

SAUDI PURGE

Most detained agree to cash settlements

Most of those detained in a sweeping anti-corruption purge of the Saudi elite have struck monetary settlements in exchange for their freedom, the attorney general said Tuesday, a month after they were locked up in a 5-star hotel. Dozens of high-profile figures including princes, ministers and tycoons are being held in Riyadh's Ritz-Carlton hotel, now a makeshift luxury prison, in the biggest sweep of the kingdom's elite in its recent history.

Some 320 people were called in for questioning and 159 people are currently being detained, many of whom have agreed to a "settlement", or handing over allegedly ill-gotten gains to the Saudi state treasury, attorney general Sheikh Saud al-Mojeb said. "The necessary arrangements are being finalised to conclude such agreements," Mojob said in a statement.

The attorney general has previously said he estimates at least \$100 billion has been lost in embezzlement or corruption over several decades.

His latest statement comes after Prince Miteb bin Abdullah, the former National Guard chief once seen as a contender to the throne, was released last week following a settlement reportedly exceeding \$1 billion.

Some analysts saw Prince Miteb's removal as an attempt by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is also Saudi defence minister, to consolidate his control over the security services.

In a recent interview to The New York Times, Prince Mohammed described as "ludicrous" reports equating the crackdown to a power grab, saying that many of those detained at the opulent Ritz-Carlton had already pledged allegiance to him.



Palestinian protesters burn the US and Israeli flags in Gaza City yesterday. President Donald Trump recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, upending decades of careful US policy and ignoring dire warnings from Arab and Western allies alike of a historic misstep that could trigger a surge of violence in the Middle East.

WORLD'S POSITION ON JERUSALEM

HISTORY
In 1947, the United Nations devised a plan to divide British mandate Palestine into three entities: a Jewish state, an Arab state and Jerusalem, which would have a unique status as an internationally controlled city. Jewish leaders accepted the plan, but the Arab world rejected it. Following the British withdrawal the next year, a war broke out in which Israel seized the west of the city, while Jordanians and Palestinians took the east.

In the next conflict in 1967 Israel seized control of east Jerusalem and later annexed it, in moves never recognised by the international community. The predominantly Palestinian population in the east lives under full Israeli control, but cannot vote in parliamentary elections.

ISRAELI, PALESTINIAN VIEWS
Israel views the city as its undivided capital, with a Tuesday statement saying the city "is the capital of the Jewish people for 3,000 years and Israel's capital since 70 years." The internationally recognised Palestinian government sees the eastern part as the capital of their future state. Islamist movement Hamas, which controls Gaza and does not recognise Israel, calls Jerusalem the Palestinian capital.

UNITED STATES
In 1995, the US Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act calling on the United States to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognising it as Israel's capital.

The law is binding on the US government but a clause allowed presidents



to postpone its application for six months on "national security interests". Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama re-ratified the clause every six months. Trump reluctantly renewed it for the first time in June 2017, despite promising during his campaign to move the embassy.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY
The position of the majority of the international community has been largely unchanged for decades. Essentially Jerusalem is viewed as an issue for final status negotiations between the two sides. United Nations statements suggest, however, that the city could remain the capital of both Israel and a future Palestinian state in any deal. The vast majority of countries have largely followed this line. All embassies are based in the commercial capital Tel Aviv, but most countries simply do not specify what they consider to be Israel's capital. Thirteen countries did have embassies in Jerusalem until 1980, however, when a UN resolution called upon them to remove them. Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, the Netherlands, Panama, Uruguay and Venezuela then shifted their embassies.

RUSSIA
Earlier this year Israeli media trumpeted a Russian government statement that for the first time specifically said "we view West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel". This appeared to be a shift in policy position and was hailed by some Israeli politicians, though it had little practical implication. The statement also recognised "east Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state". SOURCE: AFP

PERSON OF THE YEAR

Time honours abuse 'silence breakers'

REUTERS, Washington

Time magazine has named the social movement aimed at raising awareness about sexual harassment and assault, epitomized by the #MeToo social media hashtag, as the most influential "person" in 2017, the publication announced yesterday.

"This is the fastest moving social change we've seen in decades and it began with individual acts of courage by hundreds of women - and some men, too - who came forward to tell their own stories," Time Editor-in-Chief Edward Felsenthal told NBC News, referring to them as "the silence breakers."

