

Saudi Arabia, UAE Welcome New Military Ruler Sudan Protesters Press for Transition to Civilian Rule



Sudanese demonstrators gather to celebrate after Defense Minister Awad Ibn Auf stepped down as head of the country's transitional ruling military council, in Khartoum, April 13, 2019.

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Several thousand Sudanese protesters continued a sit-in outside the Defense Ministry on Sunday as they pressured the military to accelerate a transition towards civilian rule.

The head of the military council that replaced former President Omar al-Bashir, who was ousted on Thursday after three decades in power, has said a civilian government will be formed after consultations with the opposition.

The main organizer of protests that led to Bashir's ouster, the Sudanese

Professionals' Association (SPA), has demanded that civilians be included on the transitional military council and has pressed for Bashir's close associates to leave.

It has called for a restructuring of the powerful National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and the dissolution of militia forces that operated under Bashir.

The sit-in, which began on April 6, was the culmination of a protest movement that began nearly four months ago, triggered by a worsening economic crisis.

On Friday, Defense Minister Awad Ibn Auf, who announced Bashir's ouster and arrest, stepped down after just one day as head of the military council. On Saturday, state media reported that the head of the NISS, Salah Abdallah Mohamed Saleh - better known as Salah Gosh - had also resigned.

The new head of the council, Lieutenant General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan Abdelrahman, has said the transition period will last for a maximum of two years. He has canceled an overnight curfew and ordered the release of all prisoners jailed under emergency laws put in place by Bashir.

Sudanese media and analysts say Burhan coordinated sending Sudanese troops to Yemen to participate in the Saudi war on the impoverished country.

Saudi Arabia expressed support for measures taken by the transitional military council following his ouster.

The Saudi official news agency SPA also said late Saturday that Riyadh had announced a humanitarian aid package to Sudan, including wheat, petroleum products, and medicine.

The United Arab Emirates also welcomed the new head of Sudan's transitional military council.

A report by London-based Middle East Eye last month said the head of Israel's Mossad had met with his Sudanese counterpart in Germany as part of a secret plan by Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to oust Bashir.

Over 120 Dead as Haftar Forces Push for Tripoli



Forces loyal to Libya's Western-backed government fight in a suburb south of Tripoli on April 12, 2019.

CAIRO (AP) - More than 120 people have been killed since a Libyan military commander launched an assault on the capital 10 days ago, igniting clashes with rival militias, the UN health agency said Sunday.

The self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, launched a surprise offensive against Tripoli on April 5 and is battling rival militias loosely affiliated with a weak Western-backed government.

The World Health Organization said 121 people have been killed in the fighting and another 561 have been wounded. It did not specify whether they

were fighters or civilians.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said more than 13,500 people have been displaced, and that "significant numbers of civilians" remain stuck in areas where the fighting has escalated.

Haftar has led previous campaigns against militants and other rivals in eastern Libya, and has received support from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Russia and France.

Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi met with Haftar in Cairo on Sunday, the presidency said, without providing further details.

The head of the country's self-proclaimed eastern parliament said Haftar's forces were set to move in on Tripoli Sunday.

On Saturday, an air raid by Haftar's forces hit the yard of a school on the southern outskirts of Tripoli.

In a possible new front, the eastern Libya National Army (LNA) was readying a unit to move to the Es Sider and Ras Lanuf oil ports, Libya's biggest, on the eastern coast, anticipating an attack from an armed group allied to Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj, eastern military officials said.

The LNA's push into Tripoli is the latest outbreak of a cycle of conflict since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi. It has continued despite international calls for a halt in an offensive that risks causing many civilian casualties.

Last week the European Union called on the LNA to stop its attacks, having agreed on a statement after France and Italy sparred over how to handle the conflict.

As well as the humanitarian cost, the conflict threatens to disrupt oil supplies, boost migration to Europe, scupper a UN peace plan, and allow armed groups to exploit the chaos.

Haftar, 75, a former general in Gaddafi's army who later joined the revolt against him, moved his troops out of their eastern stronghold to take the oil-rich desert south earlier this year, before sweeping up to Tripoli at the start of April.

Maduro Orders Expansion of Civilian Militia



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro speaks during a ceremony to mark the 17th anniversary of the return to power of Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez, after a coup attempt and the National Militia Day in Caracas, April 13, 2019.

CARACAS/MARACAIBO (Dispatches) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro has ordered an expansion of civilian militia by nearly one million members as opposition leader Juan Guaido toured western Zulia state, which has been hard hit by electricity blackouts.

The civilian militia, created in 2008 by the late former president and Maduro mentor Hugo Chavez, reports directly to the presidency and is intended to complement the armed forces.

Maduro, who calls Guaido a U.S. puppet, said he aimed to raise the number of militia members to three million by year-end from what he said was more than 2 million currently. Maduro has encouraged them to become involved in agricultural production.

Shortages of food and medicine have prompted more than three million Venezuelans to emigrate in recent years.

"With your rifles on your shoulders, be ready to defend the fatherland and dig the furrow to plant the seeds to produce food for the community, for the people," Maduro told thousands of militia members gathered in the capital Caracas, wearing khaki camouflaged uniforms.

