

BEIRUT RALLY AGAINST PORT BLAST JUDGE

Heavy gunfire kills 6, wounds 30

AFP, Beirut

Tank deployments and deadly exchanges of fire turned Beirut into a war zone yesterday after a demonstration organised by Shia parties against the lead investigator into last year's devastating port blast turned violent.

Heavy fire rang out as ambulances rushed the wounded through the deserted streets, a few blocks from the Palace of Justice, where hundreds of black-clad protesters had gathered moments earlier to demand Tarek Bitar's removal.

The judge has in recent days been in the sights of the Hezbollah and Amal parties in particular for insisting on subpoenaing top officials in his probe into last year's deadly explosion in Beirut port.

According to Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi, at least six people were killed, all of them by gunfire. The Lebanese Red Cross put the number of wounded at 30.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati called for calm to be restored and warned against attempts to drag Lebanon into violence.

In a statement, Hezbollah and Amal accused "armed and organised groups" of assaulting their supporters. Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV blamed the Lebanese Forces -- a Christian party that is staunchly opposed to the Iran-backed group.

The Court of Cassation yesterday turned down a lawsuit filed by two ex-ministers demanding Bitar's replacement, a court official told AFP on the condition of anonymity.

It is the second time this month that the judiciary has ruled in favour of the judge, who is hailed by human rights groups and relatives of blast victims as a symbol of judicial independence in a country where political impunity has long been the norm. The ruling, which goes into effect immediately, would allow Bitar to resume enquiries into the August 4, 2020 explosion which killed more than 200 people and destroyed large swathes of the capital.



People evacuate a casualty after gunfire erupted in Beirut, Lebanon, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

MORE NEWS

US set to rejoin UN Human Rights Council

The United States is returning to the UN Human Rights Council three-and-a-half years after its dramatic walk-out -- time seized upon by China to assert wider influence. The United Nations General Assembly will elect new members of the UN's top rights body later yesterday, with countries kicking off their three-year council term from January 1. Though member states are chosen in a secret ballot, the election is a non-contest, with 18 candidate countries standing for 18 seats. The council is tasked with strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide, addressing violations and making recommendations. The US under previous president Donald Trump quit the council in 2018, accusing it of hypocrisy and obsession with haranguing Israel.

Taiwan building inferno kills 46, dozens injured

An overnight fire tore through a building in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung yesterday, killing 46 people and injuring dozens of others in the island's deadliest blaze in decades. The fire broke out in the 13-storey, mixed-use building in the small hours of yesterday morning, according to officials, raging through multiple floors before firefighters finally got it under control. Pictures published by Taiwan's official Central News Agency showed smoke billowing out of the building's windows as firefighters desperately tried to douse the flames using extendable hoses. As daylight broke the sheer scale of the fire became clear, with every floor of the building visibly blackened and most of its windows shattered. Officials had not yet ruled out arson. Forensics teams were on site and real cause of the incident will be determined after a probe.



Norway says deadly attack appears to be an 'act of terror'

The killing of five people in Norway in a bow-and-arrow attack appears to be an "act of terror", the Norwegian security service said yesterday, with the suspect, a Danish Muslim convert, already on their radar over fears he had been radicalised. Four women and a man died and two others were injured on Wednesday in the south-eastern town of Kongsberg in Norway's deadliest attack in a decade. "The events in Kongsberg currently appear to be an act of terror, but the investigation... will determine in closer detail what the acts were motivated by," Norway's intelligence service PST said in a statement. Saeverud said the 37-year-old suspect had confessed to the facts of the matter during questioning. Those who were killed during the attack were all aged between 50 and 70.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

Militants entering Afghanistan

Putin says jihadists from Iraq, Syria pouring in in the country; PIA suspends Afghan ops; blast kills Taliban commander

AGENCIES

Russian President Vladimir Putin said that battle-hardened militants from Iraq and Syria are "actively" entering Afghanistan as the country's new rulers are struggling to steady the ship as it faces problems from multiple fronts.

"The situation in Afghanistan is not easy," Putin said during a video conference with security service chiefs of ex-Soviet states.

"Militants from Iraq, Syria with experience in military operations are actively being drawn there," he said.

"It is possible that terrorists may try to destabilise the situation in neighbouring states," he added, warning that they could even try "direct expansion".

Putin has repeatedly warned about members of extremist groups exploiting political turmoil in Afghanistan to cross into neighbouring ex-Soviet countries as refugees.

While Moscow has been cautiously optimistic about the new Taliban leadership in Kabul, the Kremlin is concerned about instability spilling over into Central Asia where it houses military bases.



In the wake of the Taliban takeover, Russia held military drills with ex-Soviet Tajikistan -- where it operates a military base -- and in Uzbekistan. Both countries share a border with Afghanistan.

