

Violence erupts for second night in Beirut after hundreds injured

Author:

By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

ID:

1579445896225672400

Sun, 2020-01-19 14:24

BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces fired water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas on Sunday to try to break up stone-throwing protesters in Beirut, which has been rocked by some of the worst violence since unrest erupted in October.

Sunday's confrontation broke out near parliament a day after more than 370 people were wounded, the biggest casualty toll since the protests against the ruling elite began.

Unrest in the capital this week has deepened the multi-faceted crisis sweeping Lebanon as it grapples with financial strains that have sunk the currency, pushed up prices and driven banks to impose capital controls. Politicians have failed to agree on a government or an economic rescue plan since the protests pushed Saad al-Hariri to quit as prime minister in October.

"We have gone from being a country we used to call the Switzerland of the east to a country ranked at the bottom in everything," said housewife Rezzan Barraaj, 47, at Sunday night's protest.

"It's clear that the more they (security forces) step up their violence, the more people's strength and determination grow."

A Reuters witness saw police fire rubber bullets. The Lebanese Red Cross said it treated 52 people and took 38 to hospital.

Hundreds of people yelled "revolution" in the commercial district of the capital. Protesters pelted riot police with stones and fireworks.

Some tried to climb over barbed wire and fencing to storm a heavily barricaded part of central Beirut that includes parliament. One man jabbed police with a pole across the barriers as the violence escalated.

Zeina Ibrahim, 37, an office manager, said protesters had faced violence from police and attacks from supporters of the sectarian, dominant parties.

"Violence only breeds violence," she said. "After all this time, all these months...I don't blame protesters at all if they move bit by bit towards violence."

The Internal Security Forces (ISF) urged people to remain calm and said otherwise it would be forced to repel them.

The interior and defence ministers and army and other security chiefs were set to meet at the presidential palace on Monday.

Human Rights Watch on Saturday called for an end to a "culture of impunity for abuse" by police, which it said fired tear gas canisters at some people's heads.

Interior Minister Raya al-Hassan said people had the right to protest but it was unacceptable to "blatantly assault" security forces.

Protesters have also turned their anger on the banks – which have curbed

access to savings – with some smashing the facade of the banking association on Saturday night.

Hassan Diab, who was designated prime minister with the backing of Islamist movement Hezbollah and its allies last month, met with President Aoun on Sunday.

A senior political source told Reuters the government line-up would be finalised on Sunday, but Diab left without commenting as a cabinet deal remained elusive.



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[Jordan parliament passes draft law to](#)

ban gas imports from Israel

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1579442146345334800

Sun, 2020-01-19 13:21

AMMAN: Jordan's parliament on Sunday approved a draft law to ban imports of Israeli gas to the country just days after they started under a multibillion-dollar deal struck in 2016 which is opposed by much of the population.

The motion was passed unanimously by Jordan's 130 lawmakers and will be referred to the cabinet to be made law, although legal hurdles may prevent it coming into force.

The government has previously said it was a deal between companies rather than a political matter.

The \$10 billion supply deal was originally struck between Jordan's state-owned utility and a US Israeli consortium led by Texas-based Noble Energy, to provide gas to the country's power plants for electricity generation.

It was not referred to parliament for approval.

Although US ally Jordan has a peace treaty with Israel the deal, which supplies Jordan for 15 years, has faced much popular opposition, with lawmakers arguing it makes the kingdom dependent on its neighbor for energy.

Many Jordanians are also the descendants of Palestinians who moved to the country after the creation of Israel in 1948, and view Israel as an erstwhile enemy that expelled their ancestors from their homes.

The Jordanian government said after the agreement was signed in 2016 that securing stable energy prices for the next decade could achieve annual savings of at least \$500 million and help reduce a chronic budget deficit.

The import of Israeli gas has become a major focus in Jordan and sparked protests and calls for both the deal and the peace treaty to be scrapped.

