

Lebanese celebrities join Beirut protests as anger rises over tax reforms

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1571502539405908500

Sat, 2019-10-19 19:26

BEIRUT: Lebanese celebrities joined thousands of protesters on the streets of Beirut on Saturday to voice their anger at the country's ruling elite. Singers, actors and playwrights were among a host of high-profile artists who backed demands for action over government corruption and to counter Lebanon's spiralling economic crisis.

Beirut has been shrouded in smoke for three days following widespread protests and rioting over government tax plans.

A video emerged on social media showing actress Nadine Al-Rassi preparing to set fire to a car tire in downtown Beirut and crying inconsolably about her financial state.

The actress, wearing jeans and her face blackened, told protesters: "I am Nadine Al-Rassi. I was hungry for seven days. I have debts. Banque du Liban (Lebanon's central bank) seized my house and I am unable to rent a home. Corrupt people should be held responsible."

الممثلة نادين الراسي #لبنان_ينتفض #بدنا_نجاسب
pic.twitter.com/hpNPuW6enP

– Rania El Khatib (@rania_elkhatib) [October 18, 2019](#)

In a series of tweets, Lebanese recording artist Elissa, who is abroad, supported the protesters' demands, saying: "This is the first time I wish I were in Lebanon. My heart is with you."

In another tweet, the high-profile singer, one of the Middle East's best-selling performers, said: "I proudly follow the news of Beirut and its citizens ... who are demanding a decent life. It is time for people to get back their dignity."

Meanwhile, singer and composer Ragheb Alama expressed his dismay at a Council of Ministers plan to impose a daily fee on WhatsApp calls.

"The people's misfortunes are not funny. Why don't you tax the polluted air people breathe? It is a great idea that brings money to your fathers' treasury, too," he wrote.

Alama accused the Parliament of responsibility for the country's dire economy: "Why do deputies receive money, privileges and overheads, and what have they done? They covered up for looting and stealing for decades. They are responsible for destroying the economy and the country."

Nancy Ajram, one of the Arab world's most popular singers, wrote on Twitter: "My heart goes out to my country every moment and with every heartbeat. We are a people who deserves to live and it is our right to live with dignity. May God protect Lebanon."

Singer and actress Haifa Wehbe tweeted: "There is nothing better than the Lebanese people when they stand in unity and under one slogan, without any political affiliation. We are all for our country."

Comedian and prime-time TV host Hisham Haddad was among celebrities who joined protesters at Riad El-Solh Square, near the Prime Minister's office, site of the biggest centralized demonstrations.

Actress Maguy Bou Ghosn, singer Moeen Shreif, actors Abdo Chahine, Badih Abou Chakra and Junaid Zeineldine, playwright Ziad Itani and musician Ziyad Sahhab also joined the protests.

Actor Wissam Hanna called on Twitter for protesters to close the Beirut Airport road to stop corrupt officials fleeing the country.

"I am all for closing down the airport road to stop thieves from fleeing. I am all for recovering stolen funds. Lebanon rises, revolts and it is time to hold them accountable," he wrote.

Actress Gretta Aoun said: "We have to take to the streets. They must know the extent of our pain."







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[Lebanon protests](#)

[Nancy Ajram](#)

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Tens of thousands gather across Lebanon for third day of protests
Saudi Embassy evacuates 300 tourists from Lebanon

[Libya's navy intercepts about 150 Europe-bound migrants](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1571486507264147500

Sat, 2019-10-19 11:20

CAIRO: Libya's coast guard says it has intercepted around 150 Europe-bound migrants off the country's Mediterranean coast.

Spokesman Ayoub Gassim said Saturday the migrants had been returned to shore and would be taken to a detention center in the capital, Tripoli.

Gassim said the three rubber boats with 148 Arab and African migrants were

stopped off Libya's western towns of Zuwara and Sabrata Friday, and included 15 women and 11 children.

Libya has emerged as a major transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe. In recent years, the EU has partnered with Libya's coast guard and other local groups to stem the dangerous sea crossings.

Rights groups, however, say those policies leave migrants at the mercy of armed groups or confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuses.



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At least two die, 22 rescued from migrant boat off Sicily
Libya's coast guard intercepts 31 Europe-bound migrants

[Egypt reveals details of 30 ancient](#)

coffins found in Luxor

Author:

AP

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1571483071973875200

Sat, 2019-10-19 10:57

LUXOR: Egypt's antiquities authority has revealed the details of 30 ancient wooden coffins recently discovered in the southern city of Luxor.

Mostafa Waziri, secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, told reporters Saturday that the coffins, with inscriptions and paintings, were found in the Asasif Necropolis on the River Nile's west bank near Luxor.

He says the coffins were for men, women and children from the 22nd dynasty (945 B.C. 715 B.C.), and had been collected and hidden by a priest for fear of being looted.

He says the coffins were in two layers, with the ones on top across those below.

