

Iran summons ambassador over possible US measures against Venezuela shipment

Sun, 2020-05-17 19:11

LONDON: Iran summoned the Swiss ambassador, who represents US interests in the Islamic Republic, over possible measures Washington could take against an Iranian fuel shipment to Venezuela, the Mehr news agency reported.

A senior official in US President Donald Trump's administration told Reuters on Thursday the United States was considering measures it could take in response to Iran's shipment of fuel to crisis-stricken Venezuela.

The oil sectors of Iran and Venezuela, members of OPEC, are both under US sanctions. The Trump administration official declined to specify the measures being weighed but said options would be presented to Trump.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi passed on a message to the ambassador on Sunday warning against any US threat against the Iranian tankers, according to a report on the foreign ministry website.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also wrote a letter to UN chief Antonio Guterres warning that any American measures against the fuel shipment would be dangerous, illegal and a form of piracy, according to the report on the foreign ministry website.

At least one tanker carrying fuel loaded at an Iranian port has set sail for Venezuela, according to vessel tracking data from Refinitiv Eikon on Wednesday, which could help ease an acute scarcity of gasoline in the South American country.

Venezuela is in desperate need of gasoline and other refined fuel products to keep the country functioning amid an economic collapse under socialist President Nicolas Maduro. Venezuela produces crude oil but its infrastructure has been crippled during the economic crisis.



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East Syria strikes kill 7 Iran-backed fighters: MonitorIran sentences French academic to 6 years in prison

[Pirates attack tanker Stolt Apal off Yemen](#)

Sun, 2020-05-17 18:15

DUBAI: Stolt Tankers said its vessel the Stolt Apal was attacked by pirates 75 nautical miles off Yemen's coast on Sunday. Stolt Tankers said six armed pirates approached the vessel in two speedboats.

[#Breaking](#) Reports that a U.K. flagged product tanker STOLT APAL attacked in the GoA IRTC westbound transit corridor at position 13° 43N 050° 37.4E Unconfirmed reports of an RPG launched against the vessel. More updates: <https://t.co/avKFionWGV>

pic.twitter.com/y6ZacoBJwh

– Dryad Global (@GlobalDryad) [May 17, 2020](#)

“After multiple warning shots were fired by the armed guard team aboard Stolt Apal, the skiffs opened fire on the ship. The armed guard team returned fire, disabling one skiff and ending the pursuit,” Stolt Tankers said. “The bridge area sustained minor damage from bullets but there were no injuries, no pollution and no cargo impacted on Stolt Apal. A coalition warship responded and Stolt Apal has resumed her voyage.”

Maritime security firm Dryad Global said it was the ninth reported incident in the Gulf of Aden this year.



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Yemenis stranded in India call to be repatriated as fear of infection rises
Yemenis head to countryside to avoid COVID-19 restrictions

Syria tycoon lashes out at state in fresh accusations

Author:

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Sun, 2020-05-17 12:24

DAMASCUS: Top Syria tycoon Rami Makhlouf on Sunday said the regime was piling pressure on him and threatening to arrest him and close his telecommunications empire unless he hands over profits.

Makhlouf, a first cousin of Syrian President Bashar Assad, made the latest accusations against the Damascus government – the third since April – in a 16-minute Facebook video.

The head of Syria's largest mobile operator, Syriatel, has been embroiled in a power struggle with the Assad government since last summer when authorities seized his Al-Bustan charity and dissolved militias affiliated to him.

When the finance ministry in December froze the assets of several businessmen over tax evasion and illicit enrichment, the Syrian press said Makhlouf, his wife and companies were included.

On Sunday he said authorities are "demanding we forfeit our company's profits" and hand over "120 percent of the profits to the state or else we will be arrested."

Failure to comply, he said, will prompt authorities to revoke Syriatel's license.

At the end of April and again in early May, Makhlouf, who had kept a low profile throughout Syria's nine-year-war, posted online scathing attacks against authorities.

He said they were demanding \$185 million in payments from Syriatel, urging Assad to intervene and reschedule the payment.

Makhlouf, who also has stakes in electricity, oil and real estate, has also accused security services of detaining employees to intimidate him into stepping down from his businesses.

According to the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, around 40 Syriatel employees and 19 from Al-Bustan have been arrested since April.

Condemning the arrests, Makhlouf claimed authorities would release the employees if he paid the \$185 million and resigned as head of Syriatel.

Makhlouf said he would be willing to pay the amount demanded by authorities but the issue of his resignation was a red line.

"Whoever thinks I will resign under these conditions, doesn't know me," he said.

Makhlouf has long been seen as a pillar of the Syrian regime since Assad rose to power in 2000, succeeding his father Hafez.

But rumors have swirled in recent months of souring ties between Makhlouf and Assad, who is spearheading an anti-graft campaign in a bid to shore up state finances.

In an interview with Syrian state TV in October, Assad said that he has

“called on everyone in the private sector who has squandered state funds to return the money.”



