

Tunisian president receives official US delegation

Fri, 2021-08-13 22:50

TUNIS: Tunisian President Kais Saied on Friday received an official US delegation headed by deputy national security adviser Jonathan Finer, who carried a written message from President Joe Biden, the Tunisian presidency posted on Facebook.

During the meeting Saied said the measures he had taken – dismissing the prime minister, freezing Parliament and assuming executive authority – were within the framework of implementing the constitution and responding to a popular will in light of the political, economic and social crises, and rampant corruption and bribery.



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Lebanon's state facilities to suspend operations as fuel crisis worsens

Fri, 2021-08-13 21:58

BEIRUT: Many vital state facilities in Lebanon have warned of a full suspension of operations within 48 hours as a nationwide diesel fuel crisis has hit a catastrophic level.

There were long queues at gas stations, bakeries, and pharmacies across the country on Friday as people slept on the roofs of their buildings amid power cuts and the absence of diesel to run private generators.

One state facility that barely avoided a shutdown was the Beirut-Rafic Hariri International Airport, which benefited from a last-second injection of diesel to help keep the lights on.

"The petroleum importing companies were unable to deliver gasoline and diesel to the stations because they did not know how to price anything," said Georges Fayyad, who heads the Association of Petroleum Importing Companies in Lebanon.

"The central bank told them that it will adopt the black market exchange rate (20,000 Lebanese pounds to the dollar) while the Ministry of Energy is still adopting the rate of 3,900 Lebanese pounds to the dollar."

The recent fuel shortage is among one of the lowest points of a two-year financial crisis that has seen the Lebanese pound lose 90 percent of its value and driven more than half the population into poverty.

"The tug of war between the ruling authority and the central bank puts the people, the owners of the stations, and the entire fuel sector in a bind," said George Brax, a member of the Gas Station Owners' Syndicate.

"The citizens are suffering the consequences."

The state-run telecommunications company Ogero announced that "due to the lack of fuel," services have been suspended in the Akkar region in northern Lebanon.

Caretaker Minister of Communications Talal Hawat denied rumors about the ministry planning to permanently cut off Internet service in the country between 12 a.m. and 7 a.m. next month.

Youth groups in the south and north intercepted diesel tanks and confiscated the cargo while a fistfight over fuel at a gas station in Damour escalated into a shooting.

Nasser Srour, secretary of the syndicate of bakery owners in Beirut and Mount

Lebanon, said he informed the economy minister that “dozens of bakeries have closed their doors” due to the fuel crisis.

Farid Zeinoun, head of the Union of Workers and Distributors in the Gas Sector, announced that the gas reserves “are sufficient for five days,” and called on the central bank “to allow the gas tanker that has been anchored at sea for 20 days to enter.”

The crisis has also sparked an exodus of citizens as long queues have emerged at Lebanese General Security centers across the country as 4,000 to 5,000 passport requests are being submitted every day.

“We get thousands of young Lebanese who are requesting passports to apply for immigration,” a security source said.

The Directorate of General Security described it as an “unprecedented” rush for passports.

The demand to expedite the formation of a new government was the focus of Friday’s meeting between President Michel Aoun and Maronite Patriarch Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rahi.

The cleric demanded a government that “is made up of competent people who rise above all parties; this government needs to be ready to face difficulties and implement structural reforms in various sectors.”

On Thursday, Central Bank Gov. Riad Salameh said he will not dip into the mandatory reserve to subsidize fuel unless parliament legislates this matter. As a result, petroleum importing companies decided not to distribute fuel to stations until an agreement over the pricing is reached.

The bank’s decision puzzled the ruling authority, which had been trying to pressure Salameh to continue subsidizing fuel until ration cards for the needy were issued.

“The ration cards will be distributed to 500,000 families, and about \$17 will be allocated for each family member,” a source close to caretaker Minister of Finance Ghazi Wazni told Arab News.

Lebanon will benefit from \$300 million from the World Bank, according to the source, and it is expected to also benefit from \$860 million in September coming from the International Monetary Fund to finance the ration cards. There is another World Bank program that can support 150,000 poor families.

