

Roads raising alarm from preservationists

Highways raise alarm in Cairo's historic City of Death

CAIRO, Aug 3, (AP): For centuries, sultans and princes, saints and scholars, elites and commoners have been buried in two sprawling cemeteries in Egypt's capital, creating a unique historic city of the dead. Now in its campaign to reshape Cairo, the government is driving highways through the cemeteries, raising alarm from preservationists.

In the Northern Cemetery last week, bulldozers demolished walls of graves, widening a road for a new expressway. The graves are from the early 20th Century, including elaborate mausoleums of well-known writers and politicians. The ornate, 500-year-old domed tomb of a sultan towers in the construction's path and, though untouched, will likely be surrounded on either side by the multi-lane highway.

In the older Southern Cemetery, several hundred graves have been wiped away and a giant flyover bridge swiftly built. In its shadow sits the mosque-shrine of one of Egypt's earliest prominent Islamic clerics, Imam Leith, from the 700s.

As bulldozers worked, families rushed to move the bodies of their loved ones. Others faced losing their

homes: though known as the City of the Dead, the cemeteries are also vibrant communities, with people living in the walled yards that surround each gravesite.

Cairo's governorate and the Supreme Council of Antiquities underlined that no registered monuments were harmed in the construction.

"It is impossible that we would allow antiquities to be demolished," the head of the council, Mostafa al-Waziri, said on Egyptian TV. He said the affected graves are from the 1920s and 1940s, belonging to individuals who will be compensated.

But antiquities experts said that's too narrow a view. Among the wrecked graves are many that, though not on the limited list of registered monuments, have historical or architectural value. More importantly, the freeways wreck an urban fabric that has survived largely intact for centuries. The cemeteries are included in a historic zone recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"It goes against the identity of the location itself. They (the cemeteries) have been an integral part of the history

of Cairo since its inception," said May al-Ibrashy, a conservation architect who chairs the Mugawara Built Environment Collective and has worked extensively in the Southern Cemetery.

The government has carried out a furious campaign of bridge and highway building in Cairo and around the country. Authorities say it is vital to ease traffic choking the city of some 20 million and better link regions, presenting the projects as part of a nationalist vision of a new Egypt.

That vision is solidly suburban. The bridges and highways mainly link up suburbs around Cairo, largely made up of upper-class gated communities, as well as a new capital being built farther out in the desert.

Critics say the construction at times has no regard for the neighborhoods of Cairo it passes through. In some cases, gardens and greenery have been torn down for bridges. One flyover was built almost the exact width of the street it runs down, and residents can literally step out of their upper-story windows onto the expressway.

The construction in the cemeteries, antiquities experts say, is a blow to ef-

orts to preserve what is unique about historic Cairo: not just monuments spanning from Roman-era Christianity, through various Muslim dynasties to the early modern era, but also its cohesion through the centuries.

The two cemeteries extend north and south outside Cairo's Old City, each at least 3 kilometers (2 miles) long. The Northern Cemetery first began to be used by nobles and rulers in Egypt's Mamluk sultanate in the 1300s and 1400s. The southern, known as al-Qarafa, is even older, used since the 700s, not long after the Muslim conquest of Egypt.

Until now, both have remained untouched by major road-building. Large Mamluk mortuary complexes create a skyline of domes and minarets over a landscape densely packed with graves and tombs from many eras.

"It's a city of the dead, but it's a living heritage. This continuity is very valuable," said Dina Bakhoum, an art historian specializing in heritage conservation and management. "This urban fabric remained in place for a very long time," as has its use and function - "you still have the hustle and bustle

that you read about" in medieval texts.

Throughout history, people have lived in the cemeteries, and to this day people come regularly to sit at their loved ones' graves. Sultans held sumptuous processions through the Northern Cemetery. During outbreaks of plague, Cairo's population massed there for prayers pleading to God for relief.

