

All flights to be cancelled today in Tunisia: Trade union

REUTERS — TUNIS

All international flights to and from Tunisia will be cancelled today due to a national public strike called by the powerful UGTT union, a union officials said yesterday.

The union called a nationwide strike by employees in state companies in "defence of workers' rights" after a government decision to freeze wages as part of a reform package aimed at reaching a deal on a \$4bn loan from the International Monetary Fund.

"All international and domestic flights will also stop, starting from 00.00 tonight. The strike will include all cruises as well," said Wajih Zidi, the

official in the UGTT union. The protest is a challenge to President Kais Saied as opposition to his one-man rule mounts and a financial crisis looms.

The union, which has about 1 million members, has called for protests across Tunisia, saying its demands are social and economic, not political. International and domestic flights will stop from midnight (2300 GMT on Wednesday).

"The strike will impose a great cost on Tunisia," government spokeserson Nasreddine Nsibi said, adding that the union was making unaffordable demands. "We do not want to give false promises to the union." The strike, the UGTT's first since 2018, adds a

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new dimension to political and financial crises that have deepened since Saied seized power nearly a year ago, in a move his opponents have called a coup against Tunisia's young democracy.

Tensions have recently surfaced between the union and the government. The UGTT leader said earlier this month it was being "targeted" by authorities after it refused to participate in talks on a new

constitution, which aims to enshrine changes Saied has made to Tunisia's system of government.

Saied has gradually consolidated power since last July, dismissing parliament, sacking the government, and ruling by decree. His supporters say he acted to save Tunisia from a corrupt political class and economic malaise.

Saied held an online multiple-choice consultation over

the new constitution, but few took part. Critics described the survey as slanted to achieve the results sought by Saied.

He aims to put the new one to a referendum on July 25 — the first anniversary of his move to freeze parliament.

The political crisis has complicated efforts to address a crisis in Tunisia's public finances. The government has been seeking the IMF loan to avoid public financial bankruptcy, and to gain access to other external funds.

The central bank governor has warned that if Tunisia is unable to secure funds, it would face a scenario like those in Lebanon and Venezuela where public finances have imploded.

IN BRIEF

Erdogan changes mind again on new name for airline

ANKARA: Turkish president, in a push to recast top Turkish assets to avoid any possible derogatory associations, changed his mind yesterday over what Turkish Airlines should now be called.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told ruling party lawmakers that national airline will now be known internationally by its Turkish name "Türk Hava Yolları".

A day earlier, the Turkish leader had announced that his country would rebrand the national airline as "Türkiye Hava Yolları" as part of his push for his country to be called "Türkiye" instead of Turkey. "Hava yolları" is Turkish for airlines.

But that decision sparked opposition, especially from Turkish nationalists, who suggested that dropping the word "Türk" would amount to a concession to Kurdish nationalists and others who oppose the use of the word to describe their nationality and want to be called "Türkiyeli" (a person from Türkiye) instead. -Reuters

Two dead in PKK air strikes on Turkish sites in Iraq's north

BAGHDAD: At least two people were killed and seven injured in Turkish air strikes targeting Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) sites in Iraq's northern province of Sinjar.

They said one strike targeted an intelligence headquarters and another hit a council building, causing damage to nearby shops. Videos on social media showed plumes of thick smoke and fires blaze while people ran away in the street.

There has been a long-running Turkish campaign in Iraq and Syria against militants of the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which are both regarded as terrorist groups by Ankara. -Reuters

Iraq to begin setting up electricity links with Saudi Arabia

DUBAI: Iraq's electricity ministry has begun establishing interconnection stations with Saudi Arabia and determining transmission paths, state news agency INA said yesterday.

Iraq suffers from an electricity shortage that worsens during the hot summer months. The country also has electricity supply agreements with Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states. -Reuters

Algerian President dismisses finance minister

ALGERIA: Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune dismissed the Minister of Finance Abdel Rahman Rawiya, from his post, less than four months after he assumed the ministerial post.

