

Lebanese parties reject the return to 'militia behavior' amid anger over pro-Assad rallies

Author:

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BEIRUT: Lebanese political parties have reacted strongly to a Beirut demonstration on Sunday by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), with the speaker of the Lebanese parliament reiterating the need for a national government on Monday.

Chants by SSNP members were "a return to the language of the civil war," the parties said.

The demonstration, authorized by the Ministry of Interior, took place in light of a complex and deadly political stalemate.

It also came after four days of raising pictures of Syrian President Bashar Assad, with Syrian workers and refugees, who were cheering Assad, being attacked by some Lebanese citizens.

The SSNP demonstration came within the framework of the commemoration of the liberation of southern Lebanon from the Israeli occupation.

At the forefront of the celebrating parties was Hezbollah, whose supporters spread in the border areas.

Those groups waved Lebanese and Hezbollah flags, and drove their cars and motorbikes to smash an iron gate bearing an Israeli symbol before travelling to the town of Naqoura.

The speaker of the Lebanese parliament, Nabih Berri, warned on Monday that "creating crises on purpose, if it continues without a quick initiative to address them, will topple Lebanon."

Berri called on "the loyalists and the opposition to feel the danger of the fateful stage."

He urged political forces and NGOs "to liberate Lebanon from the complex of choosing personal interests over the interests of the homeland by some people, and recognize that our governmental problem is 100 percent internal."

Berri said: "The only solution is to form a national government, without preconditions, with non-partisan competencies, no obstructing third for anyone, according to the French initiative, and its only program of action should be to restore the confidence of the Lebanese and the Arab brothers in Lebanon."

Political activist Naufal Daou told Arab News that "what is happening in

Lebanon is just smoke bombs to divert attention from the main problem, which is the Syrian and Iranian occupation of Lebanon."

He clarified that "all that happened in recent days is an attempt to cover up the basis of the problem and to distract people."

He added: "As long as we do not acknowledge the main problem, which is related to the wrong regional and international positioning of Lebanon, and as long as we remain as part of the Syrian-Iranian system, there are no solutions and no one is ready to help us.

"The international community is telling us to reform and fight corruption. This is your business.

"But when we say to the international community that we are occupied by Iran, the issue of Lebanon becomes the focus of foreign treatments."

The SSNP demonstration soon evolved into a military parade without weapons.

Party members covered their faces with masks and wore black and khaki colors.

Video footage circulated on social media of groups participating in the demonstration shouting chants against the leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF), Samir Geagea, threatening to kill him in the same way former President Bashir Gemayel was killed in 1982.

The Judicial Council issued a death sentence against Habib Al-Shartouni, a member of the SSNP, for the murder of Gemayel.

The LF said in a statement that "the chant that was used at the demonstration was a clear admission of killing and an explicit call to kill."

The LF announced that it would file a case before the competent authorities "against those responsible for the celebration."

The leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, MP Gebran Bassil, joined the denouncers.

Bassil said that "every call to kill is reprehensible, and it is a return to the language of war that is rejected because fueling instincts undermines the principle of the state."

Bassil added: "We reject the return to militia behavior, and there is no place to justify it. As for respecting the martyrs, especially the president of the republic, it is a duty, and we all have martyrs."

The head of the LF's foreign affairs department, Richard Kouyoumjian, warned that no one can bring back Syrian tutelage to Lebanon.

He called for "every displaced Syrian who has chanted in support of Assad to return to Syria because we cannot continue as a lawless country."

The Future Movement MP Rola Al-Tabash denounced "the paramilitary parades in

Beirut, the closure of roads and intimidation of citizens, insults and confessions of assassinations and threats to commit others.”

On Twitter, she asked: “What is the position of the judicial and security agencies regarding what happened? What is the position of the administration that raises the banner of sovereignty regarding replaying the scenes of war?”

MP Nadim Gemayel, the son of the former president, said: “Bashir, after 40 years, still terrifies them.”

