

Zaghari-Ratcliffe 'was forced to sign false confession at airport'

Author:

Mon, 2022-05-23 23:07

LONDON: A British-Iranian charity worker who was detained in Tehran for almost six years says she was forced by Iranian officials to sign a false confession to spying before she was freed two months ago.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe said British government officials were present at Tehran airport when "under duress" she signed the false admission to spying. She said she was told by Iranian officials that "you won't be able to get on the plane" unless she signed.

"The whole thing of me signing the forced confession was filmed," Zaghari-Ratcliffe told the BBC in an interview broadcast on Monday.

"It's a tool. So I'm sure they will show that some day."

Opposition Labour Party lawmaker Tulip Siddiq, who represents Zaghari-Ratcliffe's home district in London, said the revelation raised "serious questions" for the British government.

She said Foreign Secretary Liz Truss "must set out in Parliament what she knew about this shocking revelation and what consequences it could have for my constituent."

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was detained at Tehran's airport in April 2016 as she was returning home to Britain after visiting family in Iran. She was employed by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of the news agency, but she was on vacation at the time of her arrest.

Zaghari-Ratcliffe was sentenced to five years in prison after she was convicted of plotting the overthrow of Iran's government, a charge that she, her supporters and rights groups denied.

She had been under house arrest at her parents' home in Tehran for the last two years.

She and another dual citizen, Anoosheh Ashoori, were released and flown back to the UK in March.

Their release came after Britain paid a £400 million (\$503 million) debt to Iran stemming from a dispute over tanks that were ordered in the 1970s but were never delivered.



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[Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe](#)

Zaghari-Ratcliffe returns to school runUK PM defends Zaghari-Ratcliffe from online trolls after she criticized government

[Tunisian union calls national strike over wages and the economy](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-05-23 22:51

TUNIS: Tunisia's labor union said on Monday it would hold a national strike over wages and the economy after refusing to take part in a limited dialogue proposed by the president as he rewrites the constitution.

With more than a million members, the UGTT is Tunisia's most powerful political force and its call for a strike may present the biggest challenge yet to President Kais Saied after his seizure of broad powers and moves to one-man rule.

Saied has focused on his political agenda since last summer when he brushed aside the parliament and discounted most of Tunisia's democratic constitution to say he would rule by decree despite a gathering economic crisis.

The president's opponents accuse him of undermining the democratic gains of

the 2011 revolution that triggered the Arab spring, but he says his moves were legal and needed to save Tunisia from a prolonged political crisis. The union has demanded a meaningful national dialogue on both political and economic reforms, but it rejected Saied's proposal that it join a small advisory group of other civil society organizations that could submit reform ideas.

BACKGROUND

President Kais Saied's government is in talks with the International Monetary Fund for a bailout but the labor union has rejected proposed spending cuts and instead wants wage increases for state workers.

Saied said last week that political parties would be barred from a role in forming the new constitution, which would replace the 2014 document that emerged from an inclusive debate among Tunisia's main political factions and social organizations.

"We reject any formal dialogue in which roles are determined unilaterally and from which civil and political forces are excluded," UGTT spokesperson Sami Tahri said.

Tunisia's major political parties pledged to fight Saied's decision to exclude them from key political reforms including the drafting of a new constitution and accused him of seeking to consolidate autocratic rule. Achaab, the newspaper of the union, said that Saied met with the UGTT leader on Sunday and informed him that he insisted that the dialogue will be in its current formula that he proposed.

The date of the strike, by UGTT members working in public services and state companies, will be announced later, Tahri said.

Saied's government is in talks with the International Monetary Fund for a bailout, seen as necessary to ward off national bankruptcy, but the UGTT has rejected proposed spending cuts and instead wants wage increases for state workers.



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Tunisia heads for 'new republic' in dialogue without political parties
Thousands in Tunisia protest against president, demand democratic return

[More hardship as new sandstorm engulfs parts of Middle East](#)

Author:

AP

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1653334585631274600

Mon, 2022-05-23 16:16

BAGHDAD: A sandstorm blanketed parts of the Middle East on Monday, including Iraq, Syria and Iran, sending people to hospitals and disrupting flights in some places.