Egypt has sought publicity for its archaeological discoveries in the hopes of reviving its tourism sector, which was badly hit by the turmoil following the 2011 uprising.



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Millions march in Iraq in annual Arbaeen Shiite pilgrimage

Author:

AP

ID:

1571477976683553900

Sat, 2019-10-19 09:36

KARBALA: Millions of pilgrims are making their way on foot to the Iraqi city of Karbala for the annual Shiite pilgrimage of Arbaeen.

Saturday's commemoration includes more than 2 million Iranians and other Shiites from abroad. Militias patrolled roads leading into the city and escorted Iranian pilgrims from the border, hiking up security for processions that have previously been targeted by Sunni militant groups with bloody bombings.

This year's Arbaeen ceremonies take place amid widespread anger in Iraq's Shiite south over the government's heavy crackdown on protests that erupted earlier this month against unemployment, corruption and government mismanagement.

Arbaeen is regarded as the largest annual public gathering in the world and draws more pilgrims than the Hajj in Saudi Arabia, a pilgrimage required once in a lifetime of every able Muslim.



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Iran cleric says US, Israel behind Iraq unrest to disrupt Shiite pilgrimage there31 killed after walkway collapse triggers stampede at Iraqi Shiite shrine

[Tens of thousands gather across Lebanon for third day of protests](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1571476556173482000

Sat, 2019-10-19 09:13

BEIRUT: Tens of thousands of Lebanese people took to the streets Saturday for a third day of protests against tax increases and alleged official corruption

despite several arrests by security forces.

They streamed into the streets around the country's parliament in Beirut, as well as elsewhere across the country, AFP journalists said, despite calls for calm from politicians and dozens of arrests on Friday.

The number of protesters grew steadily throughout the day, with major demonstrations in second city Tripoli, in the north, and other locations. Many waved billowing Lebanese flags and insisted the protests should remain peaceful and non-sectarian.

The demonstrators are demanding a sweeping overhaul of Lebanon's political system, citing grievances ranging from austerity measures to poor infrastructure.

They have crippled main roads and threatened to topple the country's fragile coalition government.

Most Lebanese politicians have uncharacteristically admitted the demonstrations are spontaneous, rather than blaming outside influence.

In Tripoli demonstrator Hoda Sayyur was unimpressed by the contrition some leaders displayed on television and echoed a widely-held hope that the entire political class be replaced.

"They took all our fundamental rights... We are dying at hospital gates," the woman in her fifties said.

"I will stay in the street... Since I was born, we've been spectators to their quarrels and corruption," she said.

The army on Saturday called on protesters to "express themselves peacefully without harming public and private property".

POLL: Will the 72-hour period announced by Prime Minister Saad Hariri be enough to solve the crisis in Lebanon?<https://t.co/XTDAMirEio>

– Arab News (@arabnews) [October 19, 2019](#)

Saturday evening thousands were again packed into the Riyadh al-Solh Square in central Beirut, despite security forces using tear gas and water cannons to disperse similar crowds a day before.

The Internal Security Forces said 70 arrests were made Friday on accusations of theft and arson.

But all of those held at the main police barracks were released Saturday, the National News Agency (NNA) said.

It said that the father of one man detained tried to set himself on fire in front of a police station.

The demonstrations first erupted on Thursday, sparked by a proposed 20 cent tax on calls via messaging apps such as WhatsApp.

Such calls are the main method of communication for many Lebanese and, despite the government's swift abandonment of the tax, the demonstrations quickly swelled into the largest in years.

Prime Minister Saad Hariri has given his deeply divided coalition until Monday evening to give their backing to a reform package aimed at shoring up the government's finances and securing the disbursement of desperately needed economic assistance from donors.

