

TENSION WITH IRAN

Saudi seeks Iraq's help to mend ties

ALJAZEERA ONLINE

The government of Saudi Arabia has sought the help of Iraq's prime minister to mend relations between Riyadh and Tehran, according to news reports.

Citing Qasim al-Araji, Iraq's interior minister, the Iraqi satellite channel Alghadeer reported that Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia, has asked Haider al-Abadi to lead the mediation with Iran.

"During our visit to Saudi Arabia, they also asked us to do so, and we said that to [the] Iranian side. The Iranian side looked at this demand positively," Araji was quoted saying by Alghadeer on Sunday.

"After the victories that Iraq has achieved, it [Saudi Arabia] began looking to Iraq, at its true size and leading role."

"The calm and stability and the return of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia have positive repercussions on the region as a whole."

Araji visited the Iranian capital, Tehran, on Saturday to discuss "several issues" with top Iranian officials, according to reports. He also visited Saudi Arabia in July.

The Iranian news agency ISNA quoted Araji in Farsi as saying that Mohammed bin Salman wanted to "ease tensions" with Iran.

Separately, Muqtada al-Sadr, the influential Iraqi Shia leader, announced on his website that he would be visiting the UAE on Sunday.

In July, Sadr made a rare visit to Saudi Arabia, where he met Mohammed bin Salman and other officials.



A woman carries her child as she and others wade through a flooded road in Jakhlabandha area in Nagaon district, in the northeastern state of Assam, India, yesterday. At least 175 people have died and thousands have fled their homes as monsoon floods swept across Nepal, India and Bangladesh, officials said, warning the toll could rise as the extent of the damage becomes clear. PHOTO: REUTERS

US officials play down risk of war with N Korea

AGENCIES

Tensions on the Korean peninsula eased slightly yesterday as South Korea's president said resolving Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions must be done peacefully and key US officials played down the risk of an imminent war with North Korea.

Concern that North Korea is close to achieving its goal of putting the mainland United States within range of a nuclear weapon has underpinned a spike in tensions in recent months.

US President Donald Trump warned at the weekend that the US military was "locked and loaded" if North Korea acted unwisely after threatening last week to land missiles near the US Pacific territory of Guam.

"There must be no more war on the Korean peninsula. Whatever ups and downs we face, the North Korean nuclear situation must be resolved peacefully," South Korean President Moon Jae-in told a regular meeting with senior aides and advisers.

"I am certain the United States will respond to the current situation calmly and responsibly in a stance that is equal to ours," he said.

While backing Trump's tough talk, US officials including National Security Adviser HR McMaster played down the risk on Sunday of the rhetoric escalating into conflict.

"I think we're not closer to war than a week ago, but we are closer to war than we were a decade ago," McMaster told ABC News' "This Week".

US Central Intelligence Agency Director Mike Pompeo said North Korean leader Kim Jong Un might well conduct another missile test but talk of being on the cusp of a nuclear war was overstating the risk.

"I've seen no intelligence that would indicate that we're in that place today," Pompeo told "Fox News Sunday".

600,000 return home

Says IOM as security situation improved in many areas

AFP, Geneva

More than 600,000 displaced Syrians have returned to their homes since the beginning of the year, with most of them heading to Aleppo, according to figures from the International Organization for Migration.

Between January and the end of July, 602,759 displaced Syrians returned to their homes, many of them citing an improved economic and security situation in the areas they had fled from, IOM said in a statement.

A total of 84 percent of those who have returned had taken refuge elsewhere within the war-ravaged country, while the remaining 16 percent returned from neighbouring countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

More than a quarter of returnees said they did so to protect their assets and properties, while nearly the same number referred to the improved economic situation in their place of origin, and 11 percent cited the improved security situation there.

Fourteen percent meanwhile pointed to the worsening economic situation in their place of refuge, IOM said.

But while most of the returns had been spontaneous, it warned they were "not necessarily voluntary, safe or sustainable," it said.

Aleppo Governorate, the scene of the harshest battles of Syria's bloody six-year war, had received 67 percent of all returnees so far this year, IOM said.

SYRIA REFUGEES

Most of the displaced heading to Aleppo

US horrified by killing of Syrian rescuers

US-led Syrian forces battle IS in Raqa Old City

And within the governorate, Aleppo city, which was recaptured by the Syrian army last December after a suffocating five-month siege, has received most returnees, it said.