It was the latest in a series of unprecedented nearly back-to-back sandstorms this year that have bewildered residents and raised alarm among experts and officials, who blame climate change and poor governmental regulations. From Riyadh to Tehran, bright orange skies and a thick veil of grit signaled yet another stormy day Monday. Sandstorms are typical in late spring and

summer, spurred by seasonal winds. But this year they have occurred nearly every week in Iraq since March.

Iraqi authorities declared the day a national holiday, urging government workers and residents to stay home in anticipation of the 10th storm to hit the country in the last two months. The Health Ministry stockpiled cannisters of oxygen at facilities in hard-hit areas, according to a statement.

The storms have sent thousands to hospitals and resulted in at least one death in Iraq and three in Syria's east.

"It's a region-wide issue but each country has a different degree of vulnerability and weakness," said Jaafar Jotheri, a geoarchaeologist at the University of Al-Qadisiyah in Baghdad.

In Syria, medical departments were put on alert as the sandstorm hit the eastern province of Deir Ezzor that borders Iraq, Syrian state TV said.

Earlier this month, a similar storm in the region left at least three people dead and hundreds were hospitalized with breathing problems.

Dr. Bashar Shouaybi, head of the Health Ministry's office in Deir Ezzor, told state TV that hospitals were prepared and ambulances were on standby. He said they have acquired an additional 850 oxygen tanks and medicine needed to deal with patients who have asthma.

Severe sandstorms have also blanketed parts of Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia this month.

For the second time this month, Kuwait International Airport suspended all flights Monday because of the dust. Video showed largely empty streets with poor visibility.

Saudi Arabia's meteorological association reported that visibility would drop to zero on the roads in Riyadh, the capital, this week. Officials warned drivers to go slowly. Emergency rooms in the city were flooded with 1,285 patients this month complaining they couldn't breathe properly.

Iran last week shut down schools and government offices in the capital of Tehran over a sandstorm that swept the country. It hit hardest in the nation's southwest desert region of Khuzestan, where over 800 people sought treatment for breathing difficulties. Dozens of flights out of western Iran were canceled or delayed.

Blame over the dust storms and heavy air pollution has mounted, with a prominent environmental expert telling local media that climate change, drought and government mismanagement of water resources are responsible for the increase in sandstorms. Iran has drained its wetlands for farming – a common practice known to produce dust in the region.

Alireza Shariat, the head of an association of Iranian water engineers, told Iran's semiofficial ILNA news agency last month that he expected extensive dust storms to become an "annual springtime phenomenon" in a way Iran has never seen before.

In Iraq, desertification exacerbated by record-low rainfall is adding to the intensity of storms, said Jotheri, the geoarchaeologist. In a low-lying country with plenty of desert regions, the impact is almost double, he said. "Because of 17 years of mismanagement of water and urbanization, Iraq lost more than two thirds of its green cover," he said. "That is why Iraqis are complaining more than their neighbors about the sandstorms in their areas."



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[Jaafar Jotheri](#)

Sandstorms pose serious risk to human health: WMO World's tallest building engulfed as Mideast sandstorms hit UAE

[Lebanese authorities begin removing barriers around parliament after elections](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-05-23 22:30

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities on Monday began removing concrete barriers around the country's parliament building after the election of former protesters as MPs.

The security measures had been put in place at the outbreak of massive anti-government protests in 2019. They are to be relaxed following the election of a dozen reformist newcomers to the 128-member legislature, including some who had taken part in the protest movement.

Some of the new MPs had called for the restrictions to be eased before they attended the first session of the new parliament.

Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi attended the start of the work yesterday afternoon.

The clearing will be completed before the next parliament session is held, a statement from House Speaker Nabih Berri's office said.

The move comes after the election of 15 MPs from the Forces of Change group, which was demonstrating in the streets around parliament, in addition to a number of independent MPs.

Beirut MP Ibrahim Mneimneh, from the Forces of Change, said: "There is no need for the barriers placed around the people's house because it is for the people. They are needless barriers."

He said that the measures decided by Berri were the result of the traditional ruling forces realizing "the decline of their popularity, so they decided to respond to the popular demands."

