

Algeria rejects Western Sahara talks

Author:

Sat, 2021-10-23 00:34

ALGIERS: Algeria on Friday ruled out returning to roundtable talks over Western Sahara, days after the UN appointed a new envoy for the conflict. "We confirm our formal and irreversible rejection of the so-called roundtable format," Algeria's Western Sahara envoy Amar Belani told the APS news agency.

Algiers is seen as the main backer of the Polisario Front, which seeks independence in the disputed territory, mostly controlled by Algeria's arch-rival Morocco.

The International Crisis Group wrote this month that "Rabat considers Western Sahara a regional issue and the Polisario an Algerian proxy", meaning Morocco wants Algeria at the table in any talks.

But some Polisario officials demand a return to bilateral talks on what they see as "a struggle by a colonized population for national liberation from a colonial power", the ICG report explained.

The last UN-led peace talks in 2019 involved top officials from Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and the Polisario.

But they were frozen after UN envoy Horst Kohler quit the post in May 2019. He was finally replaced this month by veteran diplomat Staffan de Mistura. The Security Council is expected to renew the mandate of peace mission MINURSO by Oct. 27, and possibly call for new roundtable talks.

But Belani said Algeria had told the council it rejects the "deeply unbalanced" and "counterproductive" format, warning it would thwart De Mistura's efforts.

He accused Rabat of trying "to evade the characterization of the Western Sahara issue as one of decolonization and to portray it as a regional, artificial conflict".

Tensions have mounted between Rabat and Algiers since Morocco last year normalized ties with Israel and won US recognition of its sovereignty over the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony rich in phosphate and Atlantic fisheries.

Algeria, which has long supported the Palestinian cause as well as the Polisario, in August cut diplomatic ties with its rival over "hostile actions," including alleged spying on its officials – accusations Morocco dismisses.

The standoff also came after the Polisario declared a three-decade cease-fire "null and void" after a Moroccan incursion to break up a blockade of a highway into Mauritania.

Belani urged the UN to treat the issue seriously. "We must recognize that the risks of escalation are serious," he said. "Peace and stability in the region are at stake."



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Morocco, Algeria clash at UN General Assembly over Western Sahara
Moroccan army launches operation in Western Sahara border zone

[Foreign aid lost in Syria exchange rate distortions](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-10-23 00:30

BEIRUT: Syrian President Bashar Assad's government has used distorted exchange rates to divert at least \$100 million in international aid to its coffers in the past two years, according to new research.

The currency manipulation deprives Syrians, most of them impoverished after a decade of war, of much-needed funds. It also allows the Damascus government to circumvent sanctions enforced by Western countries that hold it responsible for most of the war's atrocities.

“Western countries, despite sanctioning Syrian President Bashar Assad, have become one of the regime’s largest sources of hard currency,” said the report published this week by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based research organization that focuses on international public policy issues.

“Assad does not merely profit from the crisis he has created,” the report added. “He has created a system that rewards him more the worse things get.”

On Friday, the UN acknowledged that exchange rate fluctuations have had “a relative impact” on the effectiveness of some of the UN programs, particularly since the second half of 2019 when the Syrian currency took a nosedive.

Francesco Galtieri, a senior Damascus-based UN official, said his office received the report on Thursday. “We are carefully reviewing it, also to openly discuss it in the coming weeks with our donors, who are as concerned as we are that the impact of the assistance to the people in Syria is maximized,” Galtieri, team leader of the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, said.

The authors of the research published on Wednesday said the amount of aid lost and diverted to Syrian government coffers as a result of the national currency fall is likely to be more than \$100 million over the past two years. The data they used to calculate the amount was limited to UN procurement and does not include aid delivered through other international aid groups, salaries or cash assistance.

Sara Kayyali, who researches Syria for Human Rights Watch, called the findings shocking and said donors can no longer ignore the fact that they are effectively financing the Syrian government and its human rights abuses. She said UN procurement processes did not meet due diligence standards, from a human rights perspective.

The Syrian pound has been hit hard by war, corruption, Western sanctions and, more recently, a financial and economic collapse in neighboring Lebanon.



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[Friday prayers resume in Iran after 20-month hiatus due to COVID-19](#)

Author:

Sat, 2021-10-23 00:24

TEHRAN: Mass Friday prayers resumed in Tehran after a 20-month hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, state TV reported.

The prayers at Tehran University, a gathering of religious and political significance, came as authorities warned of a sixth wave of the coronavirus, which has so far claimed 124,928 lives in Iran and afflicted more than 5.8 million.

On Saturday, schools with fewer than 300 students are also due to reopen.

Also starting on Saturday, government employees, except those in the armed forces, will be barred from work if they are not vaccinated at least with a first dose, according to a government circular released earlier this week.

The government says more than 28.2 million people have so far received a second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine.

“Today is a very sweet day for us. We thank the Almighty for giving us back the Friday prayers after a period of restrictions and deprivation,” said Mohammad Javad Hajj Ali Akbari, Tehran’s interim Friday prayer imam who led the sermons.

Worshippers had to heed social distancing and use face masks during the gathering, a forum where officials present a unified front in the weekly sermon, a duty that rotates around senior members of Iran’s conservative clerical establishment.

