

FAILURE TO FORM NEW CABINET

Macron accuses Lebanon leaders of ‘betrayal’

AFP, Paris

French President Emmanuel Macron has upped the pressure on Lebanon’s leaders to form a government in the wake of the Beirut port blast, saying their lack of progress represented a “collective betrayal”.

Lebanon remains mired in political economic crisis with no end in sight after its premier-designate stepped down on Saturday following the failure of talks to form a government, despite intense international scrutiny.

At a rare news conference devoted to Lebanon, Macron launched an extraordinary diatribe against a Lebanese political elite who he said had looked to their own selfish interests rather than those of their country.

“They have decided to betray this commitment (to form a government),” Macron told reporters, declaring he was “ashamed” of the country’s leaders.

“I see that the Lebanese authorities and political forces chose to favour their partisan and individual interests to the detriment of the general interest of the country,” he added.

Mustapha Adib’s resignation on Saturday ended efforts to hammer out a reformist government in the wake of a

colossal August 4 explosion in Beirut that killed 190 people, injured thousands and ravaged large parts of the capital.

Political parties had pledged in early September, during a visit to Lebanon by Macron, to form within two weeks a cabinet of independent ministers tasked with ending the country’s economic malaise.

Macron has visited the former French protectorate twice since the blast, meeting Hezbollah representatives during his last trip as he sought to bring all political sides behind a roadmap to lift the country out of crisis.

In August, he chaired a video conference that saw world leaders pledge more than \$295 million for the country.

Macron said none of the leaders of Lebanon -- where in the

wake of the 1975-1990 civil war power is traditionally shared between Shias, Sunnis and Christians -- had been up to the task.

“All of them bet on the worst case scenario for the sake of saving themselves, the interests of their family or their clan,” he seethed.

According to observers, the Shia allies dug in their heels after recent US sanctions were imposed on a minister of the Amal party and two companies affiliated with Hezbollah.

In a warning to Hezbollah, Macron said the group should “not think it is more powerful than it is”



A plane drops red fire retardant on the Glass Fire in Deer Park, California. Inset, a house burns. A wind-driven wildfire erupted on Sunday in the heart of northern California’s Napa Valley wine country to spread across nearly 2,000 acres (809 hectares), forcing the evacuation of a hospital and hundreds of homes, authorities said.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Fighting escalates on second day

Dozens killed; EU warns against foreign intervention; China, US urge for calm

REUTERS, Yerevan/Baku

Fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated sharply yesterday in and around the mountain territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and at least 30 people were killed in a second day of heavy clashes.

Forces of the two ex-Soviet neighbours pounded each other with rockets and artillery in the fiercest explosion of the decades-old conflict in more than a quarter of a century.

Any move to all-out war could drag in major regional powers Russia and Turkey. Moscow has a defence alliance with Armenia, while Ankara backs its ethnic Turkic kin in Azerbaijan.

“We haven’t seen anything like this since the ceasefire to the war in the 1990s. The fighting is taking place along all sections of the front line,” said Olesya Vartanyan, senior analyst for the South Caucasus region at Crisis Group.

She said increased deployment of rockets and artillery brought a higher risk of civilian casualties that could make the escalation hard to stop by diplomatic means.

“If there are mass casualties it will be extremely difficult to contain this fighting and we will definitely see a full-fledged war that will have a potential intervention of Turkey or Russia, or both of them,” Vartanyan said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN DISPUTE



Majority Christian Armenia and mainly Muslim Azerbaijan first clashed in the 1980s over Nagorno-Karabakh, a breakaway region that is inside Azerbaijan but mostly populated and run by ethnic Armenians.

The fighting has revived concern over stability in the South Caucasus, a corridor for pipelines carrying oil and gas to world markets.

Angela Frangyan, a film maker living in the Nagorno-Karabakh capital Stepanakert, said residents had taken cover in bomb shelters and constant shelling could be heard. All shops were closed and hardly anyone was in the streets, she said.

Turkey’s President Tayyip Erdogan demanded Armenia immediately quit Azeri lands he said it

was occupying and said it was time to end the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Armenia’s parliament condemned what it said was a “full-scale military attack” by Azerbaijan on Nagorno-Karabakh. It said Azerbaijan was receiving Turkey’s help, and Ankara’s involvement could risk destabilising the region. Azerbaijan denied Turkey was taking part in the fighting.

Authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh said that 28 of its soldiers had been killed in fighting with Azeri forces yesterday, bringing military death toll to 58 combining both sides.

The total death toll rose to 67 including nine civilian deaths: seven in Azerbaijan and two on the Armenian side.

Nagorno-Karabakh also said it had recovered some territory that it had lost control of on Sunday. An Armenian defence ministry representative said 200 Armenians were wounded, Interfax reported.

The clashes have spurred a flurry of diplomacy. China urged both sides to show restraint. Eu yesterday warned against any foreign intervention. Russia called for an immediate ceasefire.

Under international law, Nagorno-Karabakh is recognised as part of Azerbaijan. But the ethnic Armenians who make up the vast majority of the population reject Azeri rule.

Pakistan opposition leader arrested after protest vow

The arrest of Shahbaz comes after his brother Nawaz attacked military for derailing democracy

AGENCIES

Pakistani anti-corruption officials arrested the country’s opposition leader yesterday, days after he vowed to help lead efforts to dislodge Prime Minister Imran Khan’s government.

Shahbaz Sharif -- who heads the opposition in the country’s National Assembly -- was arrested in Lahore after the eastern city’s high court rejected a bail plea in a money-laundering case.

“We are not scared of these arrests,” said Marriyum Aurangzeb, spokeswoman for Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N).

Sharif is the brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted over corruption allegations in 2017 and is currently residing in Britain after being released from prison earlier this year for medical treatment.

On September 20, Pakistan’s political opposition held a conference to form the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a

new alliance aimed at bringing down the government.

At the conference, Nawaz Sharif broke his two-year silence and delivered a strongly worded speech that took aim at the country’s powerful military, which has directly ruled Pakistan for roughly half of its 73-year history and is accused of rigging the 2018 elections to bring Khan to power.

Nawaz, terming the military as ‘a state above the state’, accused it of being “the root-cause of our problems.”

Khan’s administration has been pushing for Nawaz’s return to the country to continue his prison sentence.

Pressure has been simmering against Khan’s government in recent months with the country’s economy battered by fiscal deficits, soaring inflation and a string of currency devaluations.

Khan was elected in 2018 on promises to rein in corruption and build a welfare state. But since taking power, the former cricketer has struggled to deliver on his campaign vows amid economic headwinds.



Members of a feminist group clash with police officers during a march to mark the International Safe Abortion Day in Mexico City, Mexico, on Sunday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Japan warns on suicide after death of actress

AFP, Tokyo

Japan’s government yesterday urged people to seek help if they were struggling to cope, following the death at the weekend of a popular actress.

The death of “Miss Sherlock” star Yuko Takeuchi, 40, shocked the nation and follows other recent cases of Japanese celebrities taking their lives, with figures showing a recent rise in suicides.

Takeuchi was a household name in Japan and had given birth to her second child in January.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Katsunobu Kato did not mention a particular case, but noted some people were struggling to cope during the coronavirus crisis.

“There has been an uptick in the number of suicide cases since July. We have to acknowledge the fact that so many people are ending their precious lives,” said Kato, who was health minister until earlier this month.

He urged the public to use suicide-prevention hotlines and other services.

Takeuchi played the lead in the 2018 Hulu-HBO Asia series “Miss Sherlock”, and also had a minor part in the 1998 Japanese horror classic “Ring”.

Earlier in September, popular Japanese actress Sei Ashina died in an apparent suicide, and actor Haruma Miura is also thought to have taken his own life in July.

Reality TV show star Hana Kimura, 22, from the Netflix show “Terrace House”, also apparently died in May following online abuse, making international headlines.

In August, Japan saw nearly 1,900 suicides, up 15.3 percent from a year earlier.

NEWS IN BRIEF



Ai Weiwei supports Assange with silent protest

Dissident Chinese artist Ai Weiwei held a silent protest yesterday outside a London court to demand the release of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who faces extradition to the United States. Exiled Ai, who left China for Germany in 2015 after becoming a target of Beijing’s wrath, said Assange’s possible prosecution in the US was “unbelievable.” “Let him to be a free man,” Ai said outside the Old Bailey court in the British capital, wearing a pink T-shirt featuring him next to Assange, both holding up a middle finger. “He truly represents the very core value of why we are fighting, the freedom of the press.” Assange faces 18 charges in the US relating to the 2010 release by WikiLeaks of 500,000 secret files detailing aspects of military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Moon calls for return of inter-Korean army hotlines

