

Authorities issue fresh plea for rescue of civilians in Houthi-besieged district

Author:

Saeed Al-Batati

ID:

1633983493952960600

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AL-MUKALLA: Local authorities in the central Yemeni province of Marib have issued a fresh appeal to international aid organizations and rights groups to rescue thousands of civilians trapped inside the Houthi-besieged district of Al-Abedia.

In a statement seen by Arab News, they warned that more than 35,000 people who lived in Al-Abedia could die of starvation as the Houthis tightened their grip on the district and “hysterically” bombarded residential areas and civilian facilities to force local fighters to surrender.

“We are appealing to the UN Security Council and the UN special envoy for Yemen to carry out their legal and ethical duties and take urgent action to meet the basic needs of the besieged in Al-Abedia in order to prevent a looming humanitarian catastrophe,” local authorities said.

The siege has been ongoing for more than 20 days after local tribesmen and government forces fought to prevent the Houthis from seizing control of the district.

Local aid workers told Arab News that the Houthis had blocked the distribution of humanitarian assistance to residents and even prevented the wounded and elderly from leaving the district.

The appeal came as fighting intensified between locals defending the district and the Iran-backed militia, local media reported on Monday.

Arab coalition warplanes have carried out dozens of air raids in support of the besieged people, targeting Houthi gatherings and military equipment.

Coalition spokesman Gen. Turki Al-Maliki said on Sunday that 118 airstrikes had killed 400 Houthis, destroyed 15 vehicles, and obstructed Houthi attempts to seize control of the district during the past 96 hours.

People with family members in Al-Abedia said they had lost contact with their relatives, with the situation deteriorating due to heavy Houthi shelling and shortages of drugs, food and fuel.

“The situation is very bad due to the suffocating siege and the Houthi attacks from all directions in an attempt to bring the district to its knees,” one person, who preferred not to be named, told Arab News.

One analyst believed the Houthis were trying to send a message to other cities and tribes that they would be harshly punished if they resisted the militia’s offensive on the central city of Marib.

“Al-Abedia has no military significance for the Houthis, but they want to suppress and humiliate the people of Al-Abedia and the people of Marib,”

Mohammed Al-Salehi, the editor of news website Marib Press, told Arab News on Monday.

He said that at least 70 people who had been wounded during fighting were trapped in the district and could die soon due to the siege.

“No aid organization has stepped in to rescue the wounded as if this humanitarian disaster does not concern them,” Al-Salehi added.

Yemeni human rights activists and officials called on their government and military commanders to step up their attacks on the Houthis to break the Al-Abedia siege.

“It is the duty of every free Yemeni and the state’s political, military and social figures to work on breaking the unjust siege on it and stop the brutal Houthi aggression against its residents,” Mohammed Al-Omada, head of the Yemeni Network for Rights and Freedoms, tweeted.



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Arab coalition hits Houthi targets in Abdiya Egypt affirms support for political solution to Yemeni crisis

[Can Arab Gas Pipeline plan enable Lebanon to keep the lights on?](#)

Author:

Georgi Azar

ID:

1633980262792701400

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DUBAI: Lebanon was plunged into a total blackout this week after two of its main power plants shut down before the army stepped in to supply fuel from its stocks. It was the latest in a series of disasters to strike the country's public-services infrastructure in general, and the power sector in particular, in recent times.

Energy production reportedly dropped to less than 200 MW while the country requires around 3,000 MW. The blackout occurred less than a month after Electricite Du Liban, the state electricity corporation, warned that Lebanon was heading toward a "total and complete" power outage unless more fuel supplies were secured.

The collapse of electricity production also came just weeks after the energy ministers of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria agreed on a road map for the delivery of Egyptian natural gas to Lebanon, which, if successfully implemented, could provide the country with up to 17 hours of electricity per day.

Millions of Lebanese currently endure power outages of up to 22 hours per day as their leaders struggle to secure the foreign capital needed to import fuel. Operators of private backup generators are being pushed to their limits as costs of diesel and repairs have skyrocketed.

