

International

Algerian PM to resign, paving way for vote after protracted protests

Protesters demand more changes before elections

ALGIERS: Algerian Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui will resign soon to pave the way for elections this year that the army sees as the only way to end a standoff over months of protests, two senior sources said yesterday. Bedoui's departure is a major demand of protesters, who in April forced president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to quit after 20 years in office, and who have rejected fresh elections until there is a more thorough change of the power structure.

Bedoui's departure is intended to "facilitate" the holding of elections said the two senior officials, speaking on condition they were not further identified. Powerful army chief Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaed Saleh said last week that the electoral commission should by Sept 15 call an election, a move that would trigger a 90-day countdown to the vote.

Students holding a weekly protest yesterday chanted that they would accept no elections "until the gang is removed", a reference to Bouteflika's power circle, an elite entrenched largely since independence from France in 1962. Sources close to prominent figures including former prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche and human rights lawyer Mustapha Bouchachi have said they are considering running for president if the election is called.

The mass demonstrations began in February and have continued since Bouteflika's departure, with the loose-knit "Herak" movement demanding that all figures associated with him also leave and that the army play a smaller role in state affairs. The election had been scheduled for July, but was postponed as a result of the crisis, leaving major oil- and gas-exporter Algeria in a constitutional deadlock.

Over the summer the authorities have made concessions by arresting more prominent figures linked to

Bouteflika on corruption charges, while increasing the pressure on protesters with a bigger police presence at demonstrations. However, Herak has no formal leaders, making it hard to negotiate with. "We will not stop protests, this is our chance to uproot the corrupt system," Khelifa Saad, 20, said at a protest yesterday in Algiers.

Candidates

Two sources familiar with former PM Hamrouche said he was expected to run for president, though he has made no formal announcement yet. Hamrouche, 76,



Vote only way out: Army chief

headed the government from 1989-91, departing months before the military cancelled a 1992 parliamentary election that a radical Islamist party was poised to win, plunging Algeria into a civil war that claimed 200,000 lives.

A candidate in the 1999 presidential election, he withdrew at the last minute after senior figures endorsed Bouteflika. Hamrouche presents himself as a reformer, seeking better governance and economic diversification,



ALGIERS: A protester raises up a sign reading in Arabic and English 'no to the Egyptian scenario in Algeria', during a demonstration against the ruling class in the capital Algiers. — AFP

and as a consensus choice, and would seek the support of the army, the formal opposition and protesters. Two sources from inside Bouchachi's circle said he would run if Bouteflika's close allies were removed from power and an independent body set up to oversee the vote.

Bouchachi, a 65-year-old former member of parliament, human rights activist and lawyer, has been prominent on social media after strongly backing pro-

testers since February. He was elected to parliament in 2012 as a member of Algeria's oldest opposition party Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS), but resigned within two years saying the government was not serious about reform. "Bouchachi can secure the voices of tens of thousands of protesters," said electronics student Ali Larbaoui, who has marched on most Fridays since the protests began. — Reuters

Druze woman aims for equality after breaking glass ceiling in Israel

DALIYAT AL-KARMEI: Before a row of women seated in traditional Druze robes and white veils, Gadeer Kamal Mreeh stands out with her black suit and high heels. "We are proud of you," a voice cries out from the audience of women who came to hear the candidate's political platform in her village of Daliyat al-Karmel, set in the hills of northern Israel.

The 35-year-old became the first Druze woman to be elected to Israel's parliament in April, but new polls were called shortly afterwards and she is hoping to win re-election in the September 17 vote. Mreeh is part of the centrist Blue and White alliance led by ex-military chief Benny Gantz, the main rival to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud party. With this election, she hopes to win a real mandate, and her 25th place on Blue and White's electoral list gives her a strong chance to do so.

"It is the only way to change things," she told AFP in her village. "It is time to send Bibi home and let Israel return to a little common sense," she said, using Netanyahu's nickname. From Mreeh's

point of view, Israel is moving too far to the right. She points to a law passed in 2018 declaring the country the nation-state of the Jewish people, which Druze and other Arab Israelis say threatens to relegate them to second-class citizens.

