

Sandstorms pose serious risk to human health: WMO

Author:

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PARIS: Sandstorms have engulfed the Middle East in recent days, in a phenomenon experts warn could proliferate because of climate change, putting human health at grave risk.

At least 4,000 people went to hospitals on Monday for respiratory issues in Iraq where eight sandstorms have blanketed the country since mid-April.

That was on top of the more than 5,000 treated in Iraqi hospitals for similar respiratory ailments earlier this month.

The phenomenon has also smothered Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE with more feared in the coming days.

Strong winds lift large amounts of sand and dust into the atmosphere, that can then travel hundreds, even thousands, of kilometers.

Sandstorms have affected a total of 150 countries and regions, adversely impacting on the environment, health and the economy, the World

Meteorological Organization said.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **The UN agency WMO has warned of the ‘serious risks’ posed by airborne dust.**
- **The fine dust particles can cause health problems such as asthma and cardiovascular ailments.**
- **They also spread bacteria and viruses as well as pesticides and other toxins.**

“It’s a phenomenon that is both local and global, with a stronger intensity in areas of origin,” said Carlos Perez Garcia-Pando, a sand and dust storm expert at the Barcelona Supercomputing Center and the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies.

The storms originate in dry or semi-dry regions of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia and China.

Other less affected areas include Australia, the Americas and South Africa.

The UN agency WMO has warned of the “serious risks” posed by airborne dust.

The fine dust particles can cause health problems such as asthma and cardiovascular ailments, and also spread bacteria and viruses as well as pesticides and other toxins.

“Dust particle size is a key determinant of potential hazard to human health,” the WMO said.

Small particles that can be smaller than 10 micrometers can often become trapped in the nose, mouth and upper respiratory tract, and as a result it is associated with respiratory disorders such as asthma and pneumonia.

The most at-risk are the oldest and youngest as well as those struggling with respiratory and cardiac problems.

And the most affected are residents in countries regularly battered by sandstorms, unlike in Europe where dust coming from the Sahara is rare, like the incident in March.

Depending on the weather and climate conditions, sand dust can remain in the atmosphere for several days and travel great distances, at times picking up bacteria, pollen, fungi and viruses.

“However, the seriousness is less than with ultrafine particles, for example from road traffic, which can penetrate the brain or the blood system,” says Thomas Bourdrel, a radiologist, researcher at the University of Strasbourg and a member of Air Health Climate collective.

Even if the sand particles are less toxic than particles produced by combustion, their “extreme density during storms causes a fairly significant increase in cardio-respiratory mortality, especially among the most vulnerable,” he said.

With “a concentration of thousands of cubic micrometers in the air, it’s almost unbreathable,” said Garcia-Pando.

The sandstorms’ frequency and intensity could worsen because of climate change, say some scientists.

But the complex phenomenon is “full of uncertainties” and is affected by a cocktail of factors like heat, wind and agricultural practices, Garcia-Pando told AFP.

“In some areas, climate change could reduce the winds that cause storms, but extreme events could persist, even rise,” he said.

With global temperatures rising, it is very likely that more and more parts of the Earth will become drier.

“This year, a significant temperature anomaly was observed in East Africa, in the Middle East, in East Asia, and this drought affects plants, a factor that can increase sandstorms,” the Spanish researcher said.



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World's tallest building engulfed as Mideast sandstorms hit UAE
Sandstorms disrupt flights to and from Kuwait

[Iran holds pro-government rallies after price protests turn political](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2022-05-20 22:40

DUBAI: Thousands of supporters of Iran's clerical establishment, including 50,000 Revolutionary Guards and Basij militia members, rallied on Friday, state media reported, after protests against rising food prices turned political.

"The enemies mistakenly think the Iranian people will respond to ...the rumors that they spread and lies they tell," Guards commander Hossein Salami said in televised remarks at the massive rally outside the capital Tehran, which marked a major victory in Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s.

Iranian authorities say the unrest over rising food prices has been fomented by foreign enemies. On Friday, state television showed pro-government marchers chanting "Death to America" and "Death to Israel" in southwestern cities of Yasuj and Shahr-e Kord, scenes of recent protests.