The military top brass has remained loyal to Maduro despite Guaido's offer of amnesty to military members who switch sides.

While electricity has largely been restored in Caracas, Maduro's administration is rationing power to the rest of Venezuela.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who is on a tour of four Latin American countries, on Saturday called for maintaining regional

pressure on Maduro and his government.

On the third leg of his four-nation tour, Pompeo arrived in the Peruvian capital of Lima and met with the country's President Martin Vizcarra to gather support for President Donald Trump's hardline stance against Maduro.

Washington has been pressuring Maduro to step down and urging more countries to support Guaido who declared himself "interim president" in January.

The Trump administration has imposed a raft of sanctions against Maduro's government and even threatened to use military force in an attempt to remove him from power.

U.S.-imposed sanctions have hurt the Venezuelan economy as well as ordinary people, who are already suffering from hyperinflation and food and medicine shortages, triggering mass migration to neighboring countries, such as Peru and Colombia.

After a private meeting with Vizcarra, the U.S. secretary of state attended a joint news conference with Peruvian Foreign Minister Nestor Popolizio and discussed the status of Venezuelan migrants in neighboring countries.

However, he got irate when a reporter asked if that contradicted Trump's harsh immigration policy at home.

"Our objective is to allow people to stay in their home countries, this is President Trump's desire, we want to create conditions in these countries where they can stay in their own country," he said.

At Least 2 Dead as Powerful Storms Hit U.S. South



A roof is torn off a home following a suspected tornado, April 13, 2019 in Franklin, Texas.

VICKSBURG, Mississippi (AP) - Powerful storms that killed at least two people continued to move across the South on Sunday after spawning suspected tornadoes that left several people injured and multiple homes and businesses damaged or without power.

National Weather Service meteorologist John Moore said a possible twister touched down Saturday in the Vicksburg, Mississippi, area. No injuries have been reported, but officials said several businesses and vehicles were damaged. Trees were down throughout the hilly city on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi.

Heavy rains and storms continued to rake the Magnolia State into the night, moving into Alabama. Multiple people were injured and several homes were damaged in Hamilton, Mississippi, said Monroe County Coroner Alan Gurley. A tornado was reported in the area 140 miles (225 kilometers) southwest of Memphis, Tennessee, at the time. At least one mobile home was destroyed, throwing a man from the mobile home. No fatalities were reported.

The roof of a hotel in New Albany, Mississippi, was damaged, although the cause was unclear. Mississippi State University's 21,000 students huddled in basements and hallways as a tornado came

near the school's campus in Starkville. University spokesman Sid Salter said some debris, possibly carried by the tornado, was found on campus, but no injuries were reported and no buildings were damaged. Trees were down and at least some minor structural damage was reported in residential areas east of the campus.

Suspected tornadoes also were reported overnight in various parts of Alabama, including Highland Lakes, Greystone and American Village in Shelby County and lake Purdy at Grants in Jefferson County. Trees were reported down in each location but there were no immediate reports of damage, injuries or fatalities.

In East Texas, the Angelina County Sheriff's Office said an 8-year-old and a 3-year-old died when strong winds toppled a tree onto the back of their family's car in Lufkin while it was in motion. Capt. Alton Lenderman said the parents, who were in the front seats, were not injured.

The large storm system also knocked out power to thousands and caused some flash flooding. The weather service said the system is expected to shift to the Ohio Valley and the Southeast on Sunday. More than 140,000 customers remained without power in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas late Saturday.



QUETTA, Pakistan (Reuters) - Minority Shia Hazaras blocked traffic in a sit-in protest for a third day in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta on Sunday after a suicide bomb killed 19 people in an outdoor market, many of them ethnic Hazaras. Dozens were wounded in the blast on Friday on the outskirts of Quetta, capital of resource-rich Baluchistan province, officials said. Daesh claimed responsibility. Hazaras have been frequently targeted by Taliban and Daesh militants and other Takfiri groups in both Pakistan and Afghanistan. "We've lost hundreds of our loved ones in the last 10 years," Tahir Hazara, leading the sit-in, told Reuters. "The government failed to protect our community. Terrorists are free to target us." "Stop killing Hazaras," the crowd chanted. "Down with terrorism and sectarianism." The protesters, who include many women and children, have set up camps and burn wood to keep warm at night. One police official said there were about 200 people taking part on Sunday, blocking the key arterial Western Bypass leading into Quetta.

