



What can Israel annex, and what of Palestinian threats?

PAGE 5

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia set to resume Khafji oil output

PAGE 3



Djokovic wins eighth Australian crown

PAGE 7



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Govt warns of ‘painful steps’ to avert total collapse

Draft policy statement also calls for interest rate cuts as part of rescue plan

By Hussein Dakroub
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: The new government’s policy statement calls for “painful steps” and interest rate cuts as part of a “comprehensive rescue plan” to avert a total collapse of the country’s ailing economy, according to a draft obtained by The Daily Star Sunday.

The 17-page draft statement was agreed Saturday by a ministerial committee tasked with preparing the government’s policy statement that has been meeting since Prime Minister Hassan Diab formed a 20-member Cabinet on Jan. 21.

The 12-member ministerial committee is set to meet under Diab at the Grand Serail Monday for a final reading of the draft policy statement distributed to ministers Saturday.

“The government’s policy statement will be ready Monday,” Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni said in a statement. Wazni could not be reached to elaborate on the “painful steps” planned by the government to address the dire economic and financial crisis, the worst in decades.

The government warned in the policy statement that it must rapidly take “painful steps” to avoid a “total collapse” of the economy.

“Lebanon is facing a crippling and fateful economic, financial, social,

living and environmental crisis, an increasing unemployment, a severe poverty and a collapse of the infrastructure and basic services that directly threaten people’s salaries, health, housing and livelihood,” the draft statement said.

Noting that Lebanon was in the grips of “a fateful crisis” as a result of accumulated problems and challenges, the draft said: “This requires from us as officials a deep review and also taking painful steps as part of a comprehensive and integrated rescue plan.” The draft did not say what these “painful steps” are.

Seeking to appease hundreds of thousands of Lebanese who have taken to the streets since Oct. 17, calling for a change of the decades-old sectarian governing system and the ouster of the entire political ruling elite they accuse of corruption and mismanagement, the draft said: “Since the Lebanese, men and women, have clearly and bravely expressed [their views] since Oct. 17, 2019, and demanded their rights, we agreed on pledges and commitment contained in our policy statement. The requirements and reforms to which we commit essentially stem from the demands of the Lebanese.”

This is in addition to key reforms promised by Lebanon and are awaited by donor countries at the CEDRE conference held in Paris in April 2018, it said. The reforms are essential to unlock over \$11 billion in grants and soft loans pledged by donor countries at the conference to finance the implementation of vital infrastructure projects in Lebanon.

TURN TO PAGE 6



Medical officers spray Indonesian nationals with antiseptic after they arrived from Wuhan.

Philippines reports first death outside China

BEIJING: The first death outside China from the new coronavirus was recorded Sunday in the Philippines, as countries around the world evacuated hundreds of their citizens from the infection zone and Chinese authorities completed a new, rapidly constructed 1,000-bed hospital for victims of the outbreak.

Chinese authorities also delayed the reopening of schools in the hardest-hit province and tightened the quarantine in one city by allowing only one family member to venture out to buy supplies.

The Philippine Health Department said a 44-year-old Chinese man from Wuhan, the city at the center of the crisis, was hospitalized Jan. 25 with a fever, cough and sore throat and died after developing

severe pneumonia. The man’s 38-year-old female companion, also from Wuhan, tested positive for the virus as well and remained hospitalized in isolation in Manila.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte approved a ban on the entry of all noncitizens from China. The U.S., Japan, Singapore and Australia have imposed similar restrictions despite criticism from China and an assessment from the World Health Organization that such measures were unnecessarily hurting trade and travel.

The death toll in China climbed by 45 to 304, and the number of cases worldwide surged past 14,550, according to China’s National Health Commission and other nations. The vast majority of

those infected are in China; about 150 cases have been reported in two dozen other countries. The U.S. has recorded eight cases.

A hospital specially built to handle coronavirus patients in Wuhan is expected to open Monday, just 10 days after construction began. A second hospital is set to open soon after.

Also, six officials in the city of Huanggang, next to Wuhan in Hubei province, were fired over “poor performance” in handling the outbreak, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. It cited the mayor as saying the city’s “capabilities to treat the patients remained inadequate and there is a severe shortage in medical supplies such as protective suits and medical masks.”

The trading and manufacturing

center of Wenzhou, with 10 million people in coastal Zhejiang province, confined people to their homes, allowing only one family member to venture out every other day to buy necessary supplies. Huanggang, home to 7 million people, imposed similar measures Saturday.

With no end in sight to the outbreak, authorities in Hubei and elsewhere have extended the Lunar New Year holiday break, due to end this week, well into February to try to keep people at home and reduce the spread of the virus. All Hubei schools are postponing the start of the new semester until further notice.