Iranians took to the streets last week after a cut in food subsidies caused prices to soar by as much as 300 percent for some flour-based staples. The protests quickly turned political, with crowds calling for an end to the Islamic Republic, echoing unrest in 2019 which began over fuel prices hike. The government acknowledged the protests but described them as small gatherings. State media reported last week the arrests of "dozens of rioters and provocateurs."

Authorities have also arrested a number of labor union and rights activists, accusing them of contacts with foreigners, a leading rights group said on Friday.

"The arrests of prominent members of civil society in Iran on baseless accusations of malicious foreign interference is another desperate attempt to silence support for growing popular social movements in the country," said Tara Sepehri Far, senior Iran researcher at Human Rights Watch, in a statement.

Iran's state television on Tuesday showed what it described as details of the

arrest of two French citizens earlier this month, saying they were spies who had sought to stir up unrest. France has condemned their detention as baseless and demanded their immediate release, in an incident likely to complicate ties between the countries as wider talks stall on reviving a nuclear deal. In recent months, teachers across Iran have staged protests demanding better wages and working conditions. Dozens have been arrested. Social media users inside Iran say Internet services have been disrupted since last week, seen as an apparent effort by authorities to stop use of social media to organize rallies and disseminate videos. Iranian officials denied any disruption to Internet access.



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Turkey, Iran race to fill Russian 'void' in Syria

Lebanon unlikely to comply with Interpol request to hand Carlos Ghosn over to French authorities

Fri, 2022-05-20 21:53

BEIRUT: Lebanon has received an Interpol red notice for the arrest of businessman Carlos Ghosn at France's request but is unlikely to extradite him, according to a judicial source.

The 68-year-old car industry tycoon, who holds French, Lebanese and Brazilian citizenship, fled to Lebanon in December 2019 while awaiting trial in Japan. He had been under house arrest since 2018.

The Lebanese judiciary received the notice on Thursday. It is based on an international arrest warrant issued by the French authorities about a month ago.

A judicial source told Arab News that Lebanon's prosecutor general, Judge Ghassan Oueidat, received the warrant based on hearings held by a delegation of French judges who visited Lebanon for the first time in June 2021. They listened to Ghosn over the course of four days in regard to a lawsuit filed against him in Paris.

BACKGROUND

The former head of the Nissan-Renault alliance fled to Lebanon in 2019, while out on bail facing financial misconduct charges in Japan.

Ghosn was chairman of Nissan and Mitsubishi and CEO of Renault when he was arrested in 2018 on charges of "not disclosing his full wages and using company funds for personal purposes."

France accuses him of being responsible for "over €15 million (\$15.8 million) in suspicious payments between his Renault-Nissan alliance and activities Ghosn held at the opulent Palace of Versailles, including knowingly using company resources to host a party for personal purposes."

The source added that Judge Oueidat was expected to refer the Interpol notice to the discriminatory attorney general, Judge Imad Qabalan, who attended the hearings of the French judicial delegation with Ghosn.

Based on the notice, Judge Qabalan may interrogate Ghosn and decide whether he should be arrested, the source said.

"If Judge Qabalan finds Ghosn guilty of any crime, he can request his full file from the French authorities and try him in Lebanon under the Lebanese

Penal Code,” the person added.

“In the event that the crimes charged against Ghosn are not mentioned in the penal code, or if they are charges that the Lebanese penal code does not criminalize, he will leave him be.”

The source said that although Lebanon and France had an extradition treaty, Ghosn would be prosecuted in Lebanon as he had Lebanese nationality, adding that Lebanon had banned the executive from traveling.

Lebanon confiscated Ghosn’s passports in 2020 and he has not submitted a request to get them back.

The tycoon made his escape from Japan by hiding in luggage on a private plane that took off from Kansai International Airport. He has been in Lebanon ever since and has repeatedly denied any wrongdoing.

An American father and son helped Ghosn flee Japan. The US handed them over to Japanese authorities and they confessed in a Tokyo court that they had been paid \$1.3 million to do so. They face a prison sentence of up to three years.

Meanwhile, Lebanese judicial authorities on Thursday released 72-year-old Ziad Taqi Al-Din, whose name had been linked to lawsuits related to charges of fraud and forgery filed in Paris against former French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Taqi Al-Din, who has dual Lebanese and French nationality, was arrested in Beirut in 2020 based on an international arrest warrant issued by Interpol. He was later released on bond with a travel ban and his passport was confiscated.

