

Over 250 global artists urge Israel to end Gaza blockade

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PARIS: More than 250 global artists and writers including rocker Peter Gabriel, director Ken Loach and actor Viggo Mortensen have appealed to Israel to stop the "siege" of Gaza, saying the coronavirus epidemic could have a devastating effect in "the world's largest open air prison."

"Long before the global outbreak of COVID-19 threatened to overwhelm the already devastated health care system in Gaza, the UN had predicted that the blockaded coastal strip would be unlivable by 2020," the online letter said. "With the pandemic, Gaza's almost two million inhabitants, predominantly refugees, face a mortal threat in the world's largest open-air prison," it added.

Other signatories included poet Taha Adnan, Canadian writer Naomi Klein and British group Massive Attack.

The Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli blockade since 2007 when the Islamist movement Hamas started controlling the enclave.

Israel and Hamas have fought three wars since but reached a truce in late 2018 that was renewed after successive flare-ups last year.

"Well before the ongoing crisis, Gaza's hospitals were already stretched to breaking point through lack of essential resources denied by Israel's siege. Its health care system could not cope with the thousands of gunshot wounds, leading to many amputations," the artists said.

"Reports of the first cases of coronavirus in densely-populated Gaza are therefore deeply disturbing," they said.

"We back Amnesty International's call on all world governments to impose a military embargo on Israel until it fully complies with its obligations under international law."



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Saudi Cabinet condemns Israeli airstrikes on the Gaza Strip

[Sudan inflation soars to 99% as food prices rise](#)

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Sat, 2020-05-16 12:29

KHARTOUM: Inflation in Sudan jumped to 99 percent because of rising food prices, official figures showed Saturday, more than a year after the country was rocked by protests sparked by bread price hikes.

The inflation rate in April shot up from 82 percent the previous month due to increased prices of grains, meat, milk and bread, according to the Sudanese

Central Bureau of Statistics.

Despite Sudan's political transition, which has raised hopes of more reforms, the economy remains in deep crisis.

Soaring inflation, a scarcity of foreign currency and a huge public debt are among the country's most pressing challenges.

Many in Sudan still have to queue for hours to buy bread.

A tripling of the price of bread was the trigger for the first street protests against long-time autocrat Omar Al-Bashir in December 2018.

The mass demonstrations went on for months before the army deposed Bashir on April 11, 2019.

Last month, Sudanese authorities announced an increase in bread prices, meaning one Sudanese pound (about two US cents) now buys only a 50-gram loaf of bread, compared to one weighing 70 grams previously.



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Sudan extends Khartoum curfew to slow coronavirus spread
Sudan says US approves ambassador, first in two decades

Qatar coronavirus infections top 30,000

Author:

Reuters

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Sat, 2020-05-16 11:16

DUBAI: Qatar's number of novel coronavirus infections topped 30,000 on Saturday, according to a Reuters tally based on official figures. The health ministry reported 1,547 new cases on Saturday, according to the state-run Qatar News Agency. That took the cumulative total to 30,972, according to the Reuters count.



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[Coronavirus](#)

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Qatar makes face masks mandatory on threat of jail, fines Qatar's migrant workers 'beg for food' amid coronavirus outbreak

EU to push Israel to ditch West Bank annexation plans

Author:

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Fri, 2020-05-15 17:28

BRUSSELS: The EU will make a diplomatic push to try to stop Israel going ahead with a plan to annex parts of the occupied West Bank, the bloc's foreign policy chief said Friday.

Josep Borrell said the bloc would use "all our diplomatic capacities" to try to dissuade Israel's incoming government from going ahead with the move, approved under US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan.

While EU countries are alarmed at the prospect of annexations, which they say would violate international law and harm the chances of peace, they are divided about what action to take against Israel.

"What everybody agreed is we have to increase our efforts and our reachout to all relevant actors in the Middle East...," Borrell said after the talks.

"We are ready to do that and we will do that in the next days using all our diplomatic capacities in order to prevent any kind of unilateral action."

The push will involve talking to Washington and Arab countries as well as Israel and the Palestinians, Borrell said.