Wenzhou, situated about 500 miles from Wuhan, put off the reopening of government offices

TURN TO PAGE 6

Iraqis reject PM-designate picked by elites

BAGHDAD: Anti-government demonstrators Sunday rejected Iraq’s new prime minister-designate following his nomination by rival government factions, compounding the challenges he’ll have to surmount in order to resolve months of civil unrest.

Meanwhile, new divisions emerged among protesters and supporters of a maverick and often inscrutable Shiite preacher, who initially threw his weight behind the uprising but now is repositioning himself toward the political establishment, after elites selected a candidate for premier that he endorsed.

Sunday, Moqtada al-Sadr told his followers camped out among protesters in the capital and in the country’s south to unblock roads and restore normalcy, angering protesters who felt Sadr had betrayed them and the reformist aims of their movement for political gain.

Saturday’s selection of former Communications Minister Mohammed Allawi, 66, to replace outgoing Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi was the product of months of backroom talks between rival parties, ending a political stalemate.

Hundreds of students voiced their rejection of Allawi at rallies in Baghdad’s central plazas and in southern Iraq. Protesters hung portraits of Allawi marked with an “X” on bridges and tunnels around Tahrir Square, the epicenter of the four-month protest movement. “We don’t want Allawi because he is a party member chosen by the parties,” said Hadi Safir, a protester in Tahrir. “We want an independent nominee.”

Others were more diplomatic, saying they’ll wait and see how



An Iraqi demonstrator sits amid burning tires blocking a road during ongoing anti-government protests in Najaf.

Allawi delivers on promises to hold early elections.

Iraqi officials said it was likely Allawi would face the same political realities that bedeviled his predecessor, who was often caught between rival political blocs Sairoon, headed by Sadr, and Fatah, headed by Hadi al-Amiri.

“He is not known as being tough or outspoken, so some see him as an even more pacified version of Abdel-Mahdi, and will just serve the will of

the parties,” one Iraqi official said. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to reporters.

But Allawi will have to cope with shifting sands of power in the Iraqi arena, with Sadr currently gaining the upper hand after showing his dominance over the Iraqi street. The preacher recently staged an anti-U.S. rally that brought tens of thousands to the street. By asking his followers to return to Tahrir Square,

Sadr gained an advantage in the negotiations for prime minister.

“The groups we call pro-Iranian ... are taking a backseat now as Sadr emerges as more active in shaping the new government,” said Harith Hasan, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

Following the U.S. airstrike in Baghdad that killed top Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, Hasan said “the conviction increased that

TURN TO PAGE 6

Airstrikes in northwest Syria kill 14 civilians

SARMEEN, Syria: Airstrikes by the Syrian regime and its Russian ally Sunday killed 14 civilians in the last major opposition bastion of Idlib in the country’s northwest, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Moscow-backed government forces have upped their deadly bombardment of the jihadi-dominated region in recent weeks, chipping at its southern edge and causing tens of thousands to flee their homes.

Eight of those killed Sunday died in a regime barrel bomb attack in the town of Sarmeen, seven from the same family, the Observatory said.

Rescue workers pulled the bodies of a 9-year-old girl and a 13-year-old boy from the debris of a two-story building, an AFP correspondent in the town said.

Their father, Abu Fida, stood by weeping. “It’s a terrible disaster,” he said. Abu Fida said he and his family had fled bombardment on Sarmeen Thursday, with just the clothes on their back.

They returned Saturday night to collect their belongings, deciding to spend a last night at home before leaving for good. “I wanted to get my family out this morning but my wife told me to go to work. So I sent them a driver with a car to transport their things,” but then aircraft hit the house, he told AFP.

His wife was inside the house when it was struck, but he survived with three other children.

In recent months, pro-Damascus forces have pressed northward along the M5 highway that connects the capital Damascus to second city Aleppo in the north, crossing Idlib.

Last week the government forces retook the key town of Maaret al-Numan along the highway and are now just few kilometres from the abandoned town of Saraqeb.

Clashes are also raging in the bastion’s eastern flank in Aleppo province, where state news agency SANA said four television journalists were wounded Sunday.

TURN TO PAGE 6

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► Foreign minister heads to Jeddah for summit on Trump deal

Foreign Minister Nassif Hitti headed to Jeddah Sunday for a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discussing U.S. President Donald Trump’s Middle East plan. dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News.ashx

► Iranians must have ‘right to choose’ at polls: Rouhani

Iranians must have the “right to choose” between political movements, President Hassan Rouhani said Sunday, as controversy grows over the disqualification of candidates in upcoming polls. dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East.ashx

► EU top diplomat expected in Tehran Monday

Top EU diplomat Josep Borrell is expected in Tehran Monday, Iran’s Foreign Ministry announced a day ahead of the visit, amid new tensions over the Iranian nuclear issue. dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East.ashx

FIRST PUBLISHED
1952
NUMBER 15,948

SUBSCRIPTION

01 985313
subscription@dailystar.com.lb



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