Most worshippers brought their own prayer rugs and clay tablets used during prostration, said the broadcast.

It added Friday prayers were also performed in several other Iranian cities.

Health Minister Bahram Einollah said earlier this week that it was a “certainty” that Iran would face a sixth wave next week. The warning came even as the country has accelerated its vaccination drive.

Einollahi added that his country was well-prepared for the new surge.

Schools with more than 300 students will re-open on Nov. 6, Alireza Kamarei, spokesman for Iran’s Education Ministry, said earlier this week, adding that it was not essential for students and teachers to be vaccinated. He said 85 percent of the country’s teachers and 68 percent of students had so far been inoculated and that classrooms were well ventilated.

Required social distancing will remain at least one and a half meters.



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Iran nuclear talks 'on life support' as Tehran drags feet
Iran holds nationwide air force drill, latest armed exercise

[Evacuation flights for migrants start again in Libya](#)

Author:

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Fri, 2021-10-22 17:44

CAIRO: The United Nations said on Friday that it has resumed humanitarian evacuation flights for migrants stranded in Libya after authorities suspended them for several months. The announcement comes after a massive crackdown on migrants by Libyan security forces.

The UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) said in a statement that it had evacuated 127 people to Gambia from the Libyan city of Misrata on Thursday. It said the Gambian migrants were among thousands more who are waiting to go home through the organization's voluntary return program. Evacuation flights for migrants have operated sporadically amid Libya's

conflict, and been periodically suspended because of fighting. The latest suspension came from the country's ministry of interior on Aug. 8, according to the IOM.

Libya was plunged into turmoil by the NATO-backed 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi. The North African nation has since emerged as a popular, if extremely dangerous, route to Europe for those fleeing poverty and civil war in Africa and the Middle East. Many set out for Italy, packed by traffickers into unseaworthy boats.

Earlier this month, Libyan authorities started a massive crackdown against migrants in the western coastal town of Gargaresh, detaining more than 5,000 people over the course of a few days. In response, many turned to a community center operated by the UN's refugee agency's office in nearby Tripoli, camping outside and asking to be evacuated.

On Friday, the UNHCR refugee agency said that there are still 3,000 vulnerable people staying outside its community center for fear of government raids. The agency said it had suspended the center's operations for security reasons but was still able to offer some limited provisions to the migrants there. It welcomed the resumption of humanitarian flights, but also called on the government to urgently address the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in a "humane and rights-based manner," especially those who cannot return to their countries of origin.

Detained migrants in Libya have been held in overcrowded detention centers where torture, sexual assault and other abuses are rife. UN-commissioned investigators said Oct. 4 that abuse and ill treatment of migrants in Libya could amount to crimes against humanity.

The migration agency has operated evacuation flights for those wanting to return home since 2015 and since then returned some 53,000 migrants. The program receives funding from the European Union and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Migration Fund, according to the IOM statement.



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[Iran nuclear talks 'on life support' as Tehran drags feet](#)

Author:

Fri, 2021-10-22 22:17

LONDON: Talks to rein in Iran's nuclear arms program are on the verge of collapse, an anonymous source from a government involved in the negotiations has told The Independent.

Talks that had been continuing in Vienna earlier this year ground to a halt when Iran elected its new president, Ebrahim Raisi, who is a religious and political hard-liner and a close ally of supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

Since then, Iran has failed to return in earnest to the talks and has instead ramped up production of enriched uranium and other measures that bring it closer to having a nuclear bomb.

The JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), agreed in 2015 between Iran, the US, China, Russia and other world powers, curbed Iran's nuclear program

in exchange for sanctions relief, but the deal later broke down.

Now negotiations for a return to the JCPOA are on the verge of collapse, The Independent has reported.

“The deal is not totally dead, but it’s on life support,” said an official of a government involved in the talks. The official spoke on condition of anonymity.

The US has accused the Iranian side of dragging its feet in returning to the table for talks. State Department spokesman, Ned Price, told reporters “this is not an exercise that can go on indefinitely.”

Israel’s finance minister, Avigdor Liberman, warned this week that “a confrontation with Iran is only a matter of time, and not a lot of time.”

Raisi’s team has claimed they need time to settle into their new government and that is why there are delays, but the official involved in the talks said: “If they’re just playing for time while expanding their program, we’ll have to recalibrate our approach.”

Some suspect Iran is enriching more uranium and ramping up its production capacity to gain more leverage if it chooses to rejoin the talks.

Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Iran program at London-based think-tank Chatham House, told The Independent: “They are struggling to build a strategy and build consensus. Their foot-dragging can be seen as a leverage-building exercise, but it’s also a reflection of internal paralysis.”

She continued: “Their thinking is they can survive whatever is to come because they have survived everything thus far. But it’s a dangerous calculation. They’re always strategically on the razor’s edge. The outcome domestically could be dangerous in the long run. Yes, they have the monopoly of violence. Yes, the economy is bandaged, but the poverty level is increasing. Debt is increasing.”

The insider source told The Independent: “If the Iranians really wanted to take their time, why continue to escalate their non-compliance?”

“Why not freeze their non-compliance? If they walk away, the options aren’t good. It would be a miscalculation to think everyone would just shrug their shoulders.”



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IAEA: Surveillance of Iran nuclear program no longer 'intact'