



US President Donald Trump takes part in a welcoming ceremony with China's President Xi Jinping in Beijing, China, yesterday. *Inset*, anti-riot policemen blocked members of the GABRIELA (Women's Group) who denounce the planned visit of Trump to attend the 31st ASEAN leaders summit during a protest outside the US embassy in metro Manila, Philippines.

PHOTO: REUTERS

ANTI-CORRUPTION PURGE

What is changing in Saudi Arabia?

ROYAL POLITICS

Saudi Prince Mohammed capped his rapid rise to power in June this year by replacing his elder cousin Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, widely known as MbN, as crown prince. MbN's removal was "in the highest interests of the state", because he was implicated by methamphetamine and cocaine addiction, a legacy of an assassination attempt that left a shrapnel in his body. Reuters could not independently confirm MbN's death.

ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN

Prince Mohammed tightened his grip on power with the start of the anti-corruption campaign at the weekend, purging the kingdom's political and business elite. Among those arrested were 11 princes. Many Saudis welcome the moves as an assault on the endemic theft of public funds by the powerful. US President Donald Trump said those arrested had been "milking their country for years" but some Western officials expressed unease about the possible reaction in Riyadh's opaque tribal and royal politics.

YEMEN

Prince Mohammed launched a military campaign in neighbouring Yemen in March 2015. A Saudi-led coalition, acting on an invitation from the internationally-recognised government, has targeted the Houthi movement in a war which has killed more than 10,000 people.

The war is closely identified with the prince in his role as defence minister. His image once showed war propaganda but is rarely associated with the war now, although he has said it must continue in order to quash Iranian influence.

QATAR

Prince Mohammed has helped lead a diplomatic campaign to isolate Qatar, saying Riyadh's erstwhile allies backs terrorism and coupes over to Iran. Qatar rejects the accusations and says it is being punished for straying from its



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman

neighbours' backing for authoritarian rulers.

The campaign has divided Gulf Arab countries, who Washington regards as essential to its influence in the region. Qatar had increased Riyadh by cheering Arab Spring uprisings against some autocratic Arab rulers.

CONFRONTATION WITH IRAN

Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran, its competitor for influence in the Middle East, has deepened as King Salman and Prince Mohammed worked to build a Sunni coalition against Tehran and its allies in the Arab world.

In May, as deputy crown prince, Prince Mohammed used unusually provocative language in a dialogue with a conservative Shi'ite Muslim theocracy. In a speech he said was trying to interfere in Arab lands and dominate the Muslim world.

On Tuesday, state media quoted him as describing Iran's supply of rockets to militiamen in Yemen as "direct military aggression" that could be an act of war.

Prince Mohammed has also opened a new front in the proxy war with Iran by threatening Tehran's ally Hezbollah and its home country Lebanon. The resignation on Saturday of the Saudi-backed Lebanese prime minister, Saad al-Hariri, removed from Riyadh, was widely seen as the first act on this new front. The crown prince has also sought the help of Shi'a leaders in Iraq to increase Iran's dominant role there. The Saudi king has moved his court to the north of the kingdom's northern border, and has tried to improve ties with the United States under Trump, who shares his and King Salman's antipathy to Iran's government.

SOURCE: AFP

WAR IN SYRIA

Anti-IS forces retake last jihadist bastion

AFP, Beirut

Syrian troops and allied militiamen yesterday expelled Islamic State from Albu Kamal, the last significant town the jihadists still held in their disintegrating "Caliphate".

The jihadists' latest rout left them with only the drugs of a self-styled "state" that once spanned huge territory in Iraq and Syria, with surviving fighters melting away into desert hideouts.

Anti-IS forces stormed into the town just across the border from Iraq on Wednesday and while fighting was initially reported as fierce, the outcome of one of IS's last major battles was never in doubt.

"Our armed forces units, in cooperation with local and national forces, have liberated the town of Albu Kamal in Deir Ezzor province," a statement carried by the official SANA news agency said.

"Albu Kamal's liberation is very important because it means the failure of the IS terrorist group in the region," the army statement said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor of the fighting, said much of the fighting had been done by allied militias rather than the regular army.

The capture of Albu Kamal was the last in a string of setbacks that saw IS lose its urban bases of Mosul and Raqa within a few months and its only remaining state shrinks to a rump.

