

Lebanon signs request for IMF aid

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Fri, 2020-05-01 17:18

BEIRUT: Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab and Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni have signed a request for aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Diab called it an "historic moment" in the history of Lebanon. "We have taken the first step on the path of saving Lebanon from the deep financial gap and it would be difficult to get out of it without efficient and impactful help," he said.

Lebanese politicians have traded blame over who is responsible for the country's financial crisis, the worst since its 15-year civil war ended in 1990.

International donors have long demanded that Lebanon institute major economic changes and anti-corruption measures to unlock \$11 billion in pledges made in 2018.

But the country's economic crisis deepened, and the cash-strapped government announced in March it was defaulting on its sovereign debt for the first time.

The request for IMF aid comes as thousands of people lose their jobs and key sectors buckle under the double-whammy of a worsening economic situation and the coronavirus pandemic.

The Lebanese Ministry of Labor said it had received 234 requests between Oct. 17, 2019, and April 30, 2020, to terminate employment contracts.

The figure means 5,012 registered workers have lost their jobs, but it is believed that this number is not realistic and that hundreds of institutions have terminated employment contracts with their employees without informing the ministry.

Acting president of the General Labor Union, Hassan Fakhri, said that more than 75 percent of institutions, especially those in the tourism, industrial, commercial, and transport sectors, had closed because of dire straits.

"More than 60 percent of workers and employees have left their workplaces, while the rest are working in dangerous conditions in hospitals, retail stores, food factories, and transportation," he told Arab News.

"Some of them are receiving half or quarter a salary. Hundreds of thousands of workers have been laid off. Many of them did not even receive compensation in light of the disrupted judiciary. The government has not taken the appropriate, rapid, and transparent measures, and it suspiciously slowed the

distribution of planned aid, leaving people to two options: Dying of hunger or allowing the coronavirus epidemic to claim their lives.”

Coca-Cola said Thursday that it would permanently shut down in Lebanon and lay off all its employees, the second time it has ceased operations in the country. The first time was during the civil war.

The news followed the prestigious Le Bristol Hotel in Beirut saying that it was closing its doors permanently and laying off its employees.

The worsening situation and the return of the political old guard, despite a new government promising reforms, has led people to resume their protests amid the coronavirus shutdown.

Labor Day, an official holiday in Lebanon, gave activists the chance to reoccupy public squares and restore the tents that security forces had removed to prevent gatherings during the pandemic.

The activists took to Riad Al-Solh and Martyrs’ squares in the center of Beirut. They staged a sit-in outside the Banque du Liban on Hamra Street, the Ministry of Labor, and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

They also demonstrated in Aley in Mount Lebanon, in Nabatieh, Tyre, and Rachaya in the south, and in Tripoli in the north. There were chants against corruption and “the officials who looted the country.” People waved the Lebanese flag and raised banners on which they wrote their demands.

Activists believe that the reform plan approved by the government on Thursday aims to burden people with the economic collapse while relieving those in power of accountability.

Army units were brought in to prevent riots. Some banks resorted to shielding their glass windows with iron plates to avoid damage after riots in some areas affected branches.

Retired Brig. Gen. George Nader, who is involved in the movement, said they had no confidence in a government of “disguised” advisers. “The economic plan has not addressed any of the main files,” he added. “The solution is to recover the stolen money – there is no other solution.”

Ján Kubiš, the UN secretary-general’s representative in Lebanon, tweeted that peaceful protests were not only a right, they were a “critical necessity” to continue pressing on the government and, at times, reluctant political forces to implement deep structural reforms for a better, just and dignified future for the Lebanese. “They will always have full support of the UN,” he added.

According to World Bank estimates, 45 percent of Lebanese people live in poverty, while the proportion of extreme poverty expanded from 8 percent to 20 percent.

Minister of Labor Lamia Yammine promised to follow up on labor protection policy by announcing an emergency plan to address cases of mass layoffs.

Yamine said that 30 percent of institutions in Lebanon were closed, while 20 percent were paying salaries reduced by half.



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Coca-Cola fizzles out in Lebanon with economic downturn
Hezbollah 'a burden' on Lebanon, says former MP Fares Souaid

[Abu Dhabi stem cell center develops 'promising' new COVID-19 treatment](#)

Fri, 2020-05-01 17:43

LONDON: An aerosol treatment for the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) developed by a team of doctors and researchers in the UAE had shown "promising" results, the Emirates News Agency (WAM) reported on Friday.

The treatment was given to 73 patients suffering with COVID-19 in the UAE and all of them went on to make a complete recovery.

The Emirati Ministry of Economy said on Friday it had granted a patent to the Abu Dhabi Stem Cell Center (ADSCC) to develop the treatment further through the use of stem cells.

BREAKING: A UAE research institute has developed a breakthrough treatment for COVID-19 which could be a game-changer in the global fight against the virus. 1/5

- هند مانع العتيبة Hend Al Otaiba (@hend_mana) [May 1, 2020](#)

According to WAM, stem cells are extracted from the patient's blood and then reintroduced in an "activated" state to the lungs through inhalation after being nebulized into a fine mist.