"The gas of the enemy is an occupation. Down with the gas deal," placards carried by protesters said.

Jordan's ties with Israel have come under increasing strain since the gas deal was struck as Israel has moved to the right and since Donald Trump replaced Barack Obama as US president.

Jordan's King Abdullah fears Israel's rejection of a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank could spark renewed violence and see a new generation of Palestinians relocating to Jordan.



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Jordan's king raises Palestine's plight in talks with Macron

[UK's Johnson, France's Macron reiterate commitment to Iran nuclear deal](#)

Sun, 2020-01-19 16:47

LONDON: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and French President Emmanuel Macron reiterated their commitment on Sunday to the Iran nuclear deal and agreed a long-term framework was needed, Downing Street said on Sunday. "On Iran, the leaders reiterated their commitment to the JCPoA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) and also acknowledged the need to define a long-term framework to prevent Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon," a Downing Street spokeswoman said in a statement after the two met on the sidelines of

a Libya summit in Berlin.

“They agreed on the importance of de-escalation and of working with international partners to find a diplomatic way through the current tensions.”



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[Libya players agree to respect arms](#)

embargo, push cease-fire

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1579440316015171800

Sun, 2020-01-19 12:55

BERLIN: Countries with interests in Libya's long-running civil war agreed Sunday to respect a much-violated arms embargo, hold off on military support to the warring parties and push them to reach a full cease-fire, German and UN leaders said.

The agreement came after about four hours of talks at the chancellery in Berlin. German Chancellor Angela Merkel hosted leaders of 11 countries involved in the conflict, with Libya's two main rival leaders also in the German capital but not at the main conference table.

Organizers knew that "we had to succeed in getting all the parties that connected in any way with the Libya conflict to speak with one voice ... because then the parties inside Libya will also understand that there is only a non-military way to a solution," Merkel said. "We achieved this result here."

Among those who attended were Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The participants agreed that "we want to respect the arms embargo, and that the arms embargo will be more strongly controlled than was the case in the past," she said. She added that the results of the conference should be endorsed by the UN Security Council.

Libya's two main rival leaders, Prime Minister Fayez Sarraj and Gen. Khalifa Haftar, said the two men named members of a military committee that will represent them at talks on a more permanent cease-fire, Merkel.

UN Secretary-General Guterres said that the committee would be convened "in Geneva in the coming days."

Merkel said the summit participants agreed that they will give no further support to the warring parties in Libya ahead of the committee's meeting and "cease operations as long as the cease-fire holds."

Guterres said the Berlin conference had succeed in fending off "the risk of a true regional escalation."

"That risk was averted in Berlin – provided, of course, that it is possible to maintain the truce and then to move into a cease-fire," he said.

Guterres underlined the urgency of that next step, saying all the participants committed to "put pressure on the parties for a full cease-fire to be reached."

"We cannot monitor something that doesn't exist," Guterres said. "We have a truce."

Merkel added that the participants would continue to hold regular further meetings to ensure the process continues "so the people in Libya get their right to a peaceful life."

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said that "we know that today's signatures

aren't enough."

He said countries that weren't invited Sunday will be given the opportunity to participate in future meetings of the four committees dealing with various aspects of the crisis, among them military issues and the economy.

"We know that the work has only just started," Maas said, but praised the "spirit of cooperation" seen in Berlin.

Meanwhile, Macron hit out against foreign troop deployments in Libya, saying such intervention only serves to fuel the conflict and create new risks for everyone.

Voicing his "acute concerns over the arrival of Syrian and foreign fighters in the city of Tripoli," Macron told the Berlin summit that "that must end." Ankara has been accused of sending hundreds of Syrian fighters into Tripoli to back up Sarraj's government.

Libya has sunk further into chaos since the 2011 ouster and killing of its longtime dictator, Muammar Qaddafi. It is now divided into rival administrations, each backed by different nations: the weak UN-recognized government based in Tripoli, headed by Sarraj, and one based in the country's east, supported by Hafter's forces.