Leading the battle for the town were the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah and advisers from Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, as mostly as fighters from mostly Shia Iraqi militias, according to Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman.

Patel had apologised on Monday for holding 12 separate meetings – including with Pringle, who is based in Nantwich – during a family holiday to Israel in August, without notifying the Foreign Office or Downing Street in advance.

Patel wrote in her letter that there had been a "number of reports about my actions

Hariri held in Saudi Says Lebanon, wants foreign pressure to secure his return

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon believes Saad al-Hariri, who resigned as prime minister on Saturday while in Saudi Arabia, is being held by Riyadh, and Beirut plans to work with foreign states to secure his return, a top Lebanese government official said yesterday.

A second source, a senior politician close to Saudi-backed Hariri, said Saudi Arabia had ordered him to resign and put him under house arrest. A third source familiar with the situation said Saudi Arabia had "no intention of limiting Hariri".

Hariri's shock resignation, read out on television from Saudi Arabia, pitched Lebanon into a deep political crisis and pushed the country back to the forefront of a regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It has fuelled speculation in Lebanon that the Sunni Muslim politician, long an ally of Riyadh, was coerced into stepping down by the Saudis.

Saudi Arabia and members of Hariri's Future Movement have denied reports that he is under house arrest. But he has put out no statements himself denying his movements are being restricted. He made a one-day flying visit to the United Arab Emirates earlier this week before returning to Saudi Arabia.

Hariri's office said in statement he had received the French ambassador to Saudi Arabia yesterday. He had also met the head of the EU mission to Saudi Arabia on Wednesday, and on Tuesday the British ambassador and the US charge d'affaires.

Saudi Arabia says Hezbollah, which was included in Hariri's coalition government, had "hijacked" Lebanon's political system.

Saudi probe spreads beyond borders

REUTERS, Abu Dhabi

Saudi Arabia's crackdown on corruption has spread beyond its borders as regulators in the United Arab Emirates ask UAE banks for information about Saudi citizens detained in the investigation, a possible prelude to freezing their accounts.

The UAE central bank has requested commercial banks and finance companies in the UAE to provide details of the accounts of 19 Saudis, commercial bankers told Reuters yesterday, declining to be named because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Almost all of the 19, including billionaire Prince Alwaleed bin Talal and former National Guard chief Prince Miteb bin Abdulah, are known to be among dozens of senior officials and businesspeople detained in the corruption inquiry.

Commercial bankers said UAE authorities had not explained why they wanted the information, but believed the authorities were acting at the behest of the Saudi gov-

ernment, which has said it aims to recover billions of dollars of illicit assets identified in its investigation.

Central bank officials in the UAE, a federation of seven emirates, were not available to comment, and Saudi officials in Riyadh, who have frozen over 1,700 domestic bank accounts as part of the crackdown, did not respond to requests for comment.

The UAE, particularly its most commercially prominent emirate Dubai, is one of the main places where wealthy Saudis park their money abroad.

Meanwhile, Mohammed bin Salman, crown prince who was removed as next in line to the throne in June, has reportedly become the latest royal family member to be targeted in the kingdom's expanding anti-corruption crackdown.

According to Reuters news agency and the Wall Street Journal, bank accounts linked to Mohammed bin Nayef and some of his immediate relatives were frozen by Saudi authorities.

ROW OVER SECRET MEETINGS IN ISRAEL

UK minister Patel quits

AFP, London

Britain's overseas aid minister Priti Patel quit on Wednesday over unauthorised meetings in Israel, becoming the latest cabinet member to fall from power because of scandals that have rocked Prime Minister Theresa May.

"I offer a full apology to you and to the government for what has happened and offer my resignation," Patel wrote to May, becoming the second minister to leave the cabinet in one week.

May summoned Patel back from a trip to Africa to explain her talks with Israeli politicians and officials, in which she raised the possibility of Britain diverting aid to the town were the Lebanese Shia militant group Hezbollah and advises from Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, as mostly as fighters from mostly Shia Iraqi militias, according to Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman.

Patel had apologised on Monday for holding 12 separate meetings – including with Pringle, who is based in Nantwich – during a family holiday to Israel in August, without notifying the Foreign Office or Downing Street in advance.

Patel wrote in her letter that there had been a "number of reports about my actions

and I am sorry that these have served as a distraction."