MP Waddah Sadiq, a former protester, said the fences around parliament are a separation wall. "Today, parliament represents the people who demand change, so they decided to ease the procedures," Sadiq said.

Sadiq said that the economic and living crises "are increasing, and people may turn to a state of rejection again. We need the pressure to address them."

He said that the previous government did not take any effective handling measures.

The plan approved by the government included neither recovery nor economy, said the MP. "Therefore, we are entering a difficult phase and we will be on the side of the people."

MP Elias Jarada, an ophthalmologist from the southern town of Ibl Al-Saqi, called the "doctor of the poor," said that "the parliament is the house of the people, and there are no fences that can separate the representatives of the nation and the citizens."

He said that all the barriers that prevent people from entering Nejme Square must be removed before the MPs are invited to any session.

Ali Hamdan, the media adviser to the parliamentary speaker, told Arab News that "these measures are not an indication of excessive confidence. Rather, elections were held and the results have brought representatives of the protesters to parliament."

He said: "These people represent part of the street, and you may call them a movement, an uprising or a change."

He said the speaker had decided to take a step to reduce security measures, but they "will not be completely lifted around the parliament."

He said that some in Lebanon still feared security setbacks.

"There are successive crises, including the customs dollar and the rise in telecom prices, and we witnessed what happened in Greece and Cyprus."

The area around the building had been transformed by concrete walls that blocked all the roads leading to Nejme Square.

Hotels in the area closed as a result of the damages they suffered from each wave of popular protests targeting parliament since Oct. 17, 2019.

Institutions, companies and shops all moved out of the area after it became difficult to reach them. The area turned into a ghost town as a result of power outages and the absence of people.

Parliament meetings there were suspended after the explosion of the port of Beirut on Aug. 4, 2020, which damaged the building.

The parliament moved its meetings temporarily to the UNESCO Palace, which is on the western-south edge of the capital.

While the temporary location provided a spacious hall, comfortable seats and social distancing as required during the pandemic, it did not provide electronic voting for deputies or the electronic list for the attendance of deputies.

Bechara Asmar, head of General Labor Union, said he was concerned about "the continuation of sterile debates while crises become more complex."



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'Only the Lebanese can help Lebanon,' Saudi finance minister tells Davos
Lebanon unlikely to comply with Interpol request to hand Carlos Ghosn over to French authorities

[UN envoy praises 'potential' of Syria prisoner amnesty](#)

Author:

Sun, 2022-05-22 23:05

DAMASCUS: UN special envoy Geir Pedersen has welcomed a general amnesty aimed at freeing thousands of Syrians convicted on terrorism charges.

President Bashar Assad has decreed several amnesties during the country's devastating 11-year war, but the latest in April was the most comprehensive related to terrorism charges since the conflict began, rights activists said. Pedersen, speaking to reporters in Damascus after a meeting with the regime's Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad, said he had been briefed "in quite some detail" on the latest measure.

"I am very much looking forward to being kept informed on the progress on the implementation for that amnesty," Pedersen said before talks on a new constitution for Syria are to resume in Geneva.

“That amnesty has potential, and we are looking forward to see how it develops,” Pedersen said.

The regime’s Justice Ministry has said hundreds of inmates had been released, and a military official, Ahmad Touzan, told local media this week that the amnesty would cover thousands, including those who are wanted but not detained.

Touzan refused to disclose the number of inmates freed, saying “numbers are changing by the hour.”

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor, which relies on a large network of sources inside Syria, says around 1,142 inmates have so far been released across the country under the amnesty, with hundreds more expected. In the next few days Syria’s warring parties are to hold the latest round of constitutional talks in Switzerland, under a process that began in 2019.

It is hoped the talks can pave the way toward a broader political process. Pedersen said he is “hopeful that this will be a positive meeting that can help bring us forward so that we can start to see... some confidence building measures,” Pedersen said.

Syria’s civil war erupted in 2011 after the violent repression of protests demanding regime change.

The war has left around half a million people dead and displaced millions. Throughout the war, the UN has been striving to nurture a political resolution.



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Four killed as Jordanian army thwarts drug smuggling attempt from Syria
Israeli missile strikes kill 3 near Syria capital: state media