Hafter's forces are backed by Egypt, Russia and the United Arab Emirates, while the Tripoli government has turned to Turkey for troops and weapons.





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[Iraq protests swell with youth angry at slow pace of reform](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1579435808934837600

Sun, 2020-01-19 12:06

BAGHDAD: Iraqi youth angry at their government's glacial pace of reform ramped up their protests on Sunday, sealing streets with burning tires and

threatening further escalation unless their demands are met.

The rallies demanding an overhaul of the ruling system have rocked Shiite-majority parts of Iraq since October, but had thinned out in recent weeks amid rising Iran-US tensions.

Protesters had feared Iraq would be caught in the middle of the geopolitical storm and last Monday gave the government one week to make progress on reform pledges.

A day before the deadline expires, hundreds of angry young people descended on the main protest camp in Baghdad's Tahrir Square as well as nearby Tayaran Square.

They burned tires to block highways and bridges, turning back cars and causing traffic jams across the city.

At least 10 people including police officers were wounded when security forces tried to clear the sit-ins with tear gas and protesters responded by throwing rocks, medical and security sources said.

"This is only the first escalation," one protester with a scarf wrapped around his face said, as smoke from the tires turned the sky behind him a charcoal grey.

"We want to send a message to the government: Stop procrastinating! The people know what you're doing," he said, adding ominously: "Tomorrow the deadline ends, and then things could get totally out of control."

Protesters are demanding early elections based on a reformed voting law, a new prime minister to replace current caretaker premier Adel Abdel Mahdi and that officials deemed corrupt be held to account.

Abdel Mahdi resigned nearly two months ago, but political parties have thus far failed to agree on a successor and he has continued to run the government as a caretaker.

Demonstrators have publicly rejected the names circulating as possible replacements and are furious that other sweeping reform measures have not been implemented.

"We began to escalate today because the government did not respond to our demands, notably forming an independent government that could save Iraq," said Haydar Kadhim, a demonstrator in the southern protest hotspot of Nasiriyah.

"Last Monday, we gave them a deadline of seven days. That deadline ends tonight," Kadhim said.

A fellow protester, 20-year-old university student Mohammad Kareem, said more escalation could come.

"We gave the government a timeframe to implement our demands, but it looks like it doesn't care one bit," he said.

"We will keep up our movement and keep escalating to confront this government, which continues to procrastinate," Kareem said.

Rallies also swelled in the cities of Kut, Diwaniyah and Amara, where most government offices, schools and universities have been shuttered for months. In the holy city of Najaf, youth wrapped in checkered black-and-white scarves and carrying Iraqi flags lit tires and began a sit-in on a main road leading to the capital.

Further the south in the oil-rich port city of Basra, students gathered in an ongoing strike in support of the rallies elsewhere.

The protests are the largest and bloodiest grassroots movement in Iraq in decades, with nearly 460 people dead and over 25,000 wounded since they

erupted on October 1.

While the violence at the protests themselves has dropped slightly, activists say they face an escalating campaign of intimidation, kidnapping and assassination attempts.

Young protesters are also apprehensive about a rival protest on January 24 organized by firebrand cleric Moqtada Sadr in order to pressure US forces to leave.

Last week, Sadr urged Iraqis to hold “a million-strong, peaceful, unified demonstration to condemn the American presence and its violations.”

Iraqi political figures have ramped up their calls for foreign forces – including some 5,200 US troops – to leave the country following a US drone strike that killed Iran’s revered Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani and top Iraqi military official Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

Both were key brokers in Iraq’s political scene, which has been left reeling by their absence.

Iraq’s parliament voted on January 5 in favor of ousting foreign forces but the legal procedure for doing so remains murky.

Bases where US forces are stationed have been under a steady stream of rocket attacks for several months that have killed one American contractor and one Iraqi soldier.



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