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[Rami Makhlouf](#)

[Bashar Al-Assad](#)

Syrian tycoon Makhlouf says security forces are arresting his employees

[Lebanon army says arrests 16 over 'illegal' currency ring](#)

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Sat, 2020-05-16 16:55

BEIRUT: Sixteen people in Lebanon, mostly Syrians, have been arrested for money transfers and “illegal” currency exchange operations, the army said Saturday, amid a government crackdown on exchange rate manipulation. The army said it had arrested 13 Syrians and three Lebanese, who were carrying out “money transfers and illegal currency exchange transactions, using licensed companies and offices as a front,” in a statement. The suspects used an “unlicensed online platform belonging to one of the financial companies,” to carry out the financial transactions, the statement said.

The Lebanese pound has been pegged to the dollar at 1,507 since 1997 but the country’s worst economic crisis in decades has seen its value plunge to beyond 4,000 on the black market.

The government has sought to stem the fall by launching a nationwide crackdown on money changers it alleges are exchanging the pound for dollars at a rate weaker than the 3,200 per dollar permitted by the central bank. During the arrests, the army seized “significant sums” but also computers and laptops used in these operations, the statement added, specifying that the arrests took place in twelve regions across Lebanon.

The network sent dollars with motorists across the border to Syria, specifically to the northwestern province of Idlib, a security official said, referring to a region controlled by Al-Qaeda-linked extremists and allied rebels.

After land borders closed because of the coronavirus pandemic, the network started using an “illegal online platform” controlled by a Lebanese money changer, the official added.

Security forces this week arrested that suspect, and found “hundreds of thousands of dollars” stashed in his Beirut home, he said.

Investigations later led to a Syrian residing in Lebanon who was also arrested for involvement in the plot along with several of his Lebanese and

Syrian affiliates, according to the official.

Lebanon has long been a conduit for foreign currency entering war-torn Syria, a country heavily sanctioned by the US and Europe.

The value of the Syrian currency has also fallen markedly.

Lebanon is in the thick of its worst economic crisis since its 1975-1990 civil war, compounded by the coronavirus epidemic.

A liquidity crunch has seen banks in Lebanon halt dollar transfers and withdrawals.

Dozens of money exchange offices have been raided by security forces in recent weeks after their personnel allegedly purchased dollars at black market rates.

The head of the money changers' union, Mahmoud Mrad and the central bank's director of monetary operations, Mazen Hamdan, are among the many arrested for alleged exchange rate manipulation.

Commenting on charges against Hamdan, the central bank denied any "manipulation in currency exchange markets."



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Foreign workers seek evacuation from Lebanon
Lebanon central bank official probed over currency crash

Foreign workers seek evacuation from Lebanon

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Sat, 2020-05-16 16:22

BEIRUT: Foreign workers in Lebanon are seeking repatriation because the country's dire economic situation has left employers unable to pay them.

Many Lebanese people have ditched their foreign domestic help to avoid the cost of repatriating them to their home countries, or returned them to the employment agencies they were recruited from.

Domestic workers have also run away after employers stopped paying their salaries, seeking refuge in the embassies of their home countries in their bid to be evacuated.

There are more than 150,000 foreigners working legally in Lebanon, and 80,000 working illegally.

"We received videotapes of the detention of some 26 Filipino female workers, including a pregnant woman, in a building adjacent to their country's embassy in the Hadath area in the southern suburb of Beirut more than 35 days ago," Bassam Kantar, a member of Lebanon's National Human Rights Commission, which includes the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (LNHRC-CPT), told Arab News. "They were kept in a room in poor conditions. We visited the embassy and talked to the officials. There are more than 100 other workers inside the consulate awaiting repatriation."

Kantar said that the LNHRC-CPT had been contacted by other foreigners requesting repatriation, especially those who were working illegally. "The LNHRC-CPT contacted Lebanese General Security and it decided to exempt the employees from paying the residency allowance and fines. But it is unable to return them to their countries because it is the responsibility of their embassies."

He said that there was cooperation between the International Organization for Migration and Lebanese General Security to transfer such workers through planes belonging to airlines of other countries that were carrying workers of other nationalities.

Some airlines refused to send empty planes to Lebanon due to huge losses, he said, but explained the biggest problem related to workers from countries with which Lebanon had no diplomatic relations.

Bangladeshi janitors at RAMCO are still waiting for the company's promise to pay their salaries in dollars, not in Lebanese pounds, based on the official

dollar exchange rate of LBP1,515.

Dozens of these workers protested at the company's premises last week, and Kantar described the firm's behavior as "modern-day slavery."

The General Directorate of General Security announced on Saturday that it had started organizing trips to evacuate foreign workers willing to return voluntarily to their countries in coordination with the relevant departments and embassies.

The directorate said that, starting May 20, the repatriation of Egyptian and Ethiopian nationals would begin through Rafic Hariri International Airport in Beirut, and that coordination was also taking place with those concerned to secure additional flights for other nationalities.

Separately, more than 1,000 Syrian workers and their families who tried to leave Lebanon because they could no longer afford to live there have been stuck at border points after Damascus refused to allow them in. They have been forced to sleep in the open, without food or drink.

"These people live in the open, and they are starving," a security source at the Al-Masnaa border crossing told Arab News. "Lebanon cannot do anything for them except offer humanitarian assistance, while the Syrian regime does not want to open the borders for them yet. They are chasing freight cars that cross the borders between the two countries to request a loaf of bread or a drop of drinking water."



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Lebanon central bank official probed over currency crashCrisis-hit Lebanon ready to float pound after aid: Finance minister