Many of those returning meanwhile must struggle to get bare necessities, with only 41 percent having access to

clean water and 39 percent with access to health services.

The United States expressed sadness and horror Sunday over the killing of seven members of Syria's White Helmets rescue service in a jihadist-held town near Idlib.

The seven were killed Saturday by unidentified assailants in a raid on their base in Sarmin, nine kilometers (5.6 miles) east of the city of Idlib.

Meanwhile, US-backed fighters fought pitched battles Sunday with Islamic State group jihadists inside their Syria bastion Raqa.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, the Arab-Kurd alliance, first entered Raqa two months ago and have since captured more than half of the northern city, but their progress has met fierce resistance from IS.

A warplane from the US-led coalition provided air cover and bombed IS positions in the Old City, with plumes of smoke billowing into the sky.

"There is heavy fighting. Our forces are trying to surround more and more Daesh (IS)," said Nuri Mahmud, a spokesman for the Kurdish YPG militia that dominates the SDF.

Under pressure, Trump calls neo-Nazis, KKK criminals

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump denounced neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan as criminals and thugs yesterday, bowing to mounting political pressure after initially saying many sides were to blame after a white-nationalist rally turned deadly in Virginia.

Trump had been assailed by Republicans and Democrats alike for failing to respond more forcefully to Saturday's violence in Charlottesville, in which a woman was killed when a man crashed his car into a group of counter-protesters.

Critics said the president had waited too long to address the bloodshed, and slammed him for initially saying that "many sides" were involved, rather than explicitly condemning white supremacists widely seen as sparking the melee.

"Racism is evil and those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans," Trump said in a statement to reporters at the White House.

Trump said America showed its true character in such times, responding to hate with love and to division with unity.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms this egregious display of hatred, bigotry and violence," he said.

"It has no place in America... No matter the colour of our skin, we all live under the same laws. We all salute the same great flag. And we are all made by the same almighty God."

A 20-year-old man said to have harboured Nazi sympathies as a teenager was facing charges he ploughed his car into protesters opposing the white nationalists, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 people. The accused, James Alex Fields, was denied bail at an initial court hearing yesterday.

Trump said anyone who engaged in criminal behaviour over the weekend in Virginia will be held accountable. "Justice will be delivered," the president said in his address.

"I wish that he would have said those same words on Saturday," responded Democratic Senator Mark Warner of Virginia on MSNBC. "I'm disappointed it took him a couple of days."

Earlier in the day, in a strong rebuke to Trump, the chief executive of one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, Merck & Co Inc, resigned from a business panel led by the president, citing a need for leadership countering bigotry.

NEWS IN brief

Yemen cholera cases soar past half-million

AFP, Geneva

Cholera is believed to have affected more than 500,000 people and killed nearly 2,000 since late April, WHO said yesterday. A full 503,484 suspected cases and 1,975 deaths are attributable to the outbreak that erupted less than four months ago in the country.

Pak celebrates 70th Independence Day

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday celebrated 70 years of independence from British India with a patriotic display including a giant flag and a show of airpower, as the military's top brass vowed to wipe out terrorists. Celebrations began at the stroke of midnight with firework shows in major cities.

2 wounded as gunmen attack UN base in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Gunmen attacked a UN base in central Mali yesterday, wounding a UN peacekeeper and a Malian soldier. "The suspected jihadists fired on the UN mission at Douentza," a local elected official said. Malian troops repulsed the attackers, who lost two of their own men in the raid, he added.

S Korean buses carry 'comfort women' statue

AFP, Seoul

Buses installed with a statue symbolising South Korea's wartime sex slaves began running through the capital Seoul yesterday, a day before the anniversary of independence from Japan's 1910-45 occupation. For many South Koreans it epitomises the abuses committed under Japanese rule.



Two men and a dog on a motorbike flee a wildfire burning near the village of Varnavas, north of Athens, Greece, yesterday. Fire brigade officials said no injuries had been reported but at least a dozen houses were heavily damaged. PHOTO: REUTERS

AUSSIE DEPUTY PM'S CITIZENSHIP ROW

PM claims govt majority safe

REUTERS, Sydney

Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said yesterday he was confident his government's one-seat majority was safe, despite questions over his deputy's citizenship which could disqualify him from parliament.

Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said earlier that he may not be eligible for parliament after being told he may be a dual citizen of Australia and New Zealand.

The New Zealand government later said Joyce held New Zealand citizenship by descent as his father was born in New Zealand.