The Progressive Socialist Party said that “civil peace and respect for its requirements is one of the most prominent pillars of the Taif Accord, which ended the civil war and laid the basis of national reconciliation that must be adhered to above all considerations, hoping that those concerned realize the urgent necessity to achieve a government settlement before it is too late.”

The Lebanese “are experiencing unbearable daily oppression,” the party added.

The media office of Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmy referred to a split within the SSNP.

It said: “Some members of the party obtained a license from the ministry to hold a ceremonial gathering and pledged to abide by the conditions of the ministry. Others within the party objected to the request on the grounds that the license applicants do not represent the party.”

Fahmy’s office added that “the ministry does not interfere in disputes within parties.”



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Yemen resumes vaccination campaign as supplies dwindle

Mon, 2021-05-24 21:05

AL-MUKALLA: Hundreds of Yemenis thronged to health facilities across government-controlled areas to receive COVID-19 vaccines on Monday as the country resumed its campaign to inoculate thousands of vulnerable people.

Shortly after receiving 360,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine, Yemen in April kicked off a national COVID-19 vaccination campaign, targeting health workers, the elderly and people with serious diseases.

The campaign was paused for several weeks due to poor turnout from the targeted groups, prompting health officials to consider opening vaccinations to the public at large.

But this week, health facilities saw unprecedented visits after Saudi Arabia made it mandatory for travelers from Yemen to receive a COVID-19 vaccination before crossing into the Kingdom.

Long queues of people seeking inoculation were seen on Monday outside hospitals and makeshift health centers in the southern cities of Aden, Taiz, Shabwa, Abyan, Lahj and Hadramout. Some health facilities closed doors after entire vaccine stocks were depleted, while others sent urgent appeals for more doses.

The provincial office of the ministry of health in Marib asked travelers to receive jabs at other facilities outside the province after it ran out of vaccines.

According to the official news agency SABA, Qasem Buhaibeh, Yemen's health minister, said that Marib ran out of doses after health centers close to the Al-Wadiah border crossing with Saudi Arabia vaccinated 3,287 people in just two days.

The health ministry set up two new medical points to meet the surge in demand for vaccines from Yemenis looking to travel to the Kingdom, he added.

Health facilities in the densely populated city of Taiz also reported similar

turnouts, with authorities warning that the 70,000 doses in the city “might be gone within a week.”

Dr. Ahmed Mansour, a health official in Taiz, told Arab News: “The number of people is big and our stock will last for one week. We have sent a request for 100,000 more doses.”

He urged the country’s health ministry to urgently dispatch further doses along with the salaries of health workers who are battling the virus and sudden influx of people seeking vaccines.

The Iran-backed Houthi militia have blocked the distribution of vaccines in areas under their control, which prompted the Yemeni government to urge health workers in Sanaa and other northern areas to head to southern provinces to receive the jab.

Mansour said that dozens of health workers have “secretly” received COVID-19 vaccines at health centers in Taiz since April.

“They came from Sanaa and Ibb. The Houthis neither offer health workers the vaccine nor allow them to travel to government areas to get it,” Mansour added.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Houthis have refused to disclose the true number of coronavirus deaths in territories under their control, and have blocked attempts by local and international organizations to investigate the crisis.

Dropping cases

The Aden-based National Coronavirus Committee and health officials who spoke to Arab News on Monday said that the number of daily recorded cases and patient admissions in intensive care units has dropped since the beginning of this month, after figures peaked in April.

On Sunday, the government’s committee reported nine new cases, three deaths, and 44 recoveries, bringing the total number of cases in government-controlled areas to 6,658, including 1,307 deaths and 3,245 recoveries.

Dr. Farooq Q. Naji, director of a COVID-19 treatment center in Aden, told Arab News that daily admissions to the center fell from 80 cases on April 23 to 36 cases on May 17.

Following the drop in infection rates, thousands of university students on Monday headed back to classes amid warnings against violating health guidelines, including compulsory mask wearing.



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Bahrain announces record COVID-19 deaths as cases surge

Author:

Mon, 2021-05-24 20:13

RIYADH: Bahrain announced on Monday 24 deaths from COVID-19 – the highest figure since the pandemic began.

