

International

UAE lifts Lebanon travel ban: Beirut seeks support for ailing economy

Hariri hoping for cash injection for central bank

ABU DHABI: The United Arab Emirates lifted a ban on its citizens visiting Lebanon on Monday as the Beirut government sought UAE help in steering the heavily indebted economy out of deep crisis. Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri, leading a delegation to Abu Dhabi seeking support, had told Reuters he was hoping the UAE would inject cash into its central bank. Before the lifting of the travel ban was announced, Hariri said he was "optimistic" after visiting the UAE and meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. He said the UAE would announce any support initiative that may come. "The atmosphere is good," Hariri said on Twitter.

The UAE barred its citizens from travelling to Lebanon in 2016. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have both voiced frequent concern over the political situation in Lebanon, which is located next to war-torn Syria and is home to the heavily armed Hezbollah group backed by the two Gulf states' main adversary, Iran. Lebanon is now seeking a cash injection for its central bank and investments in food, infrastructure, oil and gas, and renewable energy.

Faced with one of the world's highest debt burdens, low growth and crumbling infrastructure, Beirut has vowed to implement long-delayed reforms. It is also seeking to reverse a sharp loss of confidence among foreign investors and depositors who are turning away from the Lebanese pound. While no deal was formally announced, Lebanese officials portrayed Monday's high-stakes talks as positive while Abu Dhabi stressed its support for Lebanon. In response, dollar bonds issued by heavily-indebted Lebanon rose.

A Lebanese government source said Hariri would remain in Abu Dhabi yesterday for follow-up meetings. Crown Prince Mohammed "stressed during the meeting

that the UAE...is keen on supporting its relationships with Lebanon on different levels, and stands by it in all that preserves its security and stability," the state news agency WAM reported. When asked earlier on Monday whether Lebanon would receive an injection of cash into its central bank from the UAE, Hariri said: "We are working on everything ... Yes we are hoping, we will work on it."

The bank has been drawing down its foreign exchange reserves to repay the state's maturing dollar-

Beirut seeks food, infrastructure and oil investments

denominated debt, and said last week it was prepared to do more. Central bank Governor Riad Salameh, also attending the conference, said it was continuing to provide dollars to local financial markets. He added that Lebanon has "numerous possibilities" as it looks for assistance, but it anticipates support from the UAE.

Seeking public pledges

Lebanon's traditionally high reserves of foreign currency have been in decline because capital inflows into its banking system from Lebanese abroad have been slowing. Beirut, which has a debt-to-GDP ratio



BEIRUT: Lebanese protesters chant slogans during a demonstration in central Beirut's Martyr Square. Lebanese protested in the capital over increasingly difficult living conditions, amid fears of a dollar shortage and possible price hikes. — AFP

of around 150%, hopes its Gulf allies or regional sovereign wealth funds will offer support but no public pledges have so far been made. At Abu Dhabi's Sea Palace, the leaders "discussed the latest developments in Lebanon and the region and the bilateral relations between the two countries", Hariri's office said in a statement.

Financial markets have tightened significantly this

year, raising the costs for Lebanon of borrowing and insuring against default. Dollar-denominated bonds, which rose on Monday, remain down some 15% this year. UAE Economy Minister Sultan bin Saeed Al Mansouri told reporters at the conference that financing for Lebanon would be discussed in the meetings "and they'll make the right decision", adding Lebanon's investment climate is becoming more "settled." — Reuters

IS threat to spread if Turkey invades northern Syria

BEIRUT: A feared Turkish invasion of north-east Syria could spark a resurgence of the Islamic State group, analysts and Kurdish forces have warned, despite Ankara's pledge to prevent the jihadists' return. Ankara has threatened an offensive in Syria against Kurdish militias it considers terrorists and US forces on Monday pulled back from Turkish border areas, opening the way for an invasion President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said could come at any moment.

An open assault would reverse years of successful Kurdish-led operations to defeat IS and allow some of its surviving leaders to come out of hiding, said the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Kurdish militia that controls much of northeastern Syria. With little other leverage left in the regional game, Sam Heller of the International Crisis Group think tank, told AFP the SDF has an "interest" in warning of an IS threat if open conflict breaks out with rival Turkey.

"But the fact is that ISIS is still a threat, one that seems likely to metastasize if the SDF is forced to divert attention and resources... to a defensive battle against Turkey," he said, using another acronym for IS. While a Kurdish-led operation earlier this year saw the death of IS's territorial caliphate, the organization isn't dead and sleeper cells have been active in SDF-held areas and in Syria's vast desert where they continue to hit regime forces with deadly attacks and ambushes.

Charles Lister, director of the US-based Middle East Institute, said US President Donald Trump was "granting IS the gift of rebirth". The US military itself has warned that, short of sustained international pressure, IS would soon have the ability to regroup.



QAMISHLI: Fighters from the Kurdish women's protection units (YPJ) and the people's protection units (YPG) march in front of the UN headquarters in the northern Kurdish Syrian city of Qamishli during a protest against Turkish threats in the Kurdish region yesterday. — AFP

"The battle against IS is not over," Abdulkarim Omar, the top Kurdish foreign affairs official, told AFP Monday. "There are hundreds of sleeper cells in recently liberated areas," he said.

Camps and detention centers

The SDF, with backing from the US-led coalition, has scored major victories against IS near the Turkish border in Kobane and in the jihadists' former Syria capital of Raqa. This year, they declared the territorial defeat of the group after seizing Baghouz, the final IS bastion in eastern Syria. The SDF is now concerned that jihadists could replenish their ranks by freeing thousands of fighters and their families who are being held in detention centers and informal settlements in Syria's northeast. The Kurds consistently warned that they would be unable to guard IS fighters if their forces were busy fighting off a Turkish offensive.

On Monday, Omar said that detention centres are not heavily fortified. "They are only

buildings... in the event of any security vacuum, these criminals could have an opportunity to break free," he said. The official also said he was concerned about displacement camps, namely Al-Hol, the largest of the settlements, which he described as a "time bomb". Security incidents have been on the rise in the crowded camp, which houses more than 3,000 IS families among its more than 70,000 residents, according to the Kurdish administration in northeast Syria.

The thousands of foreign IS brides held in Al-Hol, are "as dangerous as the thousands of IS fighters being held in SDF detention centers", it said this week, noting daily stabbings, killings and attempts to break free. IS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has urged followers to free detained jihadists and family members held at camps in Iraq and Syria, vowing "revenge" in an audio recording released on September 16. SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali last month said IS militants "have stepped up their regrouping efforts through women in the camp recently". —AFP

Daring to dream: Nobel winner's nervous night

WASHINGTON: When US scientist William Kaelin's phone began ringing at 5:00 am, he wasn't sure whether he was dreaming: Winning the Nobel Medicine Prize had long been a goal, but he also thought it was a long shot. He then noticed the caller ID was from Europe. "And at that point my heart started racing," the 61-year-old told AFP in an interview.

Kaelin, who runs a laboratory at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston and is a professor at Harvard Medical School, was honored Monday along with fellow American Gregg Semenza and Britain's Peter Ratcliffe for their research on how cells sense and adapt to changing oxygen levels. Their pioneering work, carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s, has opened up new strategies to fight diseases from cancer to anemia.

Kaelin said it would be a lie to say he had never dreamt of winning the prize, but "you try not to let it distort your daily life significantly," and he went to bed at a normal time Sunday night, tempering his hopes, as he had done for many years on the eve of Nobel week. Semenza on the other hand missed the first pre-dawn call from the Swedish academy, and waited several anxious minutes by the phone, answering it second time around. "I was in a daze," he said, adding he had not been expecting the honor but had since celebrated with champagne.



BOSTON: Dr William G Kaelin, Jr MD, recipient of 2019 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine speaks to the press at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. — AFP

Disease cures

At the heart of the trio's research is how the body registers and responds to oxygen, which supports life as we know it on Earth. Scientists have long known that climbing to high altitudes spurs production of the hormone erythropoietin (EPO), which in turn leads to more red blood cells, to help compensate for lower oxygen levels.