CAIRO (Reuters) - The president of Egypt met on Sunday in Cairo with the commander of eastern Libyan forces who is under international pressure to halt an advance on the capital Tripoli. Egypt has close ties with Khalifa Haftar, whose Libyan National Army (LNA) controls the east and took the mainly desert south earlier this year before moving to Tripoli ten days ago in a major escalation of conflict in the divided nation. Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met Haftar to discuss developments in Libya, Sisi's spokesman said. Egypt released photos showing Haftar sitting with Sisi and his head of intelligence, Abbas Kamel. No other details about the meeting were immediately available from either party. Haftar's move on Libya is the latest and potentially most significant development in a cycle of conflict and anarchy since the 2011 topping of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

SYDNEY (Reuters) - A drive-by shooting outside a nightclub in the Australian city of Melbourne inflicted "horrific injuries" that killed a security guard and wounded three men, police said on Sunday, but there was no suggestion yet that the attack was terror-related. Australia has some of the world's toughest gun control laws, adopted after its worst mass murder, when a gunman killed 35 people at Port Arthur in the island state of Tasmania in 1996. Sunday's shooting took place around 3.20 a.m. in the lively entertainment district of Melbourne's southeastern suburb of Prahran, police said. Three security guards and a man queueing to enter were taken to hospital with gunshot injuries, police said in a televised news conference in Melbourne. One guard died in hospital, another man was in critical condition and two escaped life-threatening injuries. One guard was shot in the face, the Age newspaper said.

MANILA (Reuters) - Philippine officials on Sunday confirmed that a leader of an alliance of pro-Daesh militants was one of four insurgents killed in a clash with the military last month. Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana confirmed Abu Dar's death based on the findings of a DNA test. "It is confirmed, it's Abu Dar's remains," he said. Security forces believe Abu Dar had led Dawla Islamiya, an alliance of pro-Daesh fighters in southern Philippines that include foreigners. The four rebels were killed in a clash in Lanao del Sur province in March. Major-General Roberto Ancan, commander of the army's 1st Infantry Division, also confirmed Dar's death. He called it a "significant accomplishment of the government and the people of Lanao del Sur who worked together to rid their beloved province of terrorists". Dawla Islamiya carried out the siege of southern Marawi City for five months in 2017 before some leaders were reported killed by the military in airstrikes and street battles, among them Isnilon Hapilon, Daesh's anointed "emir" in Southeast Asia.

MADRID (Reuters) - Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, who faces a national election in two weeks' time, has said he will act with "strength and proportion" against any attempt by Catalan separatists to repeat their 2017 independence bid. Catalonia's failed attempt to secede from Spain and Madrid's approach to the region has become the defining issue ahead of the April 28 election, in which polls show a coalition of right-wing, unionist parties could seize a majority in parliament. "If we see the laws of the constitution or the Statute of Autonomy in Catalonia broken once more, the state of law led by this government will act with strength and proportion against any challenge," Sanchez said in an interview published in Hoy newspaper. In such an event, Sanchez suggested he could apply direct rule to Catalonia, repeating the decision of former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy who took over the regional government during the secession crisis in 2017.

BERLIN (AP) - Some 600 people have been evacuated from their homes in the old city of Frankfurt so specialists could remove a World War II-era bomb that was discovered in the Main River. The German news agency dpa reported the bomb was defused, as planned, underwater on Sunday, which led to a loud detonation and a big water fountain on the river. Police told dpa "the bomb is no longer a danger." Firefighters had discovered the American 250-kilogram (550-pound) bomb during diving training in the river on Tuesday. Even more than 70 years after the end of the war, bombs and other munitions still turn up regularly in Germany, a testament to the ferocity of the fighting in World War II.

Leftists Tipped for Victory in Finland Election

HELSINKI (AFP) - Finland voted Sunday in a general election in which the Social Democratic Party appeared set to topple the centre-right government after four years of spending cuts, with the far-right predicted to make large gains.

The left-wing social democrats lead Finland's two main opinion polls with about 19 percent of the vote, having campaigned against the austerity policies of Center Party Prime Minister Juha Sipila and his Finance Minister Petteri Orpo - leader of the conservative National Coalition Party.

But the far-right Finns Party, led by hardline MEP Jussi Halla-aho, has seen a surge in support in recent months during an anti-immigration dominated campaign, urging people to "Vote for some borders".

Polls show the party ending up in second or third place, meaning it

could play a significant role in the next government, which in Finland is typically a coalition of three or four parties.

A record 1.5 million Finns, over a third of the electorate, had already cast their ballots during a week of advance voting earlier this month.

The opposition Social Democratic Party has promised to address widespread public concern that public spending was cut too harshly in recent years as the economy struggled to emerge from the recession that followed the 2008 financial crash.

Cutbacks to Finland's prized education system drew particular criticism from MPs on all sides.

However, opinion polls suggest the social democrats' lead has narrowed in recent weeks to as little as two points ahead of the National Coalition and the Finns Party, which are neck-and-neck in second place.

Some have blamed the shrinking lead on the inability of party leader Antti Rinne, a 56-year-old former trade union boss, to attract large numbers of new, younger voters.

The growing Finns Party ratings, on the other hand, appear to be driven by new supporters who have not voted in the past.

The Finns Party has run a vocal campaign calling for asylum-based immigration to be reduced to almost zero, and decrying the "climate hysteria" of other parties seeking action against global warming.

Forecasts suggest no party is likely to draw more than 20 percent of the vote, meaning the result could be historically close.

This could make negotiations to form a governing coalition particularly difficult, not least because the major parties have all expressed strong reservations about joining a government with the