Tajikistan's national security chief, Saimumin Yatimov, for his part told the video conference that he had registered an "intensification" of attempts to "smuggle drugs, weapons, ammunition" from Afghanistan into his country.

While the Taliban has said it does not pose a threat to Central Asian countries, the ex-Soviet republics in the region have previously been targeted by attacks attributed to allies of Afghan Islamists.

Highlighting the security worries, a bomb ripped through a vehicle carrying a Taliban police chief in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, killing him and wounding 11 others, officials said.

The blast happened in Asadabad, the capital of Kunar province, targeting the Taliban police chief for Shigal district, said an official from the Islamist group.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack but the Islamic State-Khorasan group, who are active in eastern Afghanistan, have claimed similar attacks on the Taliban in the past.

Meanwhile, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) suspended flights to the Afghan capital, Kabul, yesterday after what it called heavy handed interference by Taliban authorities, including arbitrary rule changes and intimidation of staff.

The suspension took place as the Taliban government ordered the airline, the only international company operating regularly out of Kabul, to cut ticket prices to levels seen before the fall of the Western-backed Afghan government in August.

Facebook releases new curbs on harassment

AFP, San Francisco

Facebook unveiled fresh protections Wednesday against online attacks on journalists, activists and celebrities as the social media giant battles a crisis over its platforms' potential harms.

The company has faced a storm of criticism and a Senate panel hearing since a whistleblower leaked internal studies showing Facebook knew its sites could be harmful to young people's mental health.

Frances Haugen, an ex-worker at the company, alleged the leading social network put profits before the safety of its users.

Facebook head of safety Antigone Davis announced the new protections, writing "we do not allow bullying and harassment on our platform, but when it does happen, we act."

Facebook expanded its range of banned "attacks" on public figures to include a range of sexual or degrading images of their bodies.

Davis, who defended the company's work in a hearing before lawmakers, said "attacks like these can weaponize a public figure's appearance."

Facebook also added journalists and human rights defenders to the list of people considered public figures because of their work.

New policies included derailing coordinated efforts to use multiple accounts to harass or intimidate people considered at heightened risk of harm in the real world, such as government dissidents and victims of violent tragedies.

Davis said Facebook will also start removing state-linked and "adversarial networks" of accounts at the social network that "work together to harass or silence people" such as dissidents.

The documents leaked by Haugen, which underpinned a series of scathing Wall Street Journal stories, have fuelled one of Facebook's most serious crises yet. In her testimony, Haugen noted the risks that the social media giant's platforms are fueling political division and self-dissatisfaction that is particularly dangerous for young people.

She has called on the authorities to regulate the network frequented daily by nearly three billion people worldwide.

Quotes of the day



Talk about this (succession) destabilises the situation.

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT VLADIMIR PUTIN ON HIS POLITICAL FUTURE



The threat to the 42 small states in existential. People say that as if it does not mean what it says -- namely these small states will disappear.

BARONESS PATRICIA SCOTLAND, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH



We need some of the world's greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live.

BRITAIN'S PRINCE WILLIAM LAUNCHES AN ATTACK ON SPACE TOURISM



Firefighters work after the Alisal fire burned the slope near Aguajito Canyon in Santa Barbara County, California, US, on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Echoing Israel, US hints at force if Iran diplomacy fails

AFP, Washington

US President Joe Biden's administration hinted Wednesday it could resort to force if diplomacy fails on Iran's nuclear program, rallying more closely than ever behind warnings by Israel.

Amid a standoff in negotiations with Iran, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced growing frustration as he held three-way talks with the top diplomats of Israel and the United Arab Emirates, US allies that established relations last year amid shared alarm about Tehran.

Blinken renewed Biden's offer to re-enter a 2015 nuclear agreement, trashed by former president Donald Trump, in which Iran drastically scaled back nuclear activity in return for unfulfilled promises of sanctions relief.

"We continue to believe that diplomacy is the most effective way," Blinken told a

joint news conference.

"But it takes two to engage in diplomacy and we have not seen from Iran a willingness to do that at this point," he said.

"We are prepared to turn to other options if Iran doesn't change course," he warned.

He did not elaborate, but Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, without being contradicted, said of Blinken's comments: "I think everybody understands -- here in Israel and in the Emirates and in Tehran -- what it is that we mean."

"If a terror regime is going to acquire a nuclear weapon, we must act. We must make clear the civilized world won't allow it," Lapid said.

Enrique Mora, the EU envoy in charge of reviving the troubled deal, visited Tehran yesterday. He met Iranian deputy foreign minister Ali Bagheri in Tehran, the Iranian ministry said.



OCTOBER 15

1946 - Hermann Goering, the highest ranking Nazi tried at Nuremberg, committed suicide by taking a cyanide capsule in his prison cell the night before he was to be hanged.

1993 - Nelson Mandela and President FW de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work to end apartheid and lay the foundations for a democratic South Africa.

SOURCE: REUTERS

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