The Lebanese judiciary requested his file from Paris for trial in Beirut, refusing to hand him over to the French judiciary.



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Former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn: 'Am I guilty or innocent? Let's finish this ordeal' France issues international arrest warrant for former Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn

[Turkey, Iran race to fill Russian 'void' in Syria](#)

Fri, 2022-05-20 21:05

ANKARA: The withdrawal of tens of thousands of Russian troops from Syria to bolster its forces in Ukraine may mark a turning point in the Syrian conflict, and lead to a race between Tehran and Ankara to fill the void left by Moscow in the country, leading analysts suggest.

Russia, Iran and Turkey are guarantor countries of the Astana talks on Syria that aim at brokering a permanent peace deal by bringing warring sides together.

However, Russia has been the balancing force in this trio, preventing the uncontrolled entrenchment of Iranian-backed militia.

But now abandoned Russian bases are believed to have been transferred to Iranian paramilitary Revolutionary Guards Corps and Hezbollah, while Tehran is expected to send more troops into Syria to fill the gap left by Ukraine-bound Russian military personnel.

FASTFACT

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Iran is believed to have created a new militia, similar to its elite forces, to assume the tasks previously handled by Russian troops. The new force, under the control of Hezbollah and the IRGC, is stockpiling drones, chemical weapons and ballistic missiles.

Ankara and Tehran back rival sides in the Syrian conflict, with Iran supporting the Assad regime, while Turkey backs the Syrian opposition.

Russia's maritime supply of its forces in Syria has been complicated in recent months by Ankara's decision under the Montreux Convention to restrict the use of Turkish straits by Russian warships based in the Black Sea.

However, Mehmet Emin Cengiz, research fellow at Al-Sharq Strategic Research, believes Russia is unlikely to give up its presence in Syria.

"Russia has invested a lot in Syria over the years, and there has been a long-standing rivalry between Russia and Iran for influence in Syria. Even if Russia relocates some of its soldiers or withdraws them from Syria, it will not leave the field entirely to Iran," he told Arab News.

Cengiz believes that with the Ukraine crisis allowing Iran to fill some of the gaps left by Russia in Syria, it is likely that the conflict will increase the regime's dependence on Iran.

"After the Ukraine crisis, contacts between Syrian and Iranian officials increased. Recently, Bashar Assad paid a visit to Tehran. He might receive economic assistance from Tehran in the face of a deep economic crisis in Syria," Cengiz said.

According to Aron Lund, a fellow at the New York-based Century Foundation think tank, the Ukraine war has upset the balance between Turkey and Russia in Turkey's favor, which could be consequential for Syria.

"It could end up destabilizing a long-frozen situation, but it won't necessarily lead to renewed conflict," he told Arab News.

"Even under pressure in Ukraine, Russia may be able to deter advances by Turkey-backed forces in Syria, and Turkey may still want Russia's cooperation to secure its own interests," he added.

Lund believes that both countries could trade concessions and favors in ways that avoid trading territory, or waging war, in Idlib.

"For example, Russia could agree to be more flexible on humanitarian issues, including an upcoming vote in the UN Security Council in July that Turkey really wants to pass. Or Russia could lend support to Turkish cross-border operations against Kurdish forces, which it has previously been reluctant to do," he said.

Last week, Geir O. Pedersen, UN special envoy for Syria, recently sent invitations to the Syrian regime and opposition for the eighth round of talks starting in late May.

Lund expects new deals regarding the UN-brokered Syrian constitutional committee.

"But renewed fighting in Idlib remains a live risk, either because of a breakdown in the balance or as a way to test the strength and determination of the other side," he said.

Noah Ringler, an expert from Georgetown University, believes that although Turkey and Iran have cooperated in the past against PKK-affiliated groups against a shared threat, this time Iran may recognize the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, a Syrian affiliate of the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party, as a different faction and be open to assuming Russia's role in negotiation and coordinating between the Assad regime and administrative authorities in northeastern Syria.

"As Iran expands its role in Syria, Turkey will likely seek opportunities to confront Assad regime forces and their partners for expanded territory or trade near Manbij or Tal Rifaat, or even near Ayn Issa, especially as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's previous operations have proven popular and as public support for forced refugee return to Syria has increased," he told Arab News.