Australian politicians are not eligible to be elected to parliament if they hold dual or plural citizenship, a rule that has forced the resignation of two senators in recent weeks.

Turnbull's one-seat majority would be eliminated if Joyce was forced from office, likely triggering an election, political analysts said.

Joyce said he has asked Australia's High Court to decide the matter.

"The government is the very confident the court will not find that the member for New England is to be disqualified from the Parliament. Very confident," Turnbull told parliament.

Britain's Big Ben to fall silent for 4 yrs

REUTERS, London

The "Big Ben" bell in the British parliament's famous clock tower will cease its regular bongs at noon on Aug 21, falling silent for most of the next four years while renovation works are carried out, the House of Commons said yesterday.

The hammers which have struck the 13.7 tonne bell every hour for most of the last 157 years will be locked and disconnected from the clock, although the bongs will still sound for important events such as New Year's Eve celebrations.

"This essential programme of works will safeguard the clock on a long term basis, as well as protecting and preserving its home, the Elizabeth Tower," said Steve Jaggs, Keeper of the Great Clock.

The Palace of Westminster on the bank of the River Thames, home to parliament, is a world heritage site and major tourist attraction, and Jaggs encouraged members of the public to gather in nearby Parliament Square to hear the final bongs next Monday.

The 96-metre-tall Elizabeth Tower, believed to be the most photographed building in the United Kingdom, is already half enveloped in scaffolding as part of a major renovation project.

Hunger crisis grips Congo

Experts say 7.7m people in urgent need of food aid

REUTERS, Rome

Hunger in the Democratic Republic of Congo has soared in the last year, leaving 7.7 million people in urgent need of food aid and pushing the country closer to famine than it has been in a decade, food security experts said yesterday.

Much of the rise in hunger - 1.8 million new people were added to the list - stems from escalating violence in the Kasai and Tanganyika regions, which in Kasai alone has forced 1.4 million people to flee their homes in the past year.

More than 1.5 million people are now facing "emergency" hunger levels, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), whose members include the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme, said yesterday.

"Emergency" means people are forced to sell possessions and skip or reduce their meals. It is one level below a classification of famine in the IPC's internationally-recognised five stages of hunger.

"This is the first time in 10 years that we're so close to level five (famine)," said Alexis Bonte, FAO's interim representative in Congo.

the problem," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Congo now has 3.8 million people displaced within the country, in addition to a steady flow of refugees from neighbouring Burundi, Central African Republic and South Sudan.

"It has been hidden by other crises," Bonte said, referring to South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen.

The crisis has worsened with the advance of fall armyworm, a crop-eating caterpillar that has spread to many parts of the country, including Kasai and Tanganyika, as well as by outbreaks of cholera and measles.

The country has enough land to feed at least 1 billion people - roughly the population of Africa - and is wealthy in minerals. But grinding poverty and years of conflict have left many of its people chronically hungry.

"I think the donors are really tired of funding the crisis in Congo," Bonte said, in reference to conflicts that began in the 1990s and have affected millions of people every year since.

The United Nations has received a quarter of the \$812.6 million sought in the humanitarian appeal for Congo this year.

While the government needs to stabilise and reduce the conflicts, humanitarian agencies need to be able to give aid, otherwise people are more likely to resume fighting, he said.



India's Kovind praises notes ban, GST

PTI, New Delhi

Indian President Ram Nath Kovind yesterday pitched for a partnership between citizens and the government to create a 'New India' by 2022 that is a "compassionate society" and includes the "humanist component integral to the nation's DNA".

In his maiden address to the nation on the eve of 71st Independence Day, Kovind recalled the role of leaders of Independence struggle including Jawaharlal Nehru.

He said that the generation that brought us to freedom was diverse and included men and women from all parts of the country with a variety of "political and social thought".

Asking people to draw inspiration from freedom fighters the President said that there was a need to invoke the same spirit today for nation building.

"The stress on the moral basis of policy and action, belief in unity and discipline, faith in a synthesis of heritage and science, and promotion of the rule of law and of education - all of it is located in a partnership between citizen and government," he said.

Kovind said that is how India has been built - by a partnership between citizen and government, between individual and society, between a family and the wider community.

"Today, in big cities we may not even know our neighbours. Whether in cities or villages, it is important to renew that sense of caring and sharing. This will make us a gentler and happier society and help us understand each other with greater empathy," he said.