Netanyahu pushed for the law, and Mreeh has made changing it her main issue. "I joined politics for that reason—to bring back equality," said Mreeh, who earlier in her career became the first non-Jewish Hebrew-language anchor on Israeli national television. Some 140,000 Druze, who follow an offshoot of Shiite Islam, live in Israel. They serve in Israel's military unlike other Arab Israelis who are descendants of Palestinians who remained on their land following the 1948 creation of Israel.

'It wasn't easy'

Mreeh was joined at the recent event by two other candidates from her party who are also women: retired army general Oma Barbivay and Penina Tamanu-Shata, the first woman of Ethiopian origin to be elected to Israel's parliament. Mreeh calls for diversity to be valued in Israel.



DALIYAT AL KARMEI: Gadeer Kamal Mreeh is pictured during a conference organized in the northern Israeli village of Daliyat Al-Karmel. — AFP

"I'm a woman and I'm a minority member," said the ex-journalist and mother of two. "I made it. It wasn't easy. Believe me when I tell you that you can do it." Nisreen Abu Asale, a 25-year-old law student, was convinced. "She repre-

sents me completely," she said. "It's the voice of a new generation." Yara Zahereldin, 21 and a political science student, said she was especially moved by her words on equal opportunity. "She inspires me," said Zahereldin. — AFP

What is dengue, and why is it so widespread?

HANOI: Dubbed "breakbone fever", dengue is one of the world's leading mosquito-borne illnesses and infects tens of millions across the globe annually. Around half of the planet's population live in at-risk areas, mainly in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Outbreaks have ravaged Southeast Asia this year, infecting hundreds of thousands, killing hundreds, and crippling health care systems as governments struggle to contain the untreatable virus. So what is dengue, how does it spread, and how can it be contained?

How does it spread?

Dengue is transmitted mainly by the Aedes Aegypti mosquito, which thrives in densely-populated tropical climates and breed in stagnant pools of water. The mosquitoes pick up the virus from infected humans - even asymptomatic ones - and pass it along to other people through bites. Infections have steadily climbed across the globe since the 1970s due to rising temperatures and irregular monsoon rains linked to climate change, which allow for ideal mosquito breeding conditions.

Dengue is mostly found in crowded areas, and breakneck urbanisation across the globe has helped the virus thrive, especially in fast-growing mega-cities like Manila, Rio de Janeiro, Ho Chi Minh City and Tegucigalpa. A massive boom in international travel and trade has also expanded dengue's footprint, allowing the virus to be carried across the globe in a matter of hours and unleashed in new communities.

Experts say the widespread adoption of plastic is also to blame - storage containers, discarded takeout boxes, backyard pools, plant pots and cooking urns all collect water - a problem made worse during dry spells. "When you have a drought, people collect water in containers. That is one place the dengue mosquito loves to breed," said Gawrie Loku Galappaththy, a dengue specialist with the World Health Organization in the Philippines.



NHA TRANG: Photo shows a laboratory assistant examining mosquito samples at the Pasteur Institute in the southern Vietnamese city of Nha Trang. — AFP

What does it feel like?

Its grim nickname comes from the disease's intense flu-like symptoms: severe headache, pain behind the eyes, full-body aches, high fever, nausea, vomiting, swollen glands or rash. It's most serious - and deadly - in children, especially young girls though scientists don't know why.

Contracting one of dengue's four strains gives immunity only to that particular one - which is why adults in endemic areas are often safe because they've likely had it before. But later picking up a different strain, called a serotype, usually causes a worse infection than the first time. With no known treatment for dengue, doctors can only help to ease the virus' brutal symptoms, which can last weeks and often renders patients completely immobile.

Why have cases spiked this year?