"We hope that the import of gas will happen as soon as possible and the cooperation between the countries is considered natural because it is not the first time that cooperation between us has taken place," Raymond Ghajar, Lebanon's former energy minister, said last month.

Earlier this month, after a meeting with his Egyptian counterpart Tarek El-Molla in Cairo, Ghajar said Egypt had offered extra quantities of gas. Molla hinted that a deal could be finalized "within the coming weeks."

The plan is part of a US-coordinated effort to deliver natural gas via the Arab Gas Pipeline, which originates near Arish on Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and extends through Jordan, Syria and into Lebanon.



Lebanon's former Energy Minister Raymond Ghajar, Jordan's Energy Minister Hala Zawati, Syria's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources Bassam Tohme and Egypt's Minister of Oil and Mineral Resources Tarek El Mol. (Reuters)

"This is a good step in the right direction but more needs to be done," Laury Hayatyan, MENA director at the New York-based Natural Resource Governance Institute, told Arab News, citing the need for forming technical committees from each country to monitor the pipeline's condition.

According to Ghajar, Lebanon is in talks with the World Bank to secure financing for the import of Egyptian natural gas, which will provide the country with 450 megawatts of power.

"To produce 450 MW, Egypt has to provide Lebanon with around 1 billion cubic meters or 670,000 tons of gas," Marc Ayoub, an energy policy researcher at the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute, told Arab News. "Egypt can probably do that given its large gas discoveries in recent years."

The total energy production and the amount of gas needed will also depend on the efficiency of Lebanon's power plants, he said.

Lebanon currently has a maximum power generating capacity of 2,000 MW, far less than the 2017 summer peak demand of 3,400 MW. The power generating-capacity figure is misleading, however; some 50 percent of the output is wasted due to grid inefficiencies.

The biggest challenge facing the Arab Gas Pipeline is something else,

however: The state of the industrial infrastructure of each country.

Infrastructure in Syria, a country devastated by a decade-long civil war, is in urgent need of repair so that gas can reach Lebanon. Egyptian gas stopped flowing through Syria in 2010.

“They said that gas will be transported as soon as possible,” Hayatyan said. “But what exactly does this mean and how much time will it actually take to set up everything?”

Despite the US sanctions on Syria under the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which prohibits financial transactions with the country’s institutions, Washington seems to have given its tacit approval to the pipeline proposal.



Lebanon’s capital, Beirut, was pushed into a total blackout in April after its main power stations went offline due to a lack of fuel. (AFP)

“There were signals from the US ambassador to Lebanon that initiated these proceedings, but we must wait for an official confirmation from the US Treasury,” Hayatyan said.

However, the exact payment terms must be agreed on, given that each point of entry charges a transit fee for gas to pass through. “For instance, before the civil war in Syria, they used to take part of the gas transported instead of cash payments,” she said.

In the past, the gas was transported to Lebanon’s Deir Ammar power plant. However, if the arrangement is to be revived, the plant will need to be refitted, having been run on liquid fuel for many years.

If the deal eventually goes ahead, it will not be the first time Lebanon has imported gas from abroad. "We used to import gas back in 2004 when the Arab Gas Pipeline was completed," Roudi Baroudi, an oil and gas expert, told Arab News.

"If Lebanon had fully benefited from that partnership and the Arab pipeline, most of its electricity problems would have been resolved."

Lebanon's government says net transfers to state power firm EDL amount to between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion per year, most of which is spent on fuel oil. In 2016, the International Monetary Fund said the accumulated cost of subsidizing EDL amounted to roughly 40 percent of Lebanon's entire national debt, which itself exceeded 150 percent of its GDP.

Had Lebanon made the most of its pipeline partnership, the state's treasury could have saved something in the region of \$5 billion over 18 years. "That is if we assume that the price of a barrel of oil ranges between \$50 and \$60," Baroudi said.

Egypt, Jordan, and Syria might be willing to extend credit lines to Lebanon, at least in the short term, Baroudi said, adding that "the most important thing now is to open diplomatic channels with all these countries."

To increase the productivity of the new pipeline supply, Baroudi said it would make sense for Lebanon to convert the rest of its power plants to run on gas. "The Zahrani, Jiyeh, and Zouk plants should be converted and connected to the grid," he said.