May accepted Patel's resignation, replying in a letter that "the UK and Israel are close allies, and it is right that we should work closely together. But that must be done formally."

The departure comes a week after Michael Fallon quit as defence secretary following allegations of sexual harassment.

Patel had been facing a major challenge in Brexit, but May was struggling to keep her ministers in line since losing her Conservative parliamentary majority in a snap election in June, and she heads a government that looks increasingly adrift.

Months of public divisions over the negotiations with the European Union have given way to scandals over foreign affairs and sexual abuse, leading some MPs to call on her to reassess her authority with a long-awaited Cabinet reshuffle.

May's deputy Damian Green is being investigated for all manner of scandals in 2014 – which he denies – while a similar probe is under way into the behaviour of junior trade minister Mark Carriker towards his secretary.

PNG starts to empty camp Threatens forcible evict of asylum seekers as some 600 men refuse to move to transition centres

REUTERS, Sydney

Papua New Guinea began dismantling a shuttered Australian-run immigration detention centre yesterday and warned it will use force if necessary to evict nearly 600 men if they refuse to leave within two days, according to a notice posted at the camp.

The asylum seekers have barricaded themselves inside the Manus Island centre for the past nine days, defying attempts by Australia and Papua New Guinea to close the camp as a stand-off the United Nations declared a "looming humanitarian crisis".

The men fear violent reprisals from the Manus Island community if they move from the camp to three transit centres pending possible resettlement to the United States. The camp was closed on Oct 31 and water and power have been cut off.

"You may become very sick under these conditions of overflowing sewerage, heaps of rubbish, no clean running water, no electricity and no food," Papua New Guinea's



Carme Forcadell, Speaker of the Catalan parliament, arrives to Spain's Supreme Court to testify on charges of rebellion, sedition and misuse of public funds for defying the central government by holding an independence referendum and proclaiming independence, in Madrid, Spain, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

'Breed like rabbits' Polish government urges citizens as birth rate falls

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The Polish government is encouraging citizens to go forth and multiply like rabbits.

The health ministry of Poland, which has one of the lowest birth rates in Europe, has put out a short video praising rabbits for producing many offspring.

The YouTube video shows rabbits munching on lettuce and carrots while a rabbit "narrator" reveals the secret of their big families – exercise, a healthy diet and little stress. The brief appearance of a human couple enjoying a romantic picnic hints that a little romance might not be a bad idea.

Yours truly, I say. "For me to be a parent, follow the example of rabbits."

It is the latest step by the conservative government in this mostly Catholic country of 38 million to reverse a shrinking population. European Union figures show that Poland's birth rate was 1.32 children per woman in 2015.

The Health Ministry said in a statement to The Associated Press that it was trying to encourage Poles in their reproductive years – to adopt a healthy lifestyle that would improve their reproductive health.

Israel okays 240 settler homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli authorities yesterday approved building permits for 240 new homes in settlement neighbourhoods in Jerusalem's eastern sector, Deputy Mayor Meir Turjeman told AFP.

A city planning committee approved 90 units in and another 15 in Ramat Shlomo, Turjeman said, the latest in a series of moves to enhance Jewish presence in the contested Israeli-annexed Palestinian sector of the city.

Turjeman noted the committee also approved 44 units for Palestinians in their neighbourhood of Beit Hanina.

The Ramat Shlomo units are part of plans announced in 2010 to build 1,600 settler homes in Ramat Shlomo, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood in east Jerusalem.

The 2010 announcement came as then US vice president Joe Biden was visiting Israel, provoking fierce US opposition and souring relations with Washington for months.

Yesterday's approvals were granted weeks after the same committee voted on an expansion creating the largest Israeli settlement within a Palestinian neighbourhood in the city.

Jerusalem's status is ultra-sensitive and central to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Earlier this month, the Israeli ministers were set to approve a bill absorbing major Israeli settlements currently in the occupied West Bank into Jerusalem by enlarging the city limits.



has been detained on Manus Island for more than four years, said on Twitter that workers had begun that task.

"The refugees are watching them threatfully... they will not leave this prison camp for another prison camp," he said.



has been detained on Manus Island for more than four years, said on Twitter that workers had begun that task.

"The refugees are watching them threatfully... they will not leave this prison camp for another prison camp," he said.