

LEBANON PORT BLAST

Judge indicts PM, 3 ex-ministers

AFP, BEIRUT

The lead investigator into a catastrophic August 4 explosion at Beirut port charged outgoing premier Hassan Diab and three ex-ministers with negligence yesterday, a judicial source said.

They are the first politicians to be indicted over the devastating blast that killed more than 200 people, disfigured the heart of the capital and ignited a wave of public anger against Lebanon's ruling elite.

The decision by judge Fadi Sawan came after the investigation confirmed that the suspects had received "several written notices warning them against postponing the disposal of ammonium nitrate fertiliser," which authorities say was behind the explosion, the source said.

"They also did not take the necessary measures to avoid the devastating explosion and its enormous damage," added the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not authorised to speak on the issue.

The other officials charged are the former ministers of finance, Ali Hasan Khalil, public works, Yusef Fenianos, and transport, Ghazi Zaïter.

In a letter to parliament late last month, Sawan asked lawmakers to investigate several outgoing and former ministers over the explosion.

The letter came after Sawan's own investigations raised "certain suspicions about the responsibility of those ministers and their failure towards addressing the presence of the ammonium nitrate at the port."

The judicial source said yesterday that parliament had not responded to Sawan's request, prompting him to press charges unilaterally.



Pro-democracy protesters take part in a march to denounce the use of the lese majeste law, under section 112 of the penal code, in Bangkok, Thailand yesterday. Thai democracy activists rallied at the UN's Bangkok office and asked the body to pressure the kingdom into repealing royal defamation laws.

PHOTO: AFP

NEWS IN BRIEF

Karnataka BJP passes anti-cow slaughter bill

Former Karnataka chief minister Siddaramaiah bemoaned the "murder of democracy" late Wednesday night as he lashed out at the BS Yediyurappa government - whom he labelled a "coward" - after the Prevention of Cow Slaughter and Cattle Preservation (Amendment) Bill was passed by the Legislative Assembly. In a series of five tweets, the senior Congress leader said the anti-cow slaughter bill had been "introduced and passed without any discussion", and that the opposition party would boycott Assembly session to protest an "anti-democratic act". "Only a coward government, which can't debate, can behave like this. They can't stop us through their autocratic behaviour. We will take this to the people to fight against BJP's corruption and despotism," Siddaramaiah tweeted.

Biden's son Hunter says under probe for tax affairs

President-elect Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden, a focus of attacks from President Donald Trump and his Republican allies during the campaign for the White House, said on Wednesday the U.S. Attorney's Office in Delaware is investigating his tax affairs. "I take this matter very seriously but I am confident that a professional and objective review of these matters will demonstrate that I handled my affairs legally and appropriately, including with the benefit of professional tax advisors," Hunter Biden said in a statement.



ICC drops probe into British war crimes in Iraq

The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor announced Wednesday she was shutting down a preliminary probe into alleged war crimes committed by British soldiers after the US-led invasion in Iraq. Fatou Bensouda's announcement comes after a "rigorous" six-year long investigation into the conduct of British military personnel, particularly into the treatment of Iraqi prisoners in detention. The prosecutor based, in The Hague, had said in 2017 there was "reasonable basis" to believe British soldiers did commit war crimes. On Wednesday however, she said she could not find any evidence that Britain had shielded suspects from prosecution before British courts. The ICC is a court of last resort to prosecute war criminals.

SOURCE: AFP, NDTV

BID TO AVOID 'NO-DEAL' BREXIT CHAOS

EU unveils back-up plans

REUTERS, BRUSSELS

The European Union's executive yesterday laid out contingency plans for a 'no-deal' Brexit at the end of the year to limit disruption to air traffic, and road and rail travel after talks between British and EU leaders failed to break an impasse.

The European Commission also proposed that Britain and the EU continue to offer reciprocal access to their fishing waters for up to a year, potentially easing tension around one of the most emotive sticking points in the trade negotiations.

Britain told the EU earlier it should make significant concessions to break the deadlock by the end of the weekend for clarity about the finale to the five-year-old Brexit crisis.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson and the EU's chief executive, Ursula von der Leyen, gave themselves until Sunday to decide on their next steps after failing to overcome persistent rifts over a "lively" dinner of turbot on Wednesday.

"There's still clearly some scope to keep talking but there are significant



the five-year-old Brexit crisis.

points of difference that remain," Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab told BBC TV, adding that both sides needed to take stock at the weekend.

"Sunday I think is an important moment," Raab told Sky News. "You never say never in these talks, but I think we do need to get some finality."

Raab said the main points of contention - fisheries and commitments on a level playing field - were narrow in scope but they were matters of principle for Britain.

Britain formally left the EU in January, but has since been in a transition period during which it remains in the EU single market and customs union, meaning that rules on trade, travel and business have stayed the same.

US Senate backs huge arms sales to UAE

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The United States Senate has defeated an effort to block the Trump administration's sale of \$23bn in advanced fighter jets and drones to the United Arab Emirates. President Donald Trump had issued a formal threat to veto congressional efforts to block the planned weapons transfer, which is tied to the UAE's normalisation of ties with Israel under the "Abraham Accords".

Two procedural votes failed to gain a majority of the 100-member Senate, effectively stopping the effort to block the sale of advanced F-35 fighter jets and Reaper drones. Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said the resolutions seeking to block the arms sale fell far short of the two-thirds support

that would be needed to overcome a presidential veto.

"It's a little baffling to suggest that, now of all times, a protest gesture with no chance of obtaining a veto-proof majority is a valuable use of the Senate's time," McConnell said in Senate floor remarks.

Backers of the sale described the UAE as an important US partner in the Middle East. Opponents criticised the UAE for its involvement in the war in Yemen, a conflict described by the United Nations as one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters.

The Trump administration told Congress on November 10 that it had approved the sale to the UAE of weapons made by General Atomics, Lockheed Martin Corp and Raytheon Technologies Corp.

'Vaccine nationalism' moving at full speed: UN chief

AP, UNITED NATIONS

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Wednesday that "vaccine nationalism" is moving "at full speed," leaving poor people around the globe watching preparations for inoculations against the coronavirus in some rich nations and wondering if and when they will be vaccinated.

The UN chief reiterated his call for vaccines to be treated as "a global public good," available to everyone, everywhere on the planet, especially in Africa. And he appealed for \$4.2 billion in the next two months for the World Health Organization's COVAX program, an ambitious project to buy and deliver coronavirus vaccines for the world's poorest people.

After a virtual UN meeting with the African Union, Guterres said at news



conference that financing COVAX is the only way to guarantee vaccines will be available in Africa and other developing areas.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a high-level UN General Assembly meeting last week on COVID-19 that "the light at the end of the tunnel is growing steadily brighter" to end the pandemic.

But, he added, vaccines "must be shared equally as global public goods, not as private commodities that widen inequalities and become yet another reason some people are left behind."

Tedros said WHO's cash-strapped ACT-Accelerator program to quickly develop and distribute vaccines fairly, which includes the COVAX project, "is in danger of becoming no more than a noble gesture" without major new funding.

270m people face starvation

Says WFP as it receives Nobel Peace Prize, warns 'famine is at humanity's doorstep'

REUTERS, OSLO

Some 270 million people worldwide - equivalent to the combined populations of Germany, Britain, France and Italy - stand on the brink of starvation, the head of the United Nations' World Food Programme said yesterday upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

The WFP, which has coordinated medical logistics during the coronavirus pandemic, was announced winner of the award for 2020 in October.

"Because of so many wars, climate change, the widespread use of hunger as a political and military weapon, and a global health pandemic that makes all of that exponentially worse - 270 million people are marching toward starvation," David Beasley said from the WFP headquarters in Rome, upon receiving the Nobel medal and diploma.

"Failure to address their needs will cause a hunger pandemic which will dwarf the impact of Covid. And if that's not bad enough, out of that 270 million, 30 million depend on us 100% for their survival," he added. "Famine is at



humanity's doorstep", he said, and "food is the pathway to peace."

Earlier in an interview with AP, Beasley said, Covid-19 is surging again, economies are continuing to deteriorate particularly in low- and middle-income countries, and there is another wave of lockdowns and shutdowns.

But he said the money that was available in 2020 isn't going to be available in 2021, so he has been using the Nobel to meet leaders virtually and in person, talk to parliaments, and give speeches to sensitize those with power to "this tragedy that we are facing -- crises that

really are going to be extraordinary over the next, who knows, 12 to 18 months."

"Everybody now wants to meet with the Nobel Peace Prize winner," Beasley said, explaining he now gets 45 minutes instead of 15 minutes with leaders and is able to go into depth and explain how bad things are going to be next year and how leaders are going to have to prioritize programs. "And the response has really been good," he said.

Instead of the usual ceremony at the Oslo City Hall before dignitaries including Norway's King Harald, WFP officials stayed in Rome due to the coronavirus pandemic.

They are expected to travel to Oslo at a later stage to deliver the traditional Nobel lecture.

The remaining Nobel awards - for medicine, physics, chemistry, literature and economics - which are traditionally handed out in Stockholm - have also been moved online.

The ceremonies are held every year on December 10, the anniversary of the death of Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel, who founded the awards in his 1895 will.



SpaceX's first super heavy-lift Starship SN8 rocket explodes during a return-landing attempt after it launched from their facility on a test flight in Boca Chica, Texas, US on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

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