

International

Yemen to become world's poorest country if war continues, UN says

79 percent of the population living under the poverty line

DUBAI: War-ravaged Yemen is on course to become the world's poorest country if the conflict persists, the United Nations said in a report. "If fighting continues through 2022, Yemen will rank the poorest country in the world, with 79 percent of the population living under the poverty line and 65 percent classified as extremely poor," according to the United Nations Development Program report, published Wednesday. Because of the war, poverty in Yemen has jumped from 47 percent of the population in 2014 to a projected 75 percent by the end of 2019.

Yemen, long the poorest country in the Arabian Peninsula, plunged into war after Houthi rebels seized the capital Sanaa in late 2014. A Saudi-led military coalition launched a blistering offensive months later to prop up the internationally-recognized government of Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi against the Iran-aligned insurgents. The fighting has since killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians, and pushed Yemen to the brink of famine.

It has also displaced millions and left more than two thirds of the population in need of aid. The UN has previously described Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. "Not only has the war made Yemen the largest humanitarian crisis in the world, it has plunged it into a harrowing development crisis too," UNDP Yemen's resident representative, Auke Lootsma, said in a statement on Wednesday. "The ongoing crisis is threatening to make Yemen's population the

poorest in the world — a title the already suffering country cannot afford."

Power-sharing talks

Yemen's internationally recognized government and southern separatists are holding indirect negotiations and are close to reaching a power-sharing agreement, sources from both sides said. The two camps have been for weeks in indirect and discreet talks in Saudi Arabia's western city of Jeddah with the kingdom's mediation, an official from the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) told AFP.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there has been "a lot of progress" in the past couple of days. A Yemeni government source confirmed that talks between the two parties have been ongoing. In August, fighting between the two camps - both of which are battling Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels - opened a new front in the country's complex war. But sources from both sides told AFP on Monday that they are close to reaching a power-sharing deal.

"The agreement would stipulate that the government return to Aden and that the Security Belt Forces be responsible for security under the supervision of the Saudis," a source informed about the negotiations said. The source also said that the deal would include "the participation of the STC in government". The Security Belt Forces - dominated by the secessionist STC - in



SANAA: Yemenis and Shiite Houthi rebels visit the site of a damaged funeral hall building in the capital Sanaa during an event commemorating three years since its destruction in a reported Saudi-led coalition air strike. — AFP

August took control of the southern city of Aden, which has served as the government's base since it was ousted from the capital Sanaa by the Houthi rebels in 2014.

The clashes between separatists and government forces - who for years fought on the same

side against the Houthis - have raised fears that the country could break apart entirely. The coalition intervened in Yemen in March 2015 as the Houthi rebels closed in on Aden prompting Yemeni President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi to flee into Saudi exile. — Agencies

Tunisia presidential hopeful walks free from jail in runoff

TUNIS: Tunisia's presidential candidate Nabil Karoui received a hero's welcome as he walked free from jail Wednesday, just days ahead of a runoff against a political newcomer. Karoui's release is the latest twist in a shock election dominated by political outsiders in the country whose 2011 revolution sparked a wave of regional uprisings. His return to the arena as a free man comes at a time of uncertainty for the country hailed as the sole democratic success story of the Arab Spring. An AFP journalist outside Mornaguia prison near Tunis saw a throng of media mogul Karoui's supporters waving Tunisia's red-and-white flag and campaign banners as they jubilantly cheered for him. An elated Karoui then left the scene in a black Mercedes, without speaking to the press. The Court of Cassation's decision to free Karoui, a business tycoon who has been detained since August over a money laundering probe, comes ahead of Sunday's final presidential vote. Despite being behind bars, he won 15.6 percent of votes in the first round of the presidential poll.

No clear majority

The runoff comes as Tunisia appears poised for complex, rowdy negotiations to form a government. Announced shortly after Karoui's release, preliminary results of last Sunday's legislative election showed Islamist-inspired party Ennahda came out on top with 52 out of 217 seats - far short of the 109 needed to govern. Karoui's Qalb Tounes party placed

second with 38 seats. In the run-up to the parliamentary poll, Ennahda and Qalb Toues had officially ruled out forming an alliance. The abstention rate was 58.6 percent, nearly double that of the last legislative polls in 2014, despite the post-revolution constitution putting parliament at the heart of political power. TV pundits contend that the high abstention rate is not only a mark of voter apathy, but also a repudiation of the parties taking part.

A tired electorate

It was a similar sense of rejection of the establishment that catapulted political newcomers Karoui and rival contender conservative law professor Kais Saied to the lead in the September 15 presidential first round. The sidelining of Tunisia's post-Arab Spring political class in the vote was rooted in frustration over a stagnant economy, high unemployment, failing public services and rising prices. While the country has succeeded in curbing jihadist attacks that rocked the key tourist sector in 2015, its economy remains hampered by austere International Monetary Fund-backed reforms. Saied had announced last weekend he was quitting campaigning in order to avoid an unfair advantage over Karoui.

Televised debate

With the contenders now free to campaign on a level playing field, the pair will face off in a televised debate Friday, one of the organizers said. The debate is expected to begin at 9:00 pm should Karoui confirm his presence, national television channel Wataniya said. Wataniya has also invited Karoui for an on-screen interview. Previous requests to release Karoui had been turned down and he has branded his arrest as "political". Karoui's lawyer Kamel Ben Messoud on Wednesday said the Court of Cassation had "annulled the detention order" against his client. Another of his lawyers, Nazih Souei, said Karoui remains under investigation, "but he is free". — AFP

Iraq mourns protest dead

BAGHDAD: Iraq began three days of national mourning yesterday for more than 100 people killed during recent protests, while the government was expected to present a reshuffle to parliament in response to the political crisis. While social media sites in Iraq remained inaccessible - except intermittently via virtual private network (VPN) applications - more images emerged of the violence over the past week in which mainly protesters died from live fire.

Footage showed demonstrators - who initially demanded jobs and services before calling for "the fall of the regime" - being fatally shot, or running for cover under heavy fire. Authorities initially blamed "unidentified snipers" and infiltrating "saboteurs" but later acknowledged that the military had used "excessive force" in the Shiite bastion of Sadr City in Baghdad. The judiciary also announced that a riot police officer had "confessed to killing a protester" in Hilla, south of Baghdad.

Prime Minister Adel Abdel Madhi responded to public anger in his second public address in less than a week, pledging to propose a cabinet reshuffle to parliament yesterday. The deeply divided assembly depends on the participation of its largest bloc: 54 lawmakers led by populist cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr. The bloc includes ministers but Sadr called for the resignation of the government nearly a week ago.

Since protests and violence calmed on Tuesday, the government has proposed reforms to lower youth unemployment, currently at 25 percent, while the labor ministry proposed an online job register. — AFP