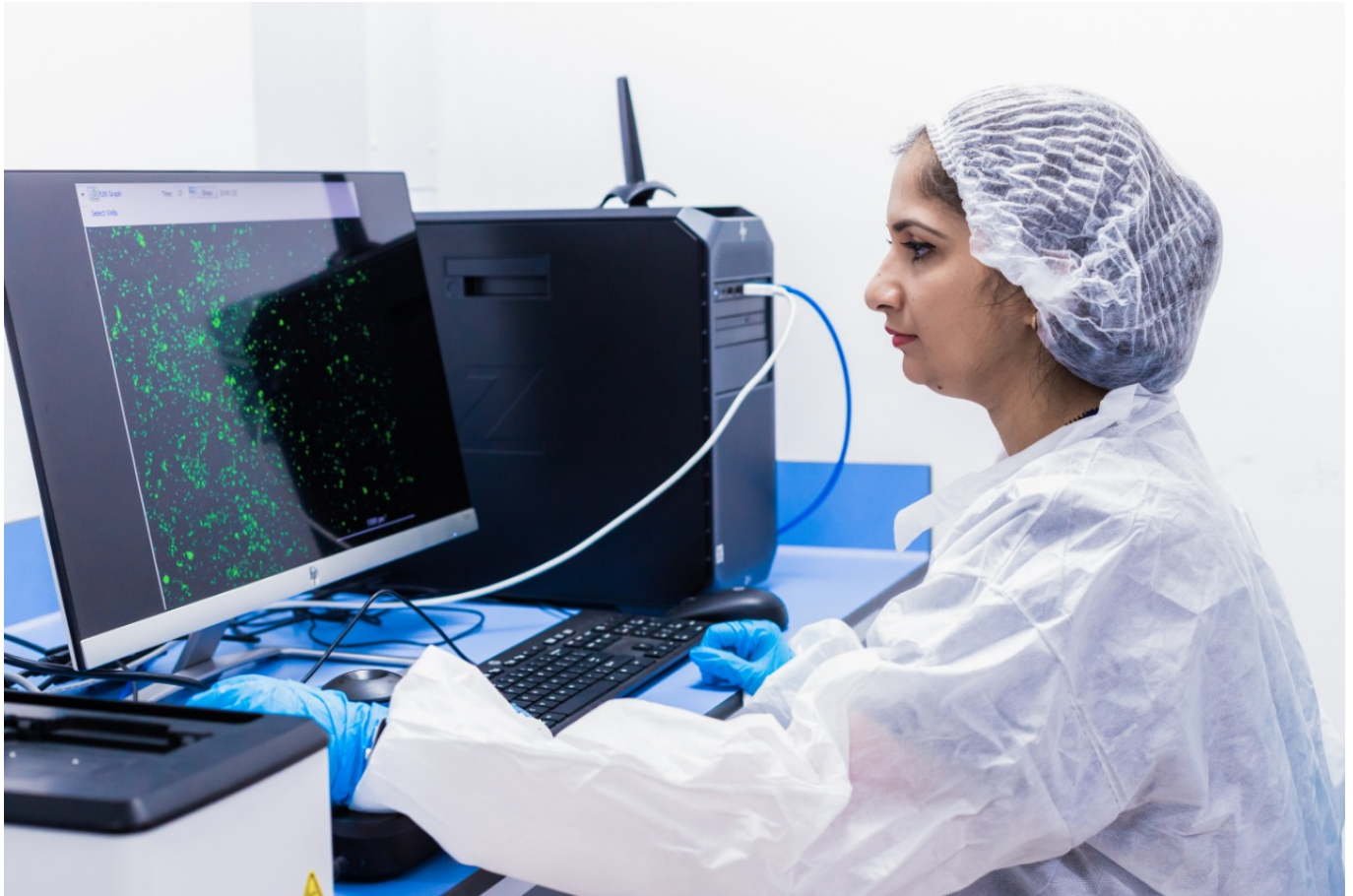
ADSCC researchers said the mist had a therapeutic effect, helping to regenerate lung cells and alter the response of the immune system to stop it from overreacting to the COVID-19 infection and causing more damage to healthy cells.

The treatment has undergone and successfully passed the first stage of clinical trials with further tests to demonstrate its effectiveness being carried out over the next two weeks.

The new treatment was provided to patients in conjunction with standard treatment protocols for COVID-19 and will continue to be used as an aid to these methods not as a substitute for them, the report added.

On Friday, the UAE had 13,038 confirmed cases of COVID-19, with 111 deaths and 2,543 recoveries.





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Potential UK coronavirus vaccine producer eyes making a million doses a month
UN urges world to quickly scale up medicines, vaccines

[Iran denies US claim it's helping Venezuela oil sector](#)

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Fri, 2020-05-01 13:01

TEHRAN: Iran on Friday rejected US claims it is helping Venezuela to rebuild its oil industry, saying the accusations are designed to increase pressure

and disrupt the two countries' trade ties.