Once confined mostly to cities in tropical climates, dengue is now found in at least 125 countries across the world, with around 100 million infected every year and some four billion people living in dengue-prone areas, according to the journal Nature Microbiology. The disease is cyclical - dramatic outbreaks occur every few years - but climate change is believed to have contributed to a spike in cases in 2019, with July clocked as the warmest on record. — AFP

In Belgrade, a struggle to excavate an urban Nazi camp

BELGRADE: Moments after she was born in a wartime Nazi concentration camp in Belgrade, Estera Bajer was furtively smuggled out in a bag. Nearly eight decades on, she has one wish: to live to see a memorial built at the site where her mother and some 7,000 other Jewish women, children and elderly people were taken to their deaths during the Holocaust. "So the next generations can see and know what happened there," says the petite, bright-eyed 77-year-old, at her apartment in Belgrade's suburbs.

The former camp, known as Staro Sajmiste, sits on prime real estate in the Serbian capital, flanking the left bank of the Sava river across from the city's historic heart. Yet few visitors - or locals - would know it exists. Its central tower is crumbling, while the lawn beneath it is strewn with children's seesaws and washing lines. Surrounding buildings have been converted into homes and businesses, including a restaurant in what was the morgue.

The camp's former hospital, restored by a local businessman who bought the building from the government in the 1980s, has hosted a night-club, gym and restaurant over the years. Owner Miodrag Krsmanovic opened a kindergarten last year too, in what, he said, he hoped was a "new beginning for this entire area".

But he shuttered it a few months ago after it was decried in the local media as disrespectful to the dead. The only sign that this run-down corner of the city was the site of mass internment and death - initially of Jews and Roma, and later of thousands of mainly Serb prisoners - is a small plaque. A larger monument was erected in 1995 further out on the river bank. "You'd never know it was once a concentration camp," laments Bajer. — AFP

Japan parental leave case puts spotlight on workers' rights

TOKYO: A male employee is suing sportswear maker Asics Corp for alleged mistreatment after taking paternity leave, a case that has shone a spotlight on gender equality and workers' rights in Japan. The lawsuit filed by a 38-year-old man - who says he was harassed by his employer after taking parental leave in 2015 and 2018 that is legally available to all workers but rarely used by men - is scheduled to begin in a Tokyo court on Thursday. Asics denies the allegations.

The man requested anonymity because of a Twitter backlash from users who accuse him of being selfish for taking a year of leave for each of his two children. "I'd been thinking, I'm going to be a salaryman for something like 40 years, so what's a year or two of leave compared to that," he told Reuters in an interview. Japan's parental leave policies are among the world's most generous, providing men and women partial-paid leave of up to a year, or more if there is no public childcare. Few men take it.

The case highlights the challenge of bolstering the role of women in the workplace, championed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's "Womenomics" program, in a society where social norms discourage men from taking on child rearing or housework. "There are plenty of people who want to take childcare leave, as it's their right, but they cannot because their workplace makes it difficult. Someone had to speak up," the Asics employee said. The man says he was transferred to a warehouse operated by an Asics subsidiary after he returned from his first paternity leave.

It was not an official demotion or a pay cut, but the job involved carrying and unloading heavy boxes - a big change from his previous role in Asics' personnel department. He hired a lawyer and complained to his bosses. Asics allowed him to return to a desk job, but gave him what he said were meaningless tasks, such as translating company guidelines into English. That situation has continued since the end of his second parental leave earlier this year, he said.

Asics said it had tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with the worker's legal and union representatives, and "looks forward to making the truth clear" in court. A Gold Partner sponsor for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, the company bills itself as a socially progressive and inclusive company. "We put effort into fostering diversity, and we will continue to make greater efforts to ensure our work environment and policies allow people to remain active through pregnancy, birth and childcare," Asics said in a statement to Reuters.

'Patahara'

The Asics case follows other similar disputes. Glen Wood, a former equity sales manager at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley in Tokyo, is suing the brokerage for harassment after he returned from paternity leave. The company has denied the allegations. Chemical firm Kaneka Corp was criticized in June after an employee's wife said on social media her husband was told to move from Tokyo to the company's Osaka office after taking a month of parental leave and denied his request for a postponement. Kaneka has said the relocation was appropriate and not punishment for taking paternity leave. The worker has since quit. — Reuters