Israel's long-awaited unity government will be sworn in on Sunday – after three inconclusive elections in less than a year and a power-sharing agreement between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former rival Benny Gantz.

Some EU countries have pushed for the bloc to take a hard line against Israel, with Luxembourg's veteran foreign minister Jean Asselborn in particular calling for the recognition of a Palestinian state.

But others have urged caution and dialogue with Israel, which is seen as an important EU partner in the Middle East.

"We are in a dialogue with the responsible parties, including in Israel," German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said.

"We have always made it clear... that we are committed to the goal of a negotiated two-state solution, and that we believe that annexations are not compatible with international law."



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[Jordan warns Israel of 'massive conflict' over annexation](#)

Author:

By LORNE COOK | AP

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Fri, 2020-05-15 16:56

BRUSSELS: Jordan's king warned Israel of a "massive conflict" if it proceeds with plans to annex large parts of the occupied West Bank, as European Union foreign ministers agreed on Friday to step up diplomatic efforts to try to head off such a move.

Israel has vowed to annex Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley, which could spell the end of the long-stalled peace process by making it virtually impossible to establish a viable Palestinian state. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has moved a step closer by reaching an agreement to form a

government after more than a year of political deadlock.

President Donald Trump's Middle East plan, which overwhelmingly favors Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians, gave a green light to annexation, but most of the rest of the international community is strongly opposed.

"Leaders who advocate a one-state solution do not understand what that would mean," Jordan's King Abdullah II said in an interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel published Friday.

"What would happen if the Palestinian National Authority collapsed? There would be more chaos and extremism in the region. If Israel really annexed the West Bank in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan," he said.

Jordan is a close Western ally and one of only two Arab states to have signed a peace treaty with Israel. Abdullah declined to say whether annexation would threaten that agreement.

"I don't want to make threats and create an atmosphere of loggerheads, but we are considering all options. We agree with many countries in Europe and the international community that the law of strength should not apply in the Middle East," he said.

At a video-conference, EU foreign ministers reaffirmed their support for a two-state solution and opposition to any annexation. The ministers, whose countries are deeply divided in their approach to Israel, agreed to ramp up diplomatic efforts in coming days with Israel, the Palestinians, the United States and Arab countries.

"We reaffirm our position in support of a negotiated, two-state solution. For this to be possible, unilateral action from either side should be avoided and, for sure, international law should be upheld," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said after chairing the meeting.

"We must work to discourage any possible initiative toward annexation," Borrell told reporters in Brussels. "International law has to be upheld. Here, and there, and everywhere."

He made no mention of the use of sanctions, saying only that the EU will use "all our diplomatic capacities in order to prevent any kind of unilateral action."

The ministers had planned to welcome the formation of a new Israeli government and offer the bloc's cooperation, but Netanyahu and his rival-turned-partner, Benny Gantz, have postponed the swearing-in of their controversial new Cabinet as the Israeli leader tries to quell infighting within his Likud party.

The ceremony, originally scheduled for Thursday, is now planned for Sunday to give Netanyahu more time to hand out coveted Cabinet appointments to members of his party. Their coalition agreement allows him to present an annexation proposal as soon as July 1.

The EU has long been committed to a two-state solution based on the 1967 lines, with the possibility of mutually agreed land-swaps. Israel seized east Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the 1967 war. The Palestinians want all three to form their future state.

The bloc has already rejected Trump's Mideast plan, which would allow Israel to annex about a third of the West Bank, leaving the Palestinians with heavily conditioned statehood in scattered territorial enclaves surrounded by Israel.

"In our opinion, an annexation is not compatible with international law,"

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Friday. “From our point of view, changes to borders must, if at all, be the result of negotiations and happen in agreement between both sides.”

Jordan has been lobbying the EU to take “practical steps” to make sure annexation doesn’t happen.

In a statement, Jordan’s Foreign Minister Ayman Al-Safadi “stressed the need for the international community and the European Union in particular to take practical steps that reflect the rejection of any Israeli decision to annex.”



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[Jordan’s King Abdullah II](#)

Jordan repatriation continues with 16 flights to bring nationals home
Jordan eases lockdown, public sector to return to work on May 26