The recognition comes amid a wave of public allegations of sexual misconduct that have targeted some of the most prominent men in US politics, media and entertainment, leading to multiple firings and investigations.

As more people made their accusations public, other individuals also shared their own stories of assault and harassment, often with posts on social media platforms using the hashtag #MeToo.

"I could never have envisioned something that would change the world. I was trying to change my community," Tarana Burke, who created the hashtag, told NBC. "This is just the start. It's not just a moment, it's a movement. Now the work really begins." US President Donald Trump, who was Time's person of the year in 2016, was the first runner-up this year, followed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, Felsenthal said.

Israel expanding ME ties

Says Netanyahu, accuses Iran of trying to dominate the region; Britain urges US to reveal peace plan for ME

AGENCIES

Israel is expanding ties throughout the Middle East but not with Iran, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said yesterday, accusing his country's arch-foe of trying to dominate the region.

Addressing a Jerusalem diplomatic conference, Netanyahu said Israel has relations "with nearly every single one" of nations that do not formally recognise it, due to their growing need for its economic and security expertise, reported Reuters.

"See that country in red? By the way that's not on our list of diplomatic allies," he said, pointing to Iran on a regional map. He deemed Iran an "aggressive regime" seeking nuclear arms and a "land bridge" via its allies to the Mediterranean sea.

He refrained from commenting on US President Donald Trump's intention to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital in his first speech since the plan was confirmed.

Meanwhile, Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson warned yesterday that President Donald Trump's plan to recog-

nise Jerusalem as Israel's capital underlines the urgency of a new US-led Middle East peace plan.

Johnson was speaking alongside US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on the sidelines of a Nato ministerial meeting in Brussels ahead of a bilateral meeting, reported AFP.

"We'll have to wait and see what the president says," Johnson told reporters, hours before Trump was expected to announce that the US will recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and begin preparations to move its embassy there.

"But clearly this is a decision that makes it more important than ever that the long-awaited American proposals on the Middle East peace process are now brought forward and I would say that that should happen as a matter of priority," Johnson said.

Tillerson said Trump is "very committed" to the Middle East peace process. He said the US believes "there is a very good opportunity for peace to be achieved" between Israel and the Palestinians, despite international outcry over Trump's decision on Jerusalem.



N Korea tensions soar

B-1B bomber joins US-South Korea drills; Moon to visit China for talks on Pyongyang next week

REUTERS, Seoul

A US B-1B bomber yesterday joined large-scale US-South Korean military exercises that North Korea has denounced as pushing the peninsula to the brink of nuclear war, as tension mounts between the North and the United States.

The bomber flew from the Pacific US-administered territory of Guam and joined US F-22 and F-35 stealth fighters in the annual exercises.

The drills come a week after North Korea said it had tested its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States, as part of a weapons programme that it has conducted in defiance of international sanctions and condemnation.

Asked about the bomber's flight, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a regular news briefing in Beijing: "We hope relevant parties can maintain restraint

and not do anything to add tensions on the Korean peninsula."

North Korea's official KCNA state news agency said at the weekend that US President Donald Trump's administration was "begging for nuclear war" by staging the drills.

It also labelled Trump, who has threatened to destroy North Korea if the United States is threatened, "insane".

The US-South Korea drills coincide with a rare visit to the isolated North by UN political affairs chief Jeffrey Feltman.

North Korea Vice Foreign Minister Pak Myong Guk met Feltman yesterday in Pyongyang, and discussed bilateral cooperation and other issues of mutual interest.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in will visit China next Wednesday for a summit with his counterpart Xi Jinping, Seoul's Blue House said. North Korea's increasing nuclear and missile capability would top the agenda, it said.



A fire crew passes a burning home during a wind-driven wildfire in Ventura, California, US. An unrelenting wildfire fanned by hot, dry Santa Ana winds threatened more than 12,000 homes in and around Ventura yesterday, forcing thousands of people to race for safety.

RUSSIA ELECTION

Putin says he will seek new term in 2018

REUTERS, Nizhny Novgorod

President Vladimir Putin yesterday announced that he would seek re-election in March 2018, a contest opinion polls show he will win comfortably, setting the stage for him to extend his dominance of Russia's political landscape into a third decade.