"Assad's forces still seek to launch another phase of the Idlib operation, and Iran may consider supporting one in the future to destabilize NATO's southern flank, depending on nuclear negotiations and other factors, but Iran is not prepared to do so at this point," Ringler said.

However, the current disagreements between Turkey and Iran are not limited to Syria, with disputes over transboundary waters and dam construction further straining bilateral ties.

Turkey's dam projects on the Tigris and Aras rivers angered Tehran, which fears the schemes could reduce water flow in the Tigris and Euphrates, and

pose an environmental threat as shown by recent dust storms.

However Turkey's Foreign Ministry has said that Ankara is open to any "rational and scientific cooperation" with Iran.

The illegal transit of Afghan refugees to Turkey from its border with Iran has also angered Ankara, which claims that Tehran facilitated the uncontrolled passage.

"Relations between Iran and Turkey have become increasingly strained on a number of files: Dam construction; Ankara's warming relations with Israel; tensions with Iran-backed militias in Iraq; and now Russia's shifting of resources from Syria to Ukraine will add further complications," said Jason Brodsky, policy director of United Against a Nuclear Iran.

A new Pentagon report claimed that Iran-backed militias have been coordinating with the PKK for attacking Turkish troops in northern Iraq.

"All of these developments have the potential to shift the balance in Syria given the crowded landscape there. In 2020, Iran's advisory center in northern Syria issued a warning to Turkish forces that they could be targeted after they retaliated following 33 Turkish soldiers being killed in a Syrian airstrike in Idlib," Brodsky told Arab News.

As Russia in the past has tried to reduce tensions between Turkey and the Syrian government in the area, Brodsky believes that Moscow's troop withdrawal could empower the Assad regime as well as Iran in Idlib.

"This is not to say Russia will be completely absent, but if it is shifting resources to contend with Ukraine, that has the potential to scramble the battlefield dynamics in Idlib," he added.



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Pentagon finds no wrongdoing in 2019 Syria strike that killed civilians
Erdogan says NATO should understand Turkey's security sensitivities

[Sudan arrests Communist Party figures as thousands protest coup](#)

Author:

Thu, 2022-05-19 23:22

KHARTOUM: Sudanese security forces arrested leading anti-coup figures on Thursday, their party said, during protests by thousands against last year's military takeover.

"Security forces raided the house of the political secretary of the Sudanese Communist Party Mohammed Mukhtar Al-Khatib," the party said in a statement.

Another leading party member was also arrested at Khartoum airport, and the two men were taken to an "unknown location," the party said.

The arrests came despite a pledge by coup leader Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan to free political detainees to set the stage for talks among Sudanese factions.

Last month, authorities released several anti-coup civilian leaders arrested in a crackdown.

The Communist Party members were detained following a trip to Juba, South Sudan where they met with rebel leader Abdel Wahid Nour who has refused to sign a landmark 2020 peace deal with the Sudanese government, according to the party statement.

They also visited rebel-held areas in South Kordofan controlled by Abdelaziz Al-Hilu, who also abstained from the 2020 deal, it said.

Thousands of protesters on Thursday took to the streets, mainly in Khartoum but also elsewhere, to again call for civilian rule in the latest rally against the October coup led by Gen. Burhan, according to AFP correspondents.

The pro-democracy Central Committee of Sudan Doctors said security forces fired tear gas "in large quantities" to quell the protests.

Regular mass demonstrations have rocked Sudan since the coup which derailed a fragile political transition set in motion after the 2019 ouster of longtime autocrat Omar Bashir.

Demonstrations have been met by a violent crackdown which has so far killed at least 95 protesters and wounded hundreds of others, according to medics.

The UN, along with the African Union and regional bloc IGAD, have been pushing to facilitate Sudanese-led talks to resolve the crisis after the northeast African country's latest coup.

UN special representative Volker Perthes in late March said the country was heading towards "an economic and security collapse" unless its civilian-led transition was restored.

The military leader threatened to expel Perthes for alleged "interference" in the country's affairs.



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Sudan frees ex-officials in effort to end political impasse
Violence in Sudan's restive Darfur kills 168: aid group