The number of cases in the kingdom has increased sharply during May, with 3,177 new infections reported on Sunday.

The latest victims were aged between 33 and 72 and included both expatriates and Bahraini nationals.

The kingdom has announced a number of measures to try and stop the spread of the coronavirus.

Travelers from “red-list” countries including India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were banned from entering the country from Monday. Citizens and residents are exempt but need to present a PCR test before travel and quarantine for 10 days on arrival.

Quarantine was also reintroduced for arrivals from all other countries if the traveler has not been vaccinated.

Last week, the kingdom introduced restrictions for public places for those who have not been vaccinated.

The increase in cases has been blamed on large gatherings during Ramadan and Eid.



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Bahrain bars entry of travelers from ‘red list’ countries

Blinken reaffirms two-state support ahead of Mideast tour

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Sun, 2021-05-23 14:58

WASHINGTON: Secretary of State Antony Blinken, speaking ahead of a trip to the Middle East, reaffirmed on Sunday US support for a two-state solution as the only way to provide hope to Israelis and Palestinians that they can live "with equal measures of security, of peace and dignity."

His remarks came days after Israel and Hamas agreed to a cease-fire, halting 11 days of mutual bombardment that killed more than 200 Palestinians.

"If there isn't positive change, and particularly if we can't find a way to help Palestinians live with more – with more dignity and with more hope, this cycle is likely to repeat itself, and that is in no one's interest," Blinken said on ABC's "This Week."

The State Department announced Thursday that Blinken will travel to the Middle East "in the coming days," with plans to meet with Israeli, Palestinian and regional counterparts.

Blinken's support for a two-state solution – the vision of Israel and a Palestinian state living peacefully side by side – restates a long-time US goal, though he conceded that this was not "necessarily for today."

But his remarks about "equal measures" for Israelis and Palestinians seemed to shift the tone, at least, from Donald Trump's administration, which cut aid to the Palestinian Authority and issued a Middle East peace plan with strong Israeli backing but no support from Palestinians.

The top US diplomat emphasized the need to provide humanitarian aid to Palestinians while beginning a major effort at reconstruction.

Saying the cease-fire would help mark a pivot from violence to "something more positive," he added, "That has to start now with dealing with the grave humanitarian situation in Gaza."

"Then reconstruction, rebuilding what's been lost, and critically, engaging both sides in trying to start to make real improvements" in people's lives. He was asked on ABC how the Biden administration could ensure that aid would go to ordinary Palestinians and not help the Hamas militants who launched thousands of rockets at Israel.

"We've worked in the past and we continue to work with trusted, independent parties that can help do the reconstruction and the development, not some quasi- government authority," he said.

"The real challenge here is to help the Palestinians and particularly to help the Palestinian Authority deliver better results for their people, and of course, Israel has a profound role to play in that too."

Israel's response to the Hamas rocket barrages has drawn sharp criticism from some liberal members of the US Congress who have questioned American arms sales to the Jewish state.

Asked about that, Blinken replied, "The president has been clear we're

committed to giving Israel the means to defend itself... At the same time, any arms sale will be done in full consultation in Congress.”



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Jordan's King Abdullah says important to turn Gaza ceasefire into extended truce

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Sun, 2021-05-23 18:54

CAIRO: Jordan's King Abdullah stressed on Sunday the importance of the Gaza ceasefire being translated into an extended truce, state news agency Petra reported.

King Abdullah said Jordan "puts all its diplomatic relations and capabilities at the service of the Palestinian cause," Petra reported.

The king also said “there is no alternative to a two-state solution to achieve just and comprehensive peace”, Petra added.

Meanwhile, Egypt’s foreign minister is to visit Jordan on Sunday to discuss ways to build on the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, de-escalate tensions in the Palestinian territories and revive the Middle East peace process, a foreign ministry statement said.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry will meet Jordan’s King Abdullah and the Jordanian foreign minister during the visit, the statement said.



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