Elliott Abrams, the envoy leading US efforts to topple Venezuela's leftist leader Nicolas Maduro, has alleged that the cash-strapped country is paying Iran in gold to restore the troubled sector.

US President Donald Trump's administration has imposed unilateral sanctions aimed at ending oil exports from Iran and Venezuela, both major crude producers.

Iran's foreign ministry in a statement called Abrams' claims "baseless," without directly addressing accusations that the Islamic republic is being paid in gold.

It accused Washington of trying to increase "pressure on Venezuela's government and disrupt trade between Iran and Venezuela."

It said US policies against Venezuela including "economic sanctions, military threats and a recent transition council" had failed.

Washington was now "trying to create obstacles in Venezuela's plan to rebuild its refineries and produce oil products such as petrol, which is in short supply due to cruel US sanctions."

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves but analysts say that the sector operates below capacity.

The country's economy has been collapsing, with millions fleeing as they lack basic goods.

Iran has also taken a hit from US sanctions after Trump pulled out of a nuclear accord and reimposed them in 2018.

Maduro has withstood more than a year of US-led efforts to remove him and retains the support of the military.

Iran has repeatedly expressed support for Maduro against opposition leader Juan Guaido, who is recognized by some 60 nations as interim president due to reports of irregularities in Maduro's 2018 re-election.



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Man accused of Iran death plot in Denmark goes on trial Iranian couple, influencers sentenced to 16 years in prison

[**Egypt army says 10 soldiers killed or injured in North Sinai blast**](#)

Author:

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Thu, 2020-04-30 22:15

CAIRO: Egypt's army said on Thursday that 10 soldiers were either killed or wounded in a blast targeting an armored vehicle in the restive northern Sinai.

The attack occurred south the city of Bir Al-Abed in the troubled North Sinai

region, the epicenter of a long-running extremist insurgency spearheaded by a local affiliate of the Daesh group.

Army spokesman Tamer Al-Rifai said the 10 casualties included an officer but did not provide details on the number of those killed or wounded.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which occurred during the Islamic holy fasting month of Ramadan.

Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi extended his condolences to the victims on Twitter.

Security forces have for years been battling to contain the insurgency in the turbulent North Sinai which intensified following the military's 2013 ouster of Islamist President Muhammad Mursi.

Scores of soldiers and police were killed in militant attacks especially in the turbulent region over the years.

In February 2018, Egyptian security forces launched a nationwide, large-scale operation against militants, mainly focused on the North Sinai region.

More than 845 suspected militants have been killed in the region along with more than 60 security personnel, according to army figures.



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Egypt's 'corona coexistence' plan to begin after Eid holidays
Egypt reviews COVID-19 plan

Syria says Israeli helicopters strike targets in southern Syria

Author:

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1588334498855389700

Fri, 2020-05-01 11:30

AMMAN: Israeli helicopters fired several rockets from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights on targets inside southern Syria, Syrian state media reported on Friday, in what intelligence sources say is part of an increase in strikes against Iran-backed militias.

Opposition sources in the area said several militia posts near Quneitra were targeted in the attack, which reports said caused only material damage.

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli army.

Bases and convoys run by Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia, which has a strong presence in the Syrian Golan Heights, have been hit by Israel in recent years.

A regional intelligence source said Israel was stepping up raids in Syria at a time when world attention and the region, including Syria, were distracted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Separately, the Syrian army said on Friday a series of blasts at an ammunition depot east of Homs had led to casualties but was not caused by an attack as earlier announced.

However, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the blasts were caused by Israeli strikes targeting a military base on the Homs-Palmyra road run by Hezbollah.

Two weeks ago, an Israeli drone attack targeted a car carrying forces from Hezbollah in southern Syria along the border with Lebanon without causing casualties.

A few days later, Israel struck central Syria near the ancient city of Palmyra, in what regional intelligence sources said were Iranian-backed outposts and a command center.

Israel has acknowledged in recent years it has conducted many raids inside Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011.

After Syria announced last Monday it had intercepted airstrikes by Israel near the capital Damascus, Israeli defense minister Naftali Bennett told Israeli media that Israel would step up its campaign against Iran in Syria. "We have moved from blocking Iran's entrenchment in Syria to forcing it out of there, and we will not stop," Bennett said in a statement.

"We will not allow more strategic threats to grow just across our borders without taking action, We will continue to take the fight to the enemy's territory," Bennett said.

The Syrian army said Monday's strikes had killed three Syrian civilians and injured several others from shrapnel that hit their homes.

Israel says Iran's military presence in Syria, where its militias are

fighting alongside Syrian President Bashar al Assad's forces, is a strategic threat and claims Tehran seeks a permanent presence along its northern borders.

The threat of direct confrontation between arch-enemies Israel and Iran has long simmered in Syria.

Assad has said Iranian forces are welcome to stay in Syria after years of military victories in which Iran and Russia have played a key role in bringing back most of the country under his control.



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Israeli strikes near Syria capital kill 3 civilians
Syrian government ends school early for over 4 million students