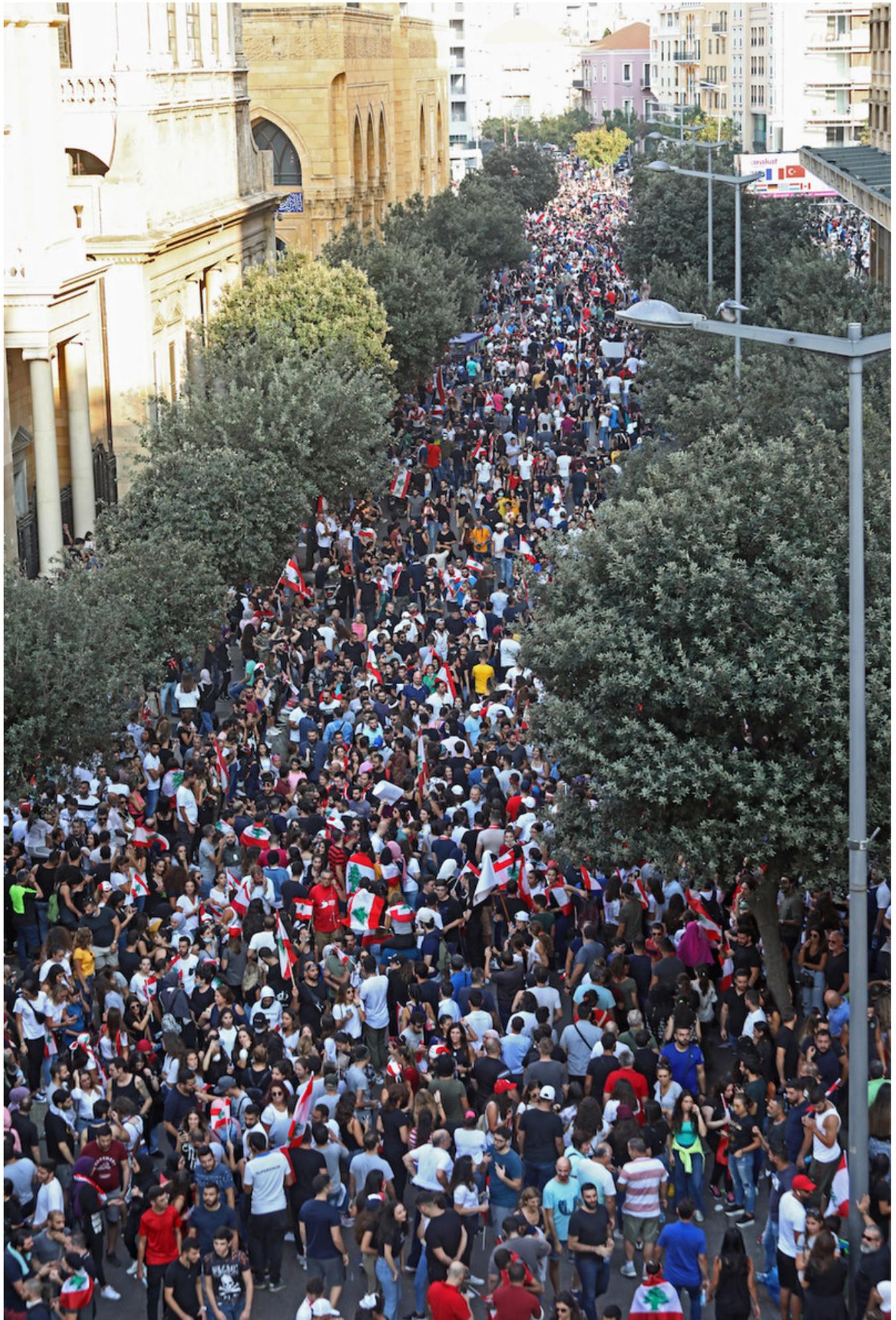
He held a series of meetings Saturday regarding the situation, NNA said. Hariri's political rival, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, gave his first response on Saturday, telling protesters their "message was heard loudly" and calling for political action.

In a thinly veiled criticism of Hariri, Nasrallah condemned those who had renounced their "responsibilities and were blaming others."

But he warned against demanding resignation of the government, saying it could take a long time to form a new one and solve the crisis.

The current unity government has the backing of most Lebanese political parties, including Hezbollah.

Karim el-Mufti, a Lebanese political scientist, said Hezbollah, which is fighting in neighbouring Syria alongside the government of Bashar al-Assad, wanted to avoid potential chaos at home.



In the southern port city of Tyre, supporters of Shia politician and speaker of parliament Nabih Berri attacked protesters Saturday, a witness said, a day after demonstrators had accused him of corruption.

His Amal political party condemned the attack and called for an investigation.

More than a quarter of the Lebanese population lives below the poverty line, according to the World Bank.

Many of the country's senior politicians came to prominence during the country's 15-year civil war, which ended in 1990.

A protester in the southern city of Nabatiyeh, a Hezbollah stronghold, said protesters are demanding their "rights". protesting.

"They are trying to portray us as a mob, but we are demanding our rights," he told a local television channel. "We are used to repression."

Lebanon has one of the highest public debt burdens in the world and the government is trying to reach agreement on a package of belt-tightening measures to cap the deficit in next year's budget.

The promised austerity moves are essential if Lebanon is to unlock \$11 billion in economic assistance pledged by international donors last year.

Growth has plummeted in recent years, with political deadlock compounded by the impact of eight years of war in neighbouring Syria.

Lebanon's public debt stands at around \$86 billion – more than 150 percent of gross domestic product – according to the finance ministry.

Lebanon agrees final budget with no taxes

Lebanon's finance minister said on Saturday following a meeting with Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri that they had agreed on a final budget that did not include any additional taxes or fees in a bid to appease nationwide protests. Lebanon President Michel Aoun said in a tweet that there would be a "reassuring solution" to the economic crisis.

(With Reuters)









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[Saad Al-Hariri](#)

[Nabih Berri](#)

[Gebran Bassil](#)

Saudi Arabia, other Middle East countries warn citizens after protests erupt in Lebanon
Protests sweep Lebanon for a second day