

Syria to UN envoy: Constitution is a 'sovereign' matter

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Sun, 2019-03-17 15:39

DAMASCUS: Syria's foreign minister says the country's constitution is a sovereign matter to be decided by the Syrians themselves without any foreign intervention.

The comments by Walid Al-Moallem were made during a meeting with the United Nations' special envoy to Syria, Geir Pederson.

Pederson, who took up his post in January, arrived in Syria on Sunday for meetings with Syrian officials. The envoy has said that the long-delayed formation of a committee to draft a new constitution for Syria is "a potential door-opener for the political process."

The 150-member committee is intended to represent the government, the opposition and civil society and is seen by the UN as key to holding free elections and ending the civil war in Syria, which entered its ninth year this week.



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[Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Moualem](#)
[Geir Pedersen](#)

For Syrians, 8 years of war leaves stories of loss and hope
Syria slams 'hypocrisy' of donors

Fresh rallies against Al-Bashir as Sudan secures \$300M loans

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By SAMY MAGDY | AP

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Sun, 2019-03-17 13:45

CAIRO: Hundreds of Sudanese took part in anti-government protests in the capital and other cities on Sunday as the government announced it had secured \$300 million in loans to address the economic crisis that triggered the unrest.

The demonstrations began in December over price hikes and food shortages, and quickly escalated into calls for President Omar Al-Bashir to step down, posing one of the biggest challenges yet to his nearly 30-year rule. Security forces have responded with a fierce crackdown that has killed dozens of people.

The rallies are being led by the Sudanese Professionals Association, an umbrella group of independent professional unions. Footage posted online showed dozens of people marching in Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, chanting: "Freedom, dignity and justice." In some videos, security forces are seen using tear gas to disperse demonstrators.

Also Sunday, dozens of families demonstrated in front of the headquarters of the National Intelligence and Security Service in Khartoum, calling for the release of detained relatives, according to activists who spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing for their safety.

A leading Sudanese geneticist was among those arrested. Muntasir Ibrahim, who heads the University of Khartoum's Institute of Endemic Diseases, was arrested on Feb. 21 from a mosque in the capital, said his son, Gassim Ibrahim.

Ibrahim said his father and other university professors had drafted an initiative for a peaceful transition of power. Police previously arrested his father on two occasions in January.

There was no immediate comment from authorities on Sunday's protests and a government spokesman did not respond to requests for comment.

Sunday's demonstrations took place as a US congress delegation is visiting Sudan to meet with government officials and opposition leaders, ahead of the start of a second phase of dialogue between the two countries.

Sudanese lawmaker Mutwakil Ahmed said in a statement the US delegation, led

by Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis, a Republican from Florida, met with Salah Gosh, the head of Sudan's National Intelligence and Security Services and other officials on Saturday to discuss religious freedoms in Sudan, as well the country's counterterrorism efforts.

In 2017, the US lifted decades-long sanctions, arguing that Sudan is making progress in areas of concern, including improving humanitarian access. The State Department last year agreed to a second phase of rapprochement with Sudan, laying out priorities to reconcile the two nations which have been at odds for nearly three decades.

At the time, no specific timeline was placed for the removal of the terrorism designation which was first placed on Sudan by the Clinton administration in 1993.

Meanwhile Sunday, the state-run SUNA news service reported that the Finance Ministry secured a \$230 million loan from the Abu Dhabi-based Arab Monetary Fund to support the country's balance of payments.

It said the ministry signed another deal worth \$70 million with the Arab Trade Financing Program, which is also based in the Emirati capital.

Al-Bashir, who seized power in an Islamist-backed military coup in 1989, has responded to the protests by suspending plans for constitutional amendments that would allow him to seek a new term in next year's elections. He has also stepped down as leader of the ruling party, appointing a loyalist in his place.

Critics say he is trying to buy time and remain in power. Al-Bashir is wanted by the International Criminal Court for charges of genocide linked to the conflict in Sudan's Darfur region.

Activists say at least 57 people have been killed in the recent protests. The government's latest tally stands at 31 killed, including policemen. Neither figure has been updated in weeks.



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[Algeria PM starts talks on new cabinet as gas field workers protest](#)

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Sun, 2019-03-17 12:36

ALGIERS: Algeria's newly-appointed prime minister has started talks to form a new government, state media reported on Sunday, in a move designed to placate protesters demanding President Abdel Aziz Bouteflika and his inner circle step down.

The discussions began as some workers at Algeria's biggest gas field staged a

protest against "extending the fourth term", an energy official said, referring to a proposal by Bouteflika to stay in office until a new constitution is adopted.

Output at the Hassi Rmel field was not affected, said the official from state oil and gas company Sonatrach.

He described the protests as "minor", but such politically-motivated action suggests Algeria's reform push has won some influence inside an enterprise that is the north African country's main economic pillar.

Algerians, who have been demonstrating for over three weeks, have rejected overtures by Bouteflika, who has reversed a decision to stand for another term after 20 years in power.

Bouteflika stopped short of relinquishing office and said he would stay on until a new constitution is adopted, in effect extending his fourth term in office, meaning he will likely remain in power for some time.