"We are now counting on the international community to fund vital projects in

the public and private sectors to revive economic life," Lebanese President Michel Aoun said.

In the meantime, Lebanon is looking to purchase excess capacity from Jordan, which could supply about three hours of electricity per day. "Jordan has been producing an excess of electricity in recent years after embracing renewables and is looking to sell that to neighboring countries," Hayatyan said.

Lebanon also struck a deal with Iraq in February to swap one million tons of Iraqi oil for derivatives that match its own power plants' specifications.

When precisely the Lebanese people will see any benefits is unclear. Grappling with the worst financial crisis in its history, Lebanon has gradually increased fuel prices in recent months because the cash-strapped central bank can no longer afford to fund fuel imports.

The latest price hike, expected to be followed by further increases in the coming weeks, is widely seen as a prelude to a final and definite lifting of fuel subsidies by the government.

Acute fuel shortages have brought the small Mediterranean country to the brink of humanitarian disaster, with hospitals across the country struggling to provide power to ventilators and other life-sustaining equipment.

To fill a medium-sized vehicle's tank, most Lebanese have to pay close to the monthly minimum wage of 675,000 Lebanese pounds, at a time when nearly 80 percent of the population is estimated to live below the poverty line.



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[Moqtada Al-Sadr wins Iraq vote, former PM Al-Maliki close behind](#)

Author:

Reuters

ID:

1633978383382113000

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BAGHDAD: Shiite Muslim cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr's party was the biggest winner in an Iraqi election on Monday, increasing the number of seats he holds in parliament, according to initial results, officials and a spokesperson for

the Sadrist Movement.

Former prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki looked set to have the next largest win among Shiite parties, initial results showed.

Iraq's Shiite groups have dominated governments and government formation since the US-led invasion of 2003 that toppled Sunni dictator Saddam Hussein and catapulted the Shiite majority and the Kurds to power.

Sunday's election was held several months early, in response to mass protests in 2019 that toppled a government and showed widespread anger against political leaders whom many Iraqis say have enriched themselves at the expense of the country.

But a record low turnout suggested that a vote billed as an chance to wrest control from the ruling elite would do little to dislodge sectarian religious parties in power since 2003.

A count based on initial results from several provinces plus the capital Baghdad, verified by local government officials, suggested Sadr had won more than 70 seats, which if confirmed could give him considerable influence in forming a government.

Statement by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), on the Iraqi elections pic.twitter.com/KwwLFI3tX7

– UNAMI (@UNIraq) [October 11, 2021](#)

However, Sadr's group is just one of several that will have to enter negotiations to form a coalition capable of dominating parliament and forming an administration, a period of jockeying for position that may take weeks or longer.

Sadr broadcast a live speech on state TV claiming victory and promising a

nationalist government free of foreign interference.

"We welcome all embassies that do not interfere in Iraq's internal affairs," he said, adding that celebrations would take place in the streets "without weapons."

Sadr has increased his power over the Iraqi state since coming first in the 2018 election where his coalition won 54 seats.

The unpredictable populist cleric has been a dominant figure and often kingmaker in Iraqi politics since the US invasion.

He opposes all foreign interference in Iraq, whether by the United States, against which he fought an insurgency after 2003, or by neighboring Iran, which he has criticized for its close involvement in Iraqi politics.

Sadr, however, is regularly in Iran, according to officials close to him, and has called for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, where Washington maintains a force of around 2,500 in a continuing fight against Islamic State.

The initial results also showed that pro-reform candidates who emerged from the 2019 protests had gained several seats in the 329-member parliament.

Iran-backed parties with links to militia groups accused of killing some of the nearly 600 people who died in the protests took a blow, winning less seats than in the last election in 2018, according to the initial results and local officials.

Kurdish parties won 61 seats, the results showed, including 32 for the Kurdistan Democratic Party which dominates the government of the autonomous Kurdish region of Iraq, and 15 for its rival the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party.

