

Crisis-hit Lebanon picks billionaire Najib Mikati as next PM-designate

AFP, Beirut

Lebanese lawmakers yesterday tasked ex-premier and billionaire Najib Mikati with forming a government and ending one year of political deadlock that has crippled the economy.

Mikati, seen by many as a symbol of Lebanon's corrupt oligarchy, will pick up where Saad Hariri left off earlier this month, after failing to broker a deal despite intense international pressure.

A new government would face the daunting task of steering Lebanon through one of the worst phases in its history, and to polls slated for next year amid unprecedented popular distrust.

Mikati, a 65-year-old telecom mogul who was last in power in 2014, is the third PM-designate to be named since the caretaker government of Hassan Diab resigned in the wake of last August's monster port blast.

He clinched more than 72 endorsements, with only one lawmaker voting in favour of veteran diplomat Nawaf Salam, according to the official National News Agency.

A total of 42 lawmakers, including members of the president's Free Patriotic Movement, abstained from endorsing any candidate, NNA said.

Top parliamentary blocs, including Hariri's Future Movement and the powerful Shia movement Hezbollah, named Mikati as their pick.

Mikati will now have to start consultations with the president and political factions to set a cabinet lineup, while Diab stays on in a caretaker capacity.

It could take months before an actual government is formed, but crisis-hit Lebanon, grappling with soaring poverty, a plummeting currency and shortages of basic items from medicine to fuel, can ill afford any delays.

Speaking to reporters after a meeting with Aoun, Mikati called his designation a "difficult step", appealing for the Lebanese people to support him.

"If I didn't have the necessary guarantees from external powers... I would not have taken on" the job, he

said, referring to foreign backing.

"I don't have a magic wand and, alone, I can't make miracles happen," he said.

"Whoever has solutions should bring them to the table."

Mikati, who started a career in politics in 1998, is considered to be Lebanon's richest man and one of the wealthiest in the Middle East, with a net worth of \$2.7 billion according to Forbes.

Many in Lebanon consider the businessman as emblematic of a corrupt ruling class targeted by a 2019 protest movement.

A native of second city Tripoli, he is suspected of illicit enrichment in 2019, and lacks a wide popular base even in his hometown, which is Lebanon's poorest.

On the eve of consultations, dozens of protesters gathered outside Mikati's Beirut home, accusing him of corruption and cronyism.

But Lebanon's bickering politicians view Mikati as a consensus candidate who could be capable of easing a political impasse that has stymied efforts towards forming a government.

Following Mikati's designation, the Lebanese pound, officially pegged to the dollar at 1,507, gained some of its black market value after dropping to record lows in mid-July.

It sold for less than 17,000 to the greenback yesterday, up from more than 20,000 last week.

Donors led by former colonial power France have pledged millions of dollars in humanitarian aid, but conditioned it on Lebanon installing a government capable of tackling corruption.

But even as international pressure mounted, with threats of European Union sanctions against them, Lebanese politicians have failed to make any serious progress.

France this month said it would host an aid conference on August 4 to "respond to the needs of the Lebanese, whose situation is deteriorating every day".



A mobile court accompanied by army personnel stops rickshaw passengers to ask them their purpose of leaving home. Those who are unable to give a reasonable answer are fined, as people are only allowed to be outside for emergencies during the ongoing nationwide lockdown, which began the day after Eid-ul-Azha. The photo was taken in the capital's Shyamoli Ring Road area yesterday.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Astronauts grow chili peppers

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into Advanced Plant Habitat (APH). The APH uses LED lights and a porous clay substrate (where an organism lives in the soil) that releases fertiliser at controlled times to deliver water, nutrients and oxygen.

"The APH is the largest plant growth facility on the space station and has 180 sensors and controls for monitoring plant growth and the environment," said Nicole Dufour, a project manager for the experiment. "It is a diverse growth chamber, and it allows us to help control the experiment from Kennedy, reducing the time astronauts spend tending to the crops."

The APH is one of three plant growth chambers in the orbiting laboratory, which has previously been used to grow cabbage and mustard. If the mission is successful, another crop will be added in order to supplement astronauts' diets for future missions.

Before then, the peppers will have to grow for four months on the station before they are harvested. Some of the peppers will be eaten by

the crew, while the rest will be sent back to Earth for analysis - assuming that they are indeed safe to consume. The combination of microgravity, light quality, temperature, and rootzone moisture could all affect the flavour, and it is as yet unclear how the fruit will develop.

"It is one of the most complex plant experiments on the station to date because of the long germination and growing times," said Matt Romeyn, principal investigator for the experiment.

"We have previously tested flowering to increase the chance for a successful harvest because astronauts will have to pollinate the peppers to grow fruit."

Choosing the peppers was not an easy task; researchers spent two years evaluating over 24 varieties from around the world.

"The challenge is the ability to feed crews in low-Earth orbit, and then to sustain explorers during future missions beyond low-Earth orbit to destinations including the Moon, as part of the Artemis program, and eventually to Mars," Romeyn said.