South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in yesterday said military hotlines with Pyongyang should be restored to prevent unexpected incidents after it was revealed that North Korean troops had shot dead a South Korean fisheries official who had gone missing. South Korea’s military has accused North Korean soldiers of killing the man, dousing his body in fuel and setting it on fire near the maritime border, apparently in an effort to prevent the risk of a novel coronavirus outbreak. The incident prompted an rare apology from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

Sri Lanka returns containers of illegal waste to Britain

Sri Lanka has shipped back to Britain container-loads of waste that the government said was brought into the island in violation of international laws governing the shipping of hazardous material. The 21 containers -- holding up to 260 tonnes of rubbish -- first arrived by ship in the capital Colombo’s main port between September 2017 and March 2018, customs told AFP, adding that they departed Sri Lanka on Saturday. They were meant to carry used mattresses, carpets and rugs, but had also contained hospital waste, officials said. Several Asian countries, sick of being the wealthy world’s rubbish dump, have in the past two years turned back container-loads of waste from foreign shores.

SOURCE: REUTERS

A diversion game with a misogynistic twist!

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput was found dead by apparent suicide at his Mumbai residence on June 14. What was a tragic end to a promising young star’s career has turned into a media frenzy centred on the 34-year-old actor’s girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty.

The round-the-clock media coverage of the case has trumped the coronavirus crisis and the India-China border crisis, with television networks seeing record viewership, raising questions of divisionary tactics by certain political quarters.

Lawyers and activists said the case is also a disquieting reminder of how women in Bollywood meet with harsher moral judgements than their male counterparts.

The case has since drawn in central investigation agencies as well as officers from the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) and has even become a political talking point for the upcoming elections in Bihar state -- Rajput’s home state.

Chakraborty was arrested earlier this month, while prominent Bollywood personalities, including Deepika Padukone, have been questioned in an escalating drug investigation.

The police announced that Rajput’s was a case of accidental death and post-mortem and viscera reports accessed by the media ruled out foul play. But Rajput’s family have accused Chakraborty, the actor’s live-in partner, of abetment to suicide, theft, cheating, conspiracy and wrongful confinement.

The Enforcement Directorate, examining money-laundering allegations against Chakraborty, has not found big transactions from the late actor’s account to the accused’s account. The CBI has not held a news briefing to reveal their findings.

But Chakraborty has found herself the subject of a vilification campaign by the media, including social media where “justice for Sushant” has trended multiple times in the past months, activists say.

The actress and her brother remain in judicial custody under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, for allegedly procuring 59 grams of cannabis for Rajput. The NCB claims Chakraborty is part of a “drug syndicate”.

Nandita Rao, Delhi High Court lawyer and activist, said that the charges against the actor are not commensurate with the evidence.

“Marijuana is a ‘conventional’ drug. The

SUSHANT SINGH RAJPUT CASE



quantity is so small. To be a drug dealer, you have to procure commercial quantities and there has to be someone apart from your boyfriend that you have to sell to,” Rao told Al Jazeera.

Rao said that the media trial appears politically orchestrated.

“It started out as an agenda against second- and third-generation Bollywood producers and actors. When Rajput died by suicide, the narrative was that he was pushed to do it by nepotism in the film industry,” she told Al Jazeera.

“[But later,] when the Bihar election took centre stage, the same people started shouting from the rooftops that he was ill-treated by

his girlfriend and that she stole his money and abandoned him. Some even said that he did not have a mental illness and that she had drugged him.

Earlier this month, the governing Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) cultural cell unveiled posters with a photograph of Rajput with the message, “na bhule hai, na bhulne denge (we have neither forgotten, nor will we forget)”. Critics say the BJP has tried to squeeze political mileage out of Rajput’s death.

This is not the first time female actors in Bollywood have been held to different moral yardsticks for their romantic relationships or public conduct. In the 1990s, Bollywood actress Rekha was blamed for the suicide death of her husband Mukesh Aggarwal.

Yasser Usman, the author of the unofficial biography, Rekha: The Untold Story, said those same people were sympathetic to actor Sanjay Dutt’s drug addiction.

Actor Tapsee Pannu laments that it may take a few more lifetimes for things to be fair for women. “A certain section of the media and the society were so interested in seeing her [Chakraborty] behind bars that they forgot that she has been arrested on charges unrelated to the main investigation.”