden. To every bed that frees up after a death, three or four patients are waiting in the emergency room waiting to take their place.

Mohammed Darwish, a nurse at the hospital, said he has been working six days a week to help with surging hospitalizations and barely sees his family.

"It is tiring. It is a health sector that is not good at all nowadays," Darwish said.

More than 2,300 Lebanese health care workers have been infected since February, and around 500 of Lebanon's 14,000 doctors have left the crisis-ridden country in recent months, according to the Order of Physicians. The

virus is putting an additional burden on a public health system that was already on the brink because of the country's currency crash and inflation, as well as the consequences of the massive Beirut port explosion last summer that killed almost 200 people, injured thousands, and devastated entire sectors of the city.

"Our sense is that the country is falling apart," World Bank Regional Director, Saroj Kumar Jha, told reporters in a virtual news conference Friday.

At the Rafik Hariri University Hospital, the main government coronavirus facility, there are currently 40 beds in the ICU – all full. According to the World Health Organization, Beirut hospitals are at 98% capacity.

Across town, at the private American University Medical Center – one of Lebanon's largest and most prestigious hospitals – space is being cleared to accommodate more patients.

But that's not enough, according to Dr. Pierre Boukhalil, head of the Pulmonary and Critical Care department. His staff were clearly overwhelmed during a recent visit by The Associated Press, leaping from one patient to another amid the constant beep-beep of life-monitoring machines.

The situation "can only be described as a near disaster or a tsunami in the making," he said, speaking to the AP in between checking on his patients. "We have been consistently increasing capacity over the past week or so, and we are not even keeping up with demands. This is not letting up."

Boukhalil's hospital raised the alarm last week, coming out with a statement saying its health care workers were overwhelmed and unable to find beds for "even the most critical patients."

Since the start of the holiday season, daily infections have hovered around 5,000 in Lebanon, up from nearly 1,000 in November. The daily death toll hit record-breaking more than 60 fatalities in in the past few days.

Doctors say that with increased testing, the number of cases has also increased – a common trend. Lebanon's vaccination program is set to begin next month.

Darwish, the nurse, said many COVID-19 patients admitted to Rafik Hariri and especially in the ICU, are young, with no underlying conditions or chronic diseases.

"They catch corona and they think everything is fine and then suddenly you find the patient deteriorated and it hits them suddenly and unfortunately they die,"

On Thursday night, 65-year-old Sabah Miree was admitted to the hospital with breathing problems. She was put on oxygen to help her breathe. Her two sisters had also caught the virus but their case was mild. Miree, who suffers from a heart problem, had to be hospitalized.

"This disease is not a game," she said, describing what a struggle it is for her to keep breathing. "I would say to everyone to pay attention and not to take this lightly."

A nationwide round-the-clock curfew imposed on Jan. 14 was extended on Thursday until Feb. 8 to help the health sector deal with the virus surge.

"I still have nightmares when I see a 30-year-old who passed away," said Dr. Boukhalil. "The disease could have been prevented."

"So stick with the lockdown ... it pays off," he said.



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Months-old baby tests positive for COVID-19 in LebanonLebanon extends lockdown into February as virus numbers rise