

Two Hezbollah members guilty of 2005 Hariri slaying on appeal: UN tribunal

Thu, 2022-03-10 16:30

THE HAGUE: A UN-backed tribunal on Thursday found two Hezbollah members guilty on appeal for the 2005 death of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri, saying both were involved in the bombing that killed him. Appeals judges at the Netherlands-based court said trial judges "erred" in 2020 by acquitting the two men, together with a third, in finding that there was a lack of evidence.

Set up in 2009 to try those responsible for the bombing that killed Hariri and 21 others, the court convicted Salim Ayyash, a member of the Lebanese Shiite Muslim movement Hezbollah.

But they acquitted Hassan Habib Merhi, Hussein Oneissi and Assad Sabra, saying there was not enough evidence to convict them.

Appeals judges granted an appeal by prosecutors, who asked that the acquittals be overturned for Merhi and Oneissi.

"The appeals chamber has unanimously decided to reverse the acquittals of misters Merhi and Oneissi. We unanimously find Mr. Merhi and Oneissi guilty," presiding judge Ivana Hrdlickova said.

"The appeals chamber will issue arrest warrants for them later this afternoon," she added.

All four men were tried in absentia over the February 2005 attack, when a suicide bomber detonated a van full of explosives as Hariri's armored convoy passed on the Beirut waterfront.

The case against all four men relied almost exclusively on circumstantial evidence in the form of mobile phone records that prosecutors said showed a Hezbollah cell plotting the attack.

Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the Hezbollah movement, refused to hand over any of the suspects or to recognize the UN-backed court, which has issued an international warrant for the arrest of Ayyash.

The court said in April last year that Ayyash cannot appeal against the verdict until he turns himself in.

The Lebanon tribunal is expected to close after the appeals phase because of a cash shortage, with a further case against Ayyash over attacks on several politicians likely to go unheard.



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[Lebanon central bank seeks names of those who failed to repatriate funds amid crisis](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Wed, 2022-03-09 22:11

BEIRUT: Lebanon's central bank has asked commercial banks to provide the names of political figures who failed to comply with a circular ordering them

to repatriate funds sent abroad in the lead-up to the country's 2019 financial meltdown.

Lebanon's financial crisis, which the World Bank has labelled one of the deepest depressions of modern history, has been compounded by political deadlock and a row over the probe into the 2020 Beirut port blast that killed more than 200 people.

The central bank, known as the Banque du Liban (BDL), said banks must provide its Special Investigation Commission with the names by the end of March, adding that "cash deposits made between July 2017 and end-December 2020 are concerned as well, if the beneficiary is" a politically exposed person. Last week, a US Treasury delegation urged Lebanon to investigate what it described as "abuses" within the banking system by members of the political and economic elite.

Allegations of financial misconduct have been widespread following the financial collapse, when banks imposed tight controls on hard currency accounts for most savers but critics say some people with influence were able to access funds more freely.

Banks have denied claims of favoritism toward certain clients, and say they have consistently called on the government to introduce a capital control law to regulate the sector – something the government has failed to do.

Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh faces corruption probes in a number of European countries and in Lebanon, where officials are investigating alleged money laundering and embezzlement of central bank funds. He has denied wrongdoing.



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Will the debate over 'mega centers' delay Lebanon's parliamentary elections? Lebanon's president honors military women

Will the debate over 'mega centers' delay Lebanon's parliamentary elections?

Author:

Wed, 2022-03-09 21:04

BEIRUT: The Lebanese government is expected to make a decision on Thursday on whether to set up so-called mega centers to make it easier for people to vote in the country's upcoming parliamentary elections.

The aim of the facilities, which are favored by President Michel Aoun, is to allow voters to cast their ballots outside their area of registration, meaning they would not have to return to their hometowns to do so.

However, it has been suggested that if the centers are created it could lead to the elections, currently scheduled for May 15, being delayed.

After a ministerial committee completed a report into the issue, the Cabinet must now decide how to proceed based on its findings. If it approves the idea, a draft law would have to be submitted to parliament to allow the centers to be created.

While Aoun's camp said that "no legal measures were necessary to adopt the mega centers. It is very easy if the political intent is there," the opposition said that "the issue requires legal amendments and will result in a very high financial cost."

In the committee's report, Tourism Minister Walid Nassar said: "The cost of establishing eight mega centers ... does not exceed \$2 million and they can be completed in no more than three weeks."

But Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said the technical requirements of setting up the facilities would lead to disruption.

"The ministerial committee is against postponing the elections and insists on holding them on the designated date without any delay," he said.

The disruption would be caused by the need for the centers to have the "necessary principles and requirements in order to have a sound election," he said.