State news agency APS reported that the new cabinet would include experts without political affiliation and will "reflect the demographics of the Algerian society".

The aim is to "show willingness to establish a government of great openness", APS quoted an official source as saying.

However Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui is unlikely to defuse anger on the streets simply by starting talks on a new administration.

"The new government will fall in 24 hours as long as it lacks legitimacy and popular support," said Fodil Boumala, one of the people protesters have chosen to spearhead popular pressure against what they see as an authoritarian system.

Algerians have previously heard promises from Bouteflika, who has hinted at wide ranging political reform and steps to improve an economy which has offered many Algerians few opportunities despite the country's oil and natural gas wealth.

Protesters have grown tired of the same ruling elite, veterans of the 1954-1962 war of independence against France, the military, intelligence agencies and big businessmen.

Algerians have made it clear they will only settle for new leaders who can improve living standards, deliver greater freedoms and dismantle a Soviet-style bureaucracy that has discouraged investors.

On Friday, hundreds of thousands of people staged the biggest demonstration since the unrest began. Some carried banners saying "No to Bedoui".

Bouteflika has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. Protesters say he is no longer fit for office.

The president has been losing allies in recent days since returning from medical treatment in Switzerland, including senior members of the ruling National Liberation Front party, known by its French acronym FLN.

Protests have been mostly peaceful, with security forces showing restraint. The military, which is expected to keep playing its influential behind-the-scenes role as a power broker, has stayed in the barracks.

Giving details of the gas field protests, the head of Sonatrach's communication department Mounir Sakhri told Reuters that production at both Hassi Messaoud and Hassi Rmel fields was still flowing as usual.

"(There were) some minor protests that did not affect our business," Sakhri said.

Algeria is an important gas supplier to Europe, mainly Italy, Spain and

France. Its oil output is about one million barrels per day, and gas output is about 135 billion cubic meters per year. Several foreign firms operate in the country including BP, Total and Repsol. In the 1990s, oil and gas production never stopped despite the country's descent into chaos.



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Algerian protesters step up demands for Bouteflika's ouster
Algeria ruling party turns its back on Bouteflika: he is 'history now'

[Tunisia seeks extradition of Ben Ali brother-in-law from France](#)

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Sun, 2019-03-17 12:44

TUNIS: Tunisia said Sunday it is seeking the extradition of deposed president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali's brother-in-law, who has been arrested in France and is wanted at home for alleged fraud.

The justice ministry, in a statement received by AFP, said it had learned from the Interpol office in Tunis that Belhassen Trabelsi was arrested on Thursday in France.

It said he was facing 17 arrest warrants in Tunisia and 43 international warrants.

There was no official confirmation in France of Trabelsi's arrest.

But a source close to the investigation said he had been detained in the south of the country earlier this week in connection with alleged financial wrongdoing. There were no further details.

The millionaire businessman and brother of Ben Ali's wife Leila Trabelsi left Tunisia in January 2011 when the Arab Spring uprising forced the veteran leader to flee to Saudi Arabia.

Trabelsi and his family flew in a private jet to Montreal where he requested political asylum but Canada turned down his appeal in 2015, and a year later as it prepared to deport him he vanished.

He is wanted in Tunisia where he is thought to have headed a clan that embezzled government funds.

A leaked June 2008 US diplomatic cable concluded that Trabelsi was "the most notorious (Ben Ali) family member and is rumored to have been involved in a wide-range of corrupt schemes."

Trabelsi – whose holdings included an airline and hotels – has denied the allegations against him, saying he accumulated his wealth from being a successful entrepreneur.



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Tunisia minister says hospital infection killed 12 newborns
Tunisia divided over equal inheritance for women

[Israel court orders closure of building at Jerusalem holy site](#)

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Sun, 2019-03-17 09:06

JERUSALEM: An Israeli court on Sunday ordered the temporary closure of a side building at a highly sensitive Jerusalem holy site that has been the source of tensions in recent weeks.

The Jerusalem magistrates court said the building known as the Golden Gate at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, should be closed while the case continues.

The site's administrator, the Waqf religious organization, was given 60 days to respond to the court case involving the building.

Israeli police have called for the building to be closed.

There are believed to be discussions ongoing between Israel and Jordan, the custodian of the holy site, over the status of the building.

There have in recent weeks been scuffles between worshippers and Israeli police at the site in Israeli-annexed east Jerusalem over the use of the side building.

Palestinian worshippers have been entering the site despite an Israeli order that it should stay closed.

Israel shut access to the Golden Gate in 2003 during the second Palestinian intifada over alleged militant activity there.

Palestinian officials argue that the organization that prompted the ban no longer exists and there is no reason for it to remain closed.

The larger compound is the third-holiest site in Islam and a focus of Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

It is also the location of Judaism's most sacred spot, revered as the site of the two biblical-era Jewish temples.

Jews are allowed to visit but cannot pray there and it is a frequent scene of

tension.



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Israeli army 'uncovers' Hezbollah unit led by notorious commander
Three Israelis wounded in West Bank shooting