Putin, 65, has been in power, either as president or prime minister, since 2000. If he wins what would be a fourth presidential term in March, he would be eligible to serve another six years until 2024, when he turns 72.

"I will put forward my candidacy for the post of president of the Russian Federation," Putin told an audience of workers at a car-making factory in the Volga river city of Nizhny Novgorod.



"There's no better place or opportunity to put my candidacy forward. I'm sure that everything will work out for us."

Putin is lauded by allies as a father of the nation figure who has restored national pride and expanded Moscow's global clout with interventions in Syria and Ukraine. His critics accuse him of overseeing a corrupt authoritarian system.

The challenge for Putin is not other candidates -- nobody looks capable of unseating him. Instead, his toughest task will be to mobilise an electorate showing signs of apathy to ensure a high turnout which in the tightly-controlled limits of the Russian political system is seen to confer legitimacy.

Babies' brains at risk from toxic pollution

AFP, New Delhi

As New Delhi and other major cities hit new toxic smog peaks, the United Nations sounded the alarm yesterday over the damage that pollution is doing to babies' developing brains.

The UN's children's agency, Unicef, said Asia accounts for more than 16 million of the world's 17 million infants aged under one year living in areas with severe pollution -- at least six times more than safe levels.

India topped the list of countries with babies at risk, followed by China, Unicef said in a report.

Satellite imagery used to assess pollution levels around the world found that South Asian countries accounted for 12.2 million of the total number of affected children but that there is also a growing problem in African cities.

"But a growing body of scientific research points to a potential new risk that air pollution poses to children's lives and futures: its impact on their developing brains," Unicef said.

The report highlighted links found between pollution and brain functions "including verbal and nonverbal IQ and memory, reduced test scores, grade point averages among school children, as well as other neurological behavioural problems."

Countries pledge \$857m to help world's refugees: UN

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations said Tuesday that it had received pledges amounting to \$857 million (726 million euros) to fund operations aimed to help an estimated 67 million displaced and stateless people worldwide next year.

It was the highest amount ever promised to the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) at its annual pledging conference.

But it was still only about 11 percent of the total funding of the more than \$7.5 billion it needs for 2018, the agency said in a statement.

That money provides aid that can often be life-saving for people displaced worldwide, including in brutal conflicts like the ones raging in Syria, Yemen, and South Sudan.

While acknowledging that the pledges fell far short of the needs, the UNHCR said they were well above last year's December

pledges of just over \$700 million.

It said this could indicate that countries would continue being more generous throughout 2018, narrowing the funding gap.

That would be a good thing, UN refugee chief Filippo Grandi said in the statement, adding that as "refugee crises grow, refugee needs grow as well."

He noted that the agency's work is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions from governments, intergovernmental institutions, companies, foundations and individuals.

Large funding gaps, he said, "means that UNHCR has to prioritise, sometimes mercilessly."

"This can mean some will be left to fend for themselves during the harsh winter months and others won't get the assistance they need to reintegrate upon return."



Russian air strikes kill 21 in east Syria

AFP, Beirut

Russian air strikes killed 21 civilians early yesterday in a village held by the Islamic State group near the Euphrates River in eastern Syria, a monitor said.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the bombing raids hit the village of Al-Jerzi on the eastern bank of the river, which cuts across Deir Ezzor province.

"Twenty-one civilians were killed, including nine children, very early Wednesday in Russian air strikes targeting residential buildings in Al-Jerzi," Observatory head Rami Abdel Rahman told AFP.

The Britain-based monitor relies on a network of sources inside Syria and says it determines whose planes carry out raids according to type, location, flight patterns and munitions used.

It says IS, which used to control swathes of Deir Ezzor province, has been ousted from all but eight percent of the oil-rich region.

The jihadists have lost vast swathes of it to separate offensives by Russian-backed Syrian troops and an alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The SDF has long been backed by US-led coalition bombing of IS in Iraq and Syria, but its Kurdish component recently said it had also received support from Moscow.

Russian warplanes had given air cover to the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) as they fought against jihadists in Deir Ezzor, according to the YPG and Moscow's defence ministry.