"It is not a tent that can be set up in neighborhoods with a ballot box on top of a table. It is way more complicated.

"Mega centers without electronic connection, fiber optics and a central server that provides the necessary linkage are not actual mega centers, unless they want them to be like tents."

He added: "The company that will be in charge of this project will need up to three months to complete the task and link the main electoral centers to the mother server. Moreover, what applies to the Lebanese voters living outside the country should apply to voters residing in the country."

Political observers said that the insistence of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement to establish mega centers aimed to "impose the extension of the current parliament's mandate so that this same parliament elects the next president in the framework of a certain settlement."

The presidential elections are set to take place in October.

But the FPM said its call for the establishment of mega centers was made in response to the change in circumstances since the 2018 elections.

"This is due to the significant economic collapse the country has been suffering from since 2019 and because it would be difficult for voters to go to their villages due to the high cost of transportation," it said.

The huge spike in the price of gasoline – to close to 500,000 Lebanese pounds (\$330) a gallon – meant that the centers would save the Lebanese people billions of lira, the FPM said.

"In addition, the mega centers help free the voters of numerous restrictions, raise the participation rate and promote the legitimacy of the electoral process," it said.

The FPM is concerned that the high cost of traveling home to vote will deter many people from doing so. But political observers said that other political parties, especially Hezbollah and Amal Movement, are opposed to the idea of the mega centers as it could dilute the influence they hold in small villages and towns.

Other observers said that the FPM might be deliberately seeking to delay the polls to give it a greater chance of winning more parliamentary seats in certain regions.

"The aim could be even bigger than that. It could be seeking to create a parliamentary vacuum in order to disrupt the next presidential elections," one observer said. "That way, Aoun remains the president to run the affairs of the state."

MP Mohammad Hajjar, from the Future Parliamentary Bloc that represents the Sunni majority in parliament, told Arab News that if parliament decided to extend its mandate, the bloc's MPs would resign.

"This decision has been taken and is irreversible. As for the postponement of the elections, that is a different story. We insist on holding the parliamentary elections on time. However, if an unexpected event occurs, that is a different matter."



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Lebanon's president honors military women

[Arab League summit set for Algeria in November](#)

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Wed, 2022-03-09 17:33

CAIRO: The Arab League will hold its first annual summit for three years in November in Algeria, the bloc said on Wednesday, after the pandemic forced the meetings' suspension.

The two-day summit is usually held in March and was originally slated for later this month, but will now be held in Algiers starting on November 1, the organization's chief Ahmed Aboul Gheit said.

The last summit was held in Tunis in March 2019.

A meeting of Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo on Wednesday discussed Russia's invasion of Ukraine, citing "the need to reach a diplomatic solution" in a final statement.

But Aboul Gheit warned that the war "must not let us forget the Arab crises that are not over."

Conflict and crises persist in several Arab countries.

Yemen has been mired in war since 2014. The UN has estimated the conflict killed 377,000 people by the end of 2021, both directly and indirectly through hunger and disease, while millions have been displaced.

Sudan is reeling after a military coup in October that derailed a fragile transition to civilian rule, following the 2019 toppling of longtime strongman Omar Al-Bashir.

Libya now finds itself with two rival prime ministers vying for power, in a standoff that threatens a return to violence after a year and a half of relative stability.

Arab countries are also divided over the issue of a return of Syria to the Arab League, following its suspension in 2011 after the brutal repression of peaceful protests spiralled into a complex civil war.

This year's summit is important for Algeria, which has been seeking to expand its political sphere of influence, against the backdrop of heightened tensions with Morocco.



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[Italian envoy lauds 'outstanding' UAE commitment to reducing emissions](#)

Wed, 2022-03-09 20:36

ROME: Italy's ambassador in Abu Dhabi has praised the UAE for its "outstanding" commitment in the reduction of CO2 emissions.

Speaking at a debate on "the global need to save energy" organized by the Italian Trade Commission at the Italian pavilion of Expo 2020 Dubai, Nicola Lener said "huge investments are planned" in the UAE to reduce polluting emissions and increase production of clean energy.

This “positive and consolidated attitude” opens the way to “many opportunities for greater cooperation with international investors and partners, including Italian firms, which can provide state-of-the-art and innovative technologies,” he added.

Lener explained to the audience the UAE’s goal of achieving 50 percent clean energy supply and reducing its carbon footprint by 70 percent by 2050.

The audience included Emirati and Italian players in the field of environmental defense and clean energy production, such as Enel.

“We aim to present all the Italian innovations applied to the energy sector,” said Amedeo Scarpa, director of the commission in Dubai.



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UAE Barakah nuclear plant to reduce 22.5m tons of annual carbon emissions