Sunni parliament speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi's Taqaddum coalition won 38 seats, Iraq's state news agency reported, making it the second largest in parliament. Maliki's State Of Law coalition came third overall with 37.

New law, same big parties

Elections in Iraq since 2003 have been followed by protracted negotiations that can last months and serve to distribute government posts among the dominant parties.

The result on Monday is not expected to dramatically alter the balance of power in Iraq or in the wider region.

Sunday's vote was held under a new law billed by Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as a way to loosen the grip of established political parties and pave the way for independent, pro-reform candidates. Voting districts were made smaller, and the practice of awarding seats to lists of candidates sponsored by parties was abandoned.

But many Iraqis did not believe the system could be fundamentally changed and chose not to vote.

The official turnout figure of just 41 percent suggested the vote had failed to capture the imagination of the public, especially younger Iraqis who demonstrated in huge crowds two years ago.

"I did not vote. It's not worth it," Hussein Sabah, 20, told Reuters in Iraq's southern port Basra. "There is nothing that would benefit me or others. I see youth that have degrees with no jobs. Before the elections, (politicians) all came to them. After the elections, who knows?"

Kadhimi's predecessor Adel Abdul Mahdi resigned after security forces and

gunmen killed hundreds of protesters in 2019 in a crackdown on demonstrations. The new prime minister called the vote months early to show that the government was responding to demands for more accountability. In practice, powerful parties proved best able to mobilize supporters and candidates effectively, even under the new rules. Iraq has held five parliamentary elections since the fall of Saddam. Rampant sectarian violence unleashed during the US occupation has abated, and Islamic State fighters who seized a third of the country in 2014 were defeated in 2017. But many Iraqis say their lives have yet to improve. Infrastructure lies in disrepair and health care, education and electricity are inadequate.



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[Arab coalition hits Houthi targets in Abdiya](#)

Mon, 2021-10-11 16:16

RIYADH: The Arab coalition said on Monday it had launched 338 specific attacks on Houthi targets to protect civilians in Abdiya, Yemen, since the militias' siege of the district.

The coalition said in a statement that it had carried out 33 operations targeting Houthi in Abdiya over the past 24 hours, adding that the Houthi militia is depriving 8,000 students of education in southern Marib.

It also said the operations has included the destruction of eight military vehicles, and had casued 156 Houthi casualties.

The statement also affirmed the coalition's commitment to supporting the Yemeni army and protecting Yemeni citizens from the Houthi oppression.

The coalition later issued another statement saying it also supports the Yemeni National Army and the tribesmen in lifting the siege on civilians in Abdiya, state TV reported.

"The humanitarian situation in Abdiya is tragic and we are looking at all humanitarian and operational options," the coalition added.

It also said that the international community and humanitarian organizations must also bear the responsibility of lifting the siege.



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3 Egyptian health ministry employees arrested over dumped COVID-19 vaccines

Mon, 2021-10-11 15:50

CAIRO: Three Egyptian health ministry employees have been arrested after hundreds of thousands of dollars-worth of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) vaccines were found dumped in a water drain.

The Egyptian Public Prosecution ordered the detention of a pharmacist, storekeeper, and driver following the discovery of the discarded drugs by a canal in Minya, Upper Egypt, south of the capital Cairo.

Authorities were alerted on Thursday by residents in Ibshaq village who found large quantities of bags containing COVID-19 vaccines still wrapped in their packages and officials launched an investigation when Egyptian Minister of Health Hala Zayed reported that a health department employee in Minya's Bani Mazar Center had uncovered packages which it later turned out had been intended for use by the governorate's health directorate.

Further inquiries revealed that 18,400 packages, worth 5.24 million Egyptian pounds (\$333,000), had gone missing from store inventories. Investigators reported that 13,400 doses of the dumped vaccine were no longer suitable for use.

The three arrested employees have reportedly denied charges of embezzlement and loss of public money, claiming the vaccines had been stolen from them, but the Egyptian Public Prosecution said the Ministry of Health had not received any notification of the theft.

All three have been held for questioning for a further 15 days to allow time for investigators to examine mobile phone conversations and vehicle tracking data from the car allegedly used to transport the vaccines to the dumping site.



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