In the 14th century, the ruler of the Malian empire Mansa Musa and his entourage lived in the Southern Cemetery during a stopover en route to Makkah, giving away such fabulous amounts of gold that Egypt's currency plunged. Mamluk texts tell of nobles riding through the cemetery at night and having visions of holy men or poets who speak, then vanish. Medieval guidebooks describe itineraries for pilgrims to tour tombs of beloved Muslim clerics and saints.

It is a testament to the cemeteries' integrity that - seven or eight centuries later - al-Ibrashy could reconstruct those guidebooks' itineraries in her doctoral research. Graves have been rebuilt or replaced across the eras, but largely adhering to the same pathways, sometimes preserving the origi-

nal names, sometimes losing them to time.

"The thing about the cemetery is there's a lot of hidden gems that no one knows about," al-Ibrashy said. "You find tombstones from the Ottoman period. You find a shrine that looks modern but is actually a site mentioned in the ancient guidebooks."

In the Northern Cemetery, the new "Firdos," or Paradise, Expressway, will cut across its northern edge.

"I've lived here for 41 years, I married my husband here," said a woman in her 60s at the mausoleum of a prime minister from the early 20th Century.

The mausoleum was intact, but bulldozers leveled its compound's wall and the rooms that were her home. Her late husband's family were the tomb's guardians, and he was born and raised there.

He is buried alongside the site's owners in the mausoleum's garden, shaded by mango and olive trees.

"We have a long connection to this place.

They don't respect the living or the dead," she said, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

In Brief

RIYADH: The Saudi Health Ministry reported Sunday that COVID-19 has claimed 30 lives and 1,357 infected cases.

The death toll rose to 2,917 and total confirmed cases reached 278,835, while 2,533 patients recovered from COVID-19, bringing the total to 240,081 recovery cases, the ministry said in a statement. (KUNA)

DUBAI: The United Arab Emirates said on Sunday coronavirus cases rose by 239 to 60,999.

On the other hand, some 360 people were cured, raising the total recoveries to 54,615, state news agency, WAM, quoted health authorities as saying.

No deaths were reported as the toll remains unchanged at 351. (KUNA)

DOHA: The Qatari Ministry of Health announced on Sunday that 196 more people tested positive for the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) over the past 24 hours.

The latest figures bring this Gulf country's total number of confirmed infections with the globally spreading illness to 111,107, the ministry said in a press statement.

The ministry also confirmed three additional fatalities due to the highly contagious illness, taking the country's death toll to 177 so far.

Some 201 more people were cured of the deadly bug, raising the overall count of recoveries to 107,779 so far, according to the statement. (KUNA)

CAIRO: Egyptian Ministry of Health said 31 Sunday persons died of Covid-19 while 167 people tested positive for the coronavirus in the past 24 hours.

Ministry spokesman Dr Khaled Mujahed said total deaths was 4,865 and tally of registered cases was 94,483.

Mujahed said 1,318 persons recovered from the virus to reach 42,455. (KUNA)

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Health Ministry announced Monday that 244 new COVID-19 infections and 527 recovered cases in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 16,024.

Al-Khalil (Hebron) province has the highest number of infections with 131 and Jerusalem 27 cases, said the ministry in a statement.

In addition, nine patients are in the intensive care unit, including two on respiratory machines. (KUNA)

TEHRAN: Iranian health authorities on Monday confirmed 215 additional fatalities and 2,598 more cases of the novel coronavirus (Covid-19).

The fresh figures bring Iran's death toll and overall infections with the viral illness up to 17,405 and 312,035 respectively, the Iranian Health Ministry's Spokeswoman Sima Sadat said in a press statement. (KUNA)

TUNIS: Tunisian Ministry of Health said Sunday nine persons tested positive for the coronavirus to raise total registered cases to 1,561.

The ministry said in a statement 1,221 persons recovered so far. It added total deaths was 51 people. (KUNA)

ANKARA: Turkey on Sunday confirmed 18 fatalities from coronavirus, bringing the country's death toll to 5,728 over the past 24 hours.