Algeria Press Service (APS) reported that President Tebboune, after consulting Prime Minister Ahmed Ben Abdel Rahim an signed a presidential decree to end the duties of the Minister of Finance and assign the Secretary-General of the Ministry to run its affairs, on his behalf. The President appointed Abdel Rahman Rawiya as Minister of Finance in February. -QNA

Israeli court convicts Palestinian aid worker after six years in detention

REUTERS — BEERSHEBA, ISRAEL

An Israeli court yesterday convicted a Palestinian aid worker who has been detained for six years on Israeli charges he funneled tens of millions of dollars in relief funds to the Hamas group.

The Beersheba District Court found El Halabi guilty of supporting a 'terror organisation' but acquitted him of treason, judges reading out the verdict said. They set a sentencing hearing for July.

Mohammad El Halabi, head of Gaza operations for World Vision, an international Christian non-governmental organisation, was arrested in June 2016.

Israel accused him of siphoning off up to \$50m to pay Hamas fighters, buy arms and fund the group's activities. El Halabi has consistently denied the charges against him and has refused several plea deals offers.

World Vision, which focuses

on helping children, said an independent audit found no evidence of wrongdoing or of funds missing. It said that in the 10-year period El Halabi was employed, it budgeted around \$22.5m for operations in Gaza, making the amount El Halabi allegedly diverted "hard to reconcile".

"World Vision acknowledges with disappointment the decision issued by the Beersheva District Court convicting Mr. Mohammad El Halabi," Sharon Marshall, senior director of public engagement for the organisation, said in a statement outside the court after the verdict was delivered.

"We're going to support Mohammad through whatever appeal process he has left in front of him because we believe, based on what we've seen in the court and in investigations, that he is innocent of the charges," Marshall told Reuters.

International human rights organisations have criticised El



Protesters supporting Palestinian Mohammad El Halabi, demonstrate outside a court in Beersheba, Israel, yesterday.

Halabi's prolonged detention and trial. Human Rights Watch said the guilty verdict against him "compounds a miscarriage of justice."

Holding Al Halabi for six years based largely on secret evidence has made a mockery of due process and the most basic fair trial provisions."

On Tuesday, ahead of the

verdict, the head of the United Nations Human Rights Office in Palestine, James Heenan, also expressed concern over whether El Halabi's trial had met international fair trial standards.

Widespread use of secret evidence, reliance on closed proceedings and credible allegations of ill-treatment in

detention "paint a picture of enormous pressure on Mr El Halabi to confess in the absence of evidence," Heenan said.

In Gaza, dozens of Palestinians gathered with posters of El Halabi to show their support.

"This is a grave mistake and an injustice," his father, Khalil El Halabi, said. "My son is innocent."

Cloud seeding

From the dawn of time, various civilisations sought to predict weather, but never truly to change it. Would you be surprised that in today's day and age, marked by technology and innovation, humankind gets another attempt at it.

No, it isn't any esoteric or tribal practice. "Cloud seeding" is a way to modify the amount of precipitation, by dispersing specific substances into the air that alter the cloud formation processes. These could be related to cloud condensation or ice particles.

And though, to this day, the practice has shown varying effectiveness, while its risk to health remains undetermined, it is already a helper in various industries and sectors, including water challenge solutions, environmental protection and aeronautics, just to name a few.

In Weather control

Doesn't everyone love good weather? For many countries around the world, this may be a rather rare occurrence. Some are now trying to implement cloud seeding technology to improve their natural meteorological conditions.

The United Arab Emirates are already using the system to create fake rain. Just like the other countries of the Arabian Peninsula, its temperatures could rise up to 50°C in Summer, while the natural precipitation remains extremely low, less than

100 mm of rainfall per year on average. Cloud seeding becomes an innovative and promising solution that could definitely improve the quality of life. The country's goal, since the beginning of their investments in the 9 rain-making projects in 2017, is to increase the existing rainfall by another 100 mm.

In Aeronautics

Let us take the example of the aviation industry to better illustrate the importance of cloud seeding. It is a fact that good weather conditions are directly likely to a smoother flight. With fog and strong rains being in the way of the aircraft, the visibility may drastically reduce. A factor which may become a safety concern.