Semenza and Ratcliffe dug into how this gene worked on a cellular level, with the former publishing breakthrough work on the subject 1995. Kaelin came to the same subject from a different direction, through his investigations into von Hippel-Lindau's disease (VHL disease). Individuals who inherit this rare condition develop tumors that over produce the distress signal associated with hypoxia - making it a prime candidate to study the body's oxygen-regulation tools. — AFP

Sri Lanka faces the costliest election, longest ballot paper

COLOMBO: A record number of candidates for Sri Lanka's presidential poll next month has led to the longest-ever ballot paper and the most expensive vote in the country's history, the Election Commission said yesterday. Thirty five candidates are running in the November 16 poll, the highest number in any single ballot, Elections Commission chief Mahinda Deshapriya told reporters in Colombo.

"The ballot paper will be the longest-ever we have had," he said. "It will be 26 inches long. "With the increase in the size of the ballot paper, we will have to import plastic ballot boxes because the wooden boxes we have with us will not be big enough." The cost of the election was originally estimated at some \$22 million, but it is now thought that will rise to \$28 million, officials said. Sri Lanka does not have electronic voting machines and ballots are counted manually, with the results expected the day after the polls.



COLOMBO: Supporters carry placards with a picture of Gotabhaya Rajapakse, former secretary to the ministry of defense and brother of Sri Lanka's opposition leader and former president Mahinda Rajapakse in Colombo. — AFP

The authorities allow each candidate to have two polling agents at each of the 11,000 voting booths across the nation. The minimum voting age is 18 and 16 million people are eligible to vote. There are two Buddhist monks and just one woman among the 35

people running for president of the nation of 21 million people. Former president Mahinda Rajapakse's younger brother Gotabhaya, 70, is the frontrunner while his main challenger is 52-year-old Housing Minister Sajith Premadasa. — AFP

Social media outrage: Official buys burqas for students

PESHAWAR: Pakistani social media was fuming yesterday after pictures showing girls in burqas bought for them by local authorities went viral, igniting anger in a deeply patriarchal country where women have fought for their rights for decades. A district councillor in the small village of Cheena, in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, used some 90,000 rupees (\$570) of local government funds to buy around 90 burqas for students at the government-run middle school in the village.

The region is deeply conservative, and many women there traditionally wear burqas which cover them from head to foot - including their faces. The official, Muzafar Shah, said he had bought the garments at the request of parents who could not afford them as one of his final acts before stepping down from his four-year tenure. "Around 90 percent of the girls already wear burqas, so I thought these poor girls should have new burqas," he said, adding that previously he had used the funds to buy the school a solar panel, build a washroom, and purchase new fur-

niture. But he snapped two pictures - one showing a classroom full of girls wearing the burqas, and a second showing them piled on a desk - which swiftly ignited outrage on social media.

The garments were purchased "instead of focusing on improving quality of education, enforcing strict and exemplary punishments for: harassing, abusing and raping," tweeted one user, Fatima Wali. Gulalai Ismail, a Pakistani women's rights activist who fled the country recently for New York, cheered the outrage. "I'm glad to see time is changing and now more & more people are standing up against objectification of women in the garb of protection," she wrote.

Shah said he did not understand the criticism. "The people of the area are very happy with me... had I distributed jeans among the girls, the media and liberals would have praised me," he said. Provincial minister of education Zia Ullah Bangash said an inquiry has been launched in the matter, and stressed that the garment is not part of the school uniform. "Our dress code includes white trousers and a loose blue tunic, however it is up to girls if they want to dress a burqa over the uniform. We can't force them," he said.

The move came weeks after government was forced to scrap an order for female students to wear veils in two other conservative districts of the same province. Burqa-wearing was common for centuries in the ultraconservative ethnic Pashtun heartland that straddles the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. — AFP