Quoted by Turkish news agency (Anadolu), Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said that 987 more people contracted COVID-19 over the last 24 hours, bringing the total number of cases to 232,856.

The minister also confirmed 978 more recoveries from the novel coronavirus, bringing the tally to 216,494. (KUNA)

ALGIERS: Algerian Ministry of Health said Sunday eight persons died of the coronavirus while 515 people tested positive for the disease in the past 24 hours.

Dr Djamel Fourar, spokesman of a committee tasked with monitoring the virus, told a daily press briefing total deaths reached 1,231 and registered cases reached 31,465. (KUNA)



Police clear off protesters who blocked a main road during a protest against Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu outside his residence in Jerusalem early Sunday, Aug 2. Protesters demanded that the embattled Israeli leader to resign as he faces a trial on corruption charges and grapples with a deepening coronavirus crisis. (AP)

US hails Yemeni Gov't, TC on Riyadh deal implementation

Rebels claim fighters shot down US-made drone

WASHINGTON, Aug 3, (Agencies): US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised on Thursday Yemen's government and southern Transitional Council approval of a Saudi mechanism that would help implement Riyadh agreement, hoping that it would move forward in building a lasting peace.

In his Twitter account, Pompeo said "we commend the Republic of Yemen Government and Southern Transitional Council for agreeing to move the Riyadh Agreement forward and urge its swift implementation to build lasting peace."

560 died in rallies: Iraq

Early elections to be held next June: PM

BAGHDAD, Aug 3, (AP): Iraq will hold early general elections next June, the country's prime minister announced Friday, fulfilling a promise made when he took office to meet a key demand of anti-government protesters.

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi said the June 6 vote will come a year earlier than scheduled. The protesters had demanded early elections and a reformed electoral law when they took to the streets in anti-government demonstrations that erupted last October. The rallies, led by Iraqi youth, swept over Baghdad and the Iraqi south, decrying rampant corruption in the country.

Over 500 protesters were killed in the demonstrations as Iraqi security forces used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse crowds. Pressure from the protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi. Al-Kadhimi came to power following a political consensus in May and promised to deliver on key protesters' demands.

It's unclear under what electoral law the vote will be held. The premier's announcement has effectively thrown

the ball in parliament's court, which now must officially vote on the new date. But political differences prevail over the implementation of a new electoral law passed late last year.

Parliament approved the law in December, aiming to give political independents a better chance of winning seats in parliament and weaken the hold of ruling elites.

If implemented, the legislation would change each of the country's 18 provinces into several electoral districts, with one legislator elected per 100,000 people. Crucially, the law also prevents parties from running on unified lists, which in the past has helped them sweep all the seats in a specific province. With the new law, seats will go to whoever gets the most votes in the electoral districts.

The May 2018 elections drew abysmal voter turnout and were tainted with allegations of fraud.

In a statement, the UN mission in Iraq welcomed al-Kadhimi's decision and said it was ready to provide support and technical advice, if requested by his government.

"We thank King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and Deputy Defense Minister Khaled bin Salman for their mediation efforts and hope all parties will continue to work toward a unified, prosperous, and stable Yemen," the US Secretary added.

Last Wednesday, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) abandoned its declaration of self-rule in southern Yemen and pledged to implement the Riyadh Agreement with the legitimate government.

Saudi Arabia said it had proposed a plan to "accelerate" the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement.

The plan calls for the Yemeni prime minister to create a fresh government within 30 days, as well as the appointment of a new governor and security director for the de facto capital Aden.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General of Nayef Al-Hajraf stated Saturday that the GCC pins high hopes on the new Yemeni government and its leader Prime Minister Maec Abdulmalik to unite Yemenis and complete restoration of the state and its institutions.

In a phone call today with Premier Abdulmalik, Al-Hajraf wished the Yemeni premier and his government success in their mission, according to a statement by the GCC General Secretariat.