Of course, airports and other air hubs are equipped with specialized lighting and



signage to increase visibility in unfavorable weather conditions during takeoff and landing. However, once the plane is in the air and far from the ground, the terrestrial solutions no longer serve their purpose.

This is why specialized cannons and airplanes are employed by the airports and air hubs to shoot out and diffuse microparticles into the air.

Cannons affect clouds that are typically closer to the ground. As for the aircrafts, these are used on much higher altitudes thanks to their air-borne dispersal and ability to gain height.

Thanks to this developing but promising technology, fog could be turned into rain, for better visibility. It could also improve safety by decreasing the number of hail particles and turning them into raindrops.

Finally, it all comes back to the start. In other words, to weather predictions. If you can alter it, you can predict it better!

And accurate weather forecasts are essential to good traffic management. Perhaps the next time you pass through rainy weather conditions on a commercial flight, it will have been modified by the innovative technique of cloud seeding.

Congo official: Rwanda will have war if it wants

AP — GOMA

If Rwanda wants war with neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, "it will have war," a top Congolese military official said yesterday to thousands in eastern Congo protesting the recent capture of a nearby town by rebels.

Gen. Sylvain Ekenge, spokesman for the military governor of North Kivu province, made the inflammatory comments to protesters in the city of Goma before asking them to demonstrate peacefully. "Rwanda does not like us. We are not afraid of it and we will fight it," Ekenge said. "If it wants war, it will have war," he said, adding: "No one will occupy a single centimeter of our territory."

An official with the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo known as MONUSCO said it could not confirm whether Rwandan or Ugandan forces helped the M23 rebel movement seize the key Congolese town of Bunagana earlier this week.

"MONUSCO has not been able to verify by its own means these allegations," Lt. Frederic Harvey, the mission's chief of liaison with the Congolese army, said during a weekly news conference. Rwanda and Uganda have denied for years that they support the M23 rebel movement. Many of the M23 fighters are Congolese ethnic Tutsis and Rwanda's president is of Rwandan Tutsi descent. M23 has in turn accused Congolese officials of stoking xenophobia.

Rwanda's government, meanwhile, has blamed Congolese forces for injuring several civilians in cross-border shelling. On Tuesday, a government statement said that the Rwandan military "will continue to seek guarantees that cross-border attacks on Rwanda's territory are stopped."

The M23 rose to prominence about a decade ago when its fighters seized Goma, the largest city in Congo's east which sits along the border with Rwanda. The rebels were pushed out of Goma and, after a peace deal, many of M23 fighters were integrated into Congo's national military. But earlier this year the rebels made a comeback, launching an offensive against Congo's military after saying the government had failed to live up to its decade-long promises. On Wednesday, demonstrators in Goma called on the international community to intervene amid rising tensions.

"We cannot accept being attacked by neighboring countries," said Jack Sinczaha, who was among those protesting in Goma. "That's why today there is a popular mobilization to say no to the aggression of Rwanda and Uganda in our country."

Seven earthquakes strike off Iranian coast

AP — DUBAI

Seven earthquakes struck off Iran's southern Kish Island yesterday, rattling Dubai and other areas across the Gulf.

The US Geological Survey said six magnitude 4 tremors struck, as well as one magnitude 5.3 off the island near the strategic Strait of Hormuz.

Iranian state television reported that authorities deployed rescue teams to the

town of Jenah in Hormozgan province, though no damage and casualties were initially reported. Jenah is some 1,080km south of the capital, Tehran.

In the United Arab Emirates, home to Dubai and Abu Dhabi, its National Center of Meteorology acknowledged residents felt the quakes without any effect.

Qatar's Seismic Information Center similarly said residents

there felt the magnitude 5.3 quake without any impact on the country.

Iran lies on major seismic faults and experiences one earthquake a day on average. In 2003, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake flattened the historic city of Bam, killing 26,000 people.

A magnitude 7 earthquake that struck western Iran in 2017 killed more than 600 people and injured more than 9,000.



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