“But it all depends on forming a government,” the source said. “We are expecting solutions by September, but not before.”



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Lebanon's prime minister rejects president's call for fuel crisis meeting
Lebanon's central bank to offer credit lines for fuel imports at market price, ends subsidy

[Israel to relax Gaza curbs amid security calm](#)

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Fri, 2021-08-13 20:03

JERUSALEM: Israel is to authorize the entry of Palestinian traders and goods from Gaza for the first time in more than a year following an improvement in the security situation, officials said Friday.

"In light of the preservation of security stability" in the area, "1,000 merchants and 350 senior Gazan businesspeople" will be allowed into Israel from Sunday, said the Israeli military body responsible for civil affairs in the occupied Palestinian territories, COGAT.

Also, "exports from the Gaza Strip into Israel will recommence through the Kerem Shalom crossing, and imports from Israel into the Gaza Strip will be expanded – including components belonging to the transport and communications sector," COGAT said in statement.

"Equipment and goods will be allowed in for the Gaza Strip's humanitarian infrastructure, such as water and sewage," it said.

COGAT cautioned that the relaxation was "conditional on the continued preservation of the region's security."

Entry permits will be issued "only to those vaccinated against or recovered from Covid-19," it said.

A COGAT spokeswoman told AFP this would be the first time Israel was allowing Gaza traders in since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic over a year ago.

In late July, Israel expanded the fishing zone off Gaza and resumed imports into the territory for international aid projects.

A fragile truce has largely held following 11 days of deadly conflict between Israel and Hamas in May, although sporadic incendiary balloon launches from Gaza have triggered Israeli retaliatory fire.



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Israel investigating May barrage that killed 6 civilians in Gaza
A birthday gift: Israeli woman donates kidney to Gaza boy

[Spain starts returning Moroccan minors after Ceuta migration crisis](#)

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Fri, 2021-08-13 19:08

MADRID: Spain on Friday started sending hundreds of Moroccan youths, who in May crossed into its North African enclave of Ceuta, back to Morocco after reaching an agreement with Rabat.

That was reported by Spanish media and signals to an improvement in ties

after a long row.

La Ser radio cited sources in Ceuta as saying the minors were already being transported to Morocco in small groups using vans from a sports complex converted into a makeshift reception center.

Neither officials at the foreign and interior ministries, nor at the Ceuta regional administration were immediately available.

Morocco and Spain have been involved in a dispute sparked by Spain admitting Western Sahara independence movement leader Brahim Ghali for medical treatment without informing Rabat, which led to a migration crisis in Ceuta. Most of some 10,000 migrants who crossed into Ceuta were immediately returned to Morocco, but some 700 unaccompanied minors remained in the enclave.

The influx was widely seen as retaliation for Spain's decision to discreetly take in Ghali, who returned to Algeria in June after spending more than a month in hospital in Spain. Morocco regards Western Sahara as part of its own territory.

The Algeria-backed Polisario seeks an independent state in the territory, where Spain was colonial ruler until 1975.



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Spain vows to restore order after thousands swim into Ceuta from Morocco
Mass arrivals of migrants into Spain's Ceuta, Greece's Lesbos island

[US Treasury imposes sanctions on alleged oil smuggler, companies linked to Iran's Quds Force](#)

Fri, 2021-08-13 18:18

WASHINGTON D.C.: The US Treasury Department said on Friday it was imposing sanctions on an alleged oil smuggler and companies it said provide support to the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to a statement.

Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) targeted Mahmood Rashid Amur Al-Habsi and a network of businesses, it said.

According to the statement, Al-Habsi partnered with senior leaders in the Quds Force and used several companies to facilitate the sale of shipments of Iranian oil to foreign customers, including buyers in East Asia.

The OFAC director Andrea Jacki said Iranian oil sales to the Revolutionary Guards "rely on important foreign intermediaries to conceal the Quds Force's involvement," with the Treasury adding that the proceeds of which go toward funding "regional destabilizing activities."

* *With Reuters*



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