He discussed with the Yemeni prime minister the Saudi efforts to reach a mechanism for accelerating the implementation of the Riyadh power-sharing agreement between the legitimate government and the Southern Transitional Council (STC).

The GCC leader also expressed GCC interest in seeing Yemen fully restores its security and stability and resumes its regional role.

He reiterated the GCC support to all efforts exerted to end the conflict in Yemen based on the Gulf Initiative, outcome of national Yemeni dialogue and the UN Security Council Resolution N. 2216.

Meanwhile, Yemen's Houthi rebels claim they shot down a US-made drone over the country's northern border with Saudi Arabia. The kingdom and the US military on Monday did not immediately acknowledge losing a drone.

Brig Gen Yehia Sarie, a Houthi military spokesman, said in a statement their air defenses downed an AeroVironment RQ-20 Puma drone Sunday over the district of Harad in Yemen's northern Hajjah province.

Footage later aired by the Houthi's Al-Masirah satellite channel showed fighters gathered around the hand-launched drone, which appeared to have bullet holes in it. The battery-powered drone had a camera, also apparently struck by a bullet.

Masking tape on its tail bore what appeared to be the palm-tree and crossed-swords logo of Saudi Arabia, Arabic written on the side read "God Bless You," an inscription common on Saudi aircraft.

The Saudi military, which has been fighting the Houthis since 2015, is not known to operate this drone. A Saudi military spokesman did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

First used by US special forces, other arms of the American military now use the unarmed drone for surveillance work. The US military's Central Command and Air Force Central Command did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The US military has lost drones in Yemen before. Last year, the Houthis twice claimed to shoot down US MQ-9 Reaper drones, which can be armed with missiles.

The US military has accused Iran of giving the Houthis weapons capable of shooting down its drones. Iran has denied providing the Houthis arms, despite UN investigators saying Iranian armaments have reached the rebels. The US has interdicted ships with Iranian arms it says were bound for Yemen.

Often on brink

Lebanon headed towards collapse

BEIRUT, Aug 3, (AP): Power cuts that last up to 20 hours a day. Mountains of trash spilling into streets. Long lines at gas stations.

It may seem like a standard summer in Lebanon, a country used to wrestling with crumbling infrastructure as it vaults from one disaster to another.

Only this time, it's different. Every day brings darker signs Lebanon has rarely seen in past crises: Mass layoffs, hospitals threatened with closure, shuttered shops and restaurants, crimes driven by desperation, a military that can no longer afford to feed its soldiers meat and warehouses that sell expired poultry.

Lebanon is hurtling toward a tipping point at an alarming speed, driven by financial ruin, collapsing institutions, hyperinflation and rapidly rising poverty - with a pandemic on top of that.

On Monday, the country's foreign minister resigned, warning that a lack of vision and a will to implement structural reforms risked turning the country into a "failed state."

The collapse threatens to break a nation seen as a model of diversity and resilience in the Arab world and potentially open the door to chaos. Lebanese worry about a decline so steep it would forever alter the small Mediterranean country's identity and entrepreneurial spirit, unparalleled in the Middle East.

In the past, Lebanon has been able to in part blame its turmoil on outsiders. With 18 religious sects, a weak central government and far more powerful neighbors, it has always been caught in regional rivalries leading to political paralysis, violence or both. Its 1975-90 civil war made the word "Beirut" synonymous with war's devastation and produced a generation of warlord-turned-politicians that Lebanon hasn't been able to shake off to this day.

Since the war ended, the country has suffered a Syrian occupation, repeated conflict with Israel, bouts of sectarian fighting, political assassinations and various economic crises, as well as an influx of more than a million refugees from neighboring Syria's civil war. The presence of the powerful Shiite group Hezbollah - a proxy army for Iran created in the 1980s to fight Israel's occupation - ensures the country is always caught up in the struggle for supremacy by regional superpowers Iran and Saudi Arabia.