Govt to form 3 new

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purview of the city, he said.

Besides, changes have been brought to the peripheries of two municipalities - Dohar in Dhaka and Shibchar in Madaripur, the cabinet secretary added.

Describing the rationale behind the formation of three new upazilas, Anwarul said Eidgaon is a very remote place as it is 40km away from Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila and it needed upgradation.

Modhyanagar upazila was created by splitting Dharmapasha upazila as Modhyanagar is an isolated place due to a haor, which is some 25km off Dharmapasha, he said.

Dashar is also very remote place in Madaripur's Kalkini upazila, the cabinet secretary said.

Meanwhile, the cabinet gave the final approval to the draft of the

Bangladesh Legal Practitioners and Bar Council (Amendment) Ordinance, 2021 with a provision for allowing the government to form an ad-hoc committee for a tenure of maximum one year to arrange the Bar Council election in an unusual situation.

"If the regular Bar Council election can't be held by May 31 after every three years, the government can form a 15-member ad-hoc committee for a maximum one year," Anwarul said.

He said the law ministry placed the proposed law as the deadline for the Bar Council election expired on May 31 last amid the pandemic.

The cabinet cancelled its previous decision on the approval of the draft of an agreement on certain aspects of air services, which was supposed to be signed between Bangladesh and European Union.

U Thant concerned over

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shelled last week and Pakistani officials said one civilian was killed. Shelling across the frontier occurred almost daily and had resulted in many disputes between the Indian and Pakistani governments.

Military authorities in Dhaka discounted the effectiveness of the two week old offensive being conducted by Bangalee guerrillas. Handbills posted in Dhaka had warned the population to evacuate the city by Aug 1 to avoid injury in the upcoming clashes between guerrillas and the Pakistan army.

CONCERT FOR BANGLADESH
George Harrison, the former Beatle, held a news conference today with Ravi Shankar, the Indian sitar player,

to discuss their sold out concerts at Madison Square Garden on August 1. He predicted at least \$250,000 raised by the concerts would go to relief of homeless children in East Pakistan, through the United Nations Children's Fund.

NO PARALLEL IN HUMAN HISTORY
The East Pakistan refugee problem has no parallel in human history, Col MD Erla of the League of Red Cross Societies said in Kolkata today. Col Erla, a Norwegian, was there to help the Indian Red Cross aid the seven million refugees who had crossed from East Pakistan.

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'Militants eyeing move to Afghanistan'

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are being motivated by top leaders of Ansar Al Islam. One of the leaders is Mahmudul Hasan Gunobi, the outfit's spiritual leader. He used to inspire his close associates to take part in "jihad" and take part in "holy" wars.

The Rab arrested Gunobi in the capital on July 15.

A CTC official said some Ansar Al Islam members have discussed among themselves online their desire to go to Afghanistan.

A closed online group, created by the banned militant outfit with end-to-end encrypted app Telegram, was named "Science Project". The group had 10 members, the official said.

The CTC had arrested the group's four members in the capital in May. The arrestees informed investigators that they had a plan to leave the country for Afghanistan after carrying out attacks on police and Border Guard Bangladesh in Dhaka and Sylhet.

They also said three of their group members -- Abdur Razzak of Cumilla, Shibir Ahmed of Sylhet and Rabiul

Islam from Noakhali -- have already reached Afghanistan, according to a CTC official.

Razzak studied at a madrasa in Sylhet. His brother Salman Khan filed a general diary with Kotwali Police Station in Sylhet on March 25 about Razzak's going missing.

CTC Chief Md Asaduzzaman said they came to know about Ansar Al Islam men going to Afghanistan from the statements of the outfit's arrested members.

"We are verifying their statements. They might have gone to other places in Bangladesh for 'hizrat'. We don't have any information that they came from Bangladesh left for Afghanistan," he told The Daily Star on Saturday.

He said they were always on alert to thwart any move by militants to go to Afghanistan.

Rab Director (Legal and Media wing) Commander Khandaker Al Moin said they had recently carried out several operations and arrested a number of militants, but none of the arrestees gave them the information that their fellows travelled to

Afghanistan.

Speaking to The Daily Star recently, security analyst Maj Gen ANM Muniruzzaman (retd) said the resurgence of Taliban after the withdrawal of US-led international forces from Afghanistan might incite militancy in Bangladesh as all big terrorist groups here were born with links to Afghanistan.

"As Taliban's influence in Afghanistan is on the rise, a similar effect on Bangladesh might be seen," he added.

In the 1980s, many Bangladeshis, particularly madrasa students and teachers, went to Afghanistan to join the war against the forces of the then Soviet Union. They were trained on operating heavy arms and using grenades. After the Afghan war ended in 1992, many of them returned home and declared the launch of Harkat-ul-Jihad al-Islami (Huji) at a press conference in Dhaka on April 30, 1992.

Investigators have held Huji responsible for killing more than 100 people in Bangladesh in 13 militant attacks between 1999 and 2005.

Mamata-led WB govt sets up first probe

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The decision to form the committee was taken at a special cabinet meeting chaired by Mamata in Kolkata yesterday.

"We thought the centre would form an inquiry commission, or a court-monitored probe would be ordered to look into this phone-hacking incident. But the centre is sitting idle... so we decided to form a 'commission on inquiry' to look into the matter," Banerjee said in a pointed swipe.

"... I hope this small step will wake up others. We want it to start as soon as possible. Many people from Bengal have been tapped," she added.

Justice Jyotirmay Bhattacharya is a retired Calcutta High Court Chief Justice and Justice Madan Bhimrao Lokur is a former Supreme Court judge.

Last week Banerjee, who is travelling to Delhi to unite the opposition against the BJP ahead of the 2024 election, spoke of a "surveillance state" and said it was a "threat" to

democracy.

"Three things make democracy - media, judiciary and the Election Commission - and Pegasus has captured all three," she said in a speech shared with several senior opposition leaders.

Calling the Israeli military-grade spyware "dangerous" and "ferocious", Banerjee said she could not even talk to other opposition leaders, as she feared her phone too had been tapped.

In a ferocious attack she said, "Mr Modi, don't mind. I am not attacking you personally. But you, and may be the Home Minister, you are deploying agencies against opposition leaders."

On July 19, in a second round of reports on potential Pegasus targets, The Wire (part of an international media consortium investigating this issue) said Abhishek Banerjee, Congress MP Rahul Gandhi and poll strategist Prashant Kishor were on the list.

The Trinamool came down heavily on the BJP at the centre, declaring this proved they were afraid of Abhishek Banerjee and that the party was suffering from "fear-psychosis" after its defeat in Bengal.

Abhishek Banerjee hit back with a taunting tweet, calling for two minutes' silence for "sore losers".

The opposition's explosive accusations - the NSO Group has said it sells Pegasus only to "vetted governments" - triggered outrage and demands for a joint parliamentary committee probe.

The centre has rejected calls for a probe of any sort, insisting surveillance of the alleged kind was impossible given existing checks and balances within the country's legal framework.

IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw - who, as it turned out, was also on the list of potential targets (albeit before he joined the BJP) told parliament attempts were being made to malign Indian democracy.

Three rape

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two of the accused raped her. The other accused abetted the crime.

As the woman screamed for help, locals rushed there and rescued her. The accused, however, managed to flee.

Being informed, police went to the spot and sent the victim to the One-Stop Crisis Centre of Khulna Medical Hospital, he said.

On Sunday night, the victim's mother filed a rape case with Dumuria Police Station and the law enforcers arrested the three after raiding different places of the upazila, said the OC.

The arrestees are Al-Mamun Rubel, 28, Mohammad Mahfuz Hasan, 20, and a teenager, of Hasanpur area.

The woman is being treated at the hospital, added the OC.

AL activist hacked

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He added that there was a clash on Friday night over the outcome of the last Union Parishad election. The two groups were on their way to Shaikupa Police Station to settle the issue when Rashidul and Jhantu were attacked around 10:30pm.

Witnesses said the attackers were local villagers Bakul Hossain and Jahid Hossain.

Jahangir Alam, officer-in-charge of Shaikupa Police Station, said police were looking into the matter.

France, Greece send aircraft to help tackle Italy fires

AFP, Rome

Firefighting aircraft from France and Greece arrived in Italy on Sunday following an appeal for help in taming fires raging across parts of Sardinia that have forced hundreds of people from their homes.

"It's a disaster without precedent," the island's governor Christian Solinas said, as hot southwesterly winds complicated the efforts to put out the blazes and the region declared a state of emergency.

As many as 1,200 people had been evacuated from their homes, including residents of a care home, according to Rai News.

Frightened tourists were among those fleeing the little seaside village of Porto Alabe, it said.

Canadair planes could be seen collecting water off the coast of Porto Alabe, before flying low over beachfront properties and emptying it over the blazing vegetation just behind them.

Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said on Facebook that the civil protection agency had appealed for planes from other European countries.

Two had already arrived from France and two from Greece, the agency said.

A vast area in the Oristano province in the west was "on its knees due to the devastating fire", he said.

About 20,000 hectares (50,000 acres) of vegetation had gone up in flames, with properties damaged and animals killed, Solinas said. The fire danger level remained "extreme", the civil protection agency said.

About 7,500 emergency workers, including members of Italy's forest police and the Red Cross, were helping evacuees and those at risk, the fire service said.

Solinas said it was too early to know the extent of the destruction but he would ask the government to allocate recovery fund money for reforestation.



A restaurant staffer reviews a digital vaccination certificate on the day the Canary Islands government imposed stricter rules in an attempt to control a surge in coronavirus cases in Tenerife, Spain yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS