

UK FM in Iran to push
for Briton's release

AFP, Tehran

Britain's foreign minister arrived in Iran yesterday to press for the release of British-Iranian woman Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe who was arrested in 2016 in Tehran for her alleged links to mass protests in 2009.

Boris Johnson's visit was the first by a top British diplomat since 2015 and he was also due to discuss that year's landmark nuclear accord between Iran and world powers, whose future has been thrown into doubt by US President Donald Trump.

Trump's approval
rating at record low

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Donald Trump is the least popular US President in nearly 40 years, a new poll has shown. A Pew Research Centre poll found Trump's job approval rating has hit 32 per cent – lower than any US president dating back to Ronald Reagan.

US issues Pakistan
travel advisory

PTI, Washington

The United States on Friday advised its citizens to defer all non-essential travel to Pakistan, saying that foreign and indigenous terrorist groups continue to pose a threat to them throughout the country. The warning comes in the wake of increasing terrorist violence, including sectarian attacks, in Pakistan.

Trump's senior ME
adviser to resign

REUTERS, Washington

Donald Trump's deputy national security adviser and a key player in US diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, Dina Powell, plans to resign early next year, the White House said on Friday. Powell could be one of several administration officials to leave at the one-year mark of Trump's presidency. Speculation has centered on Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and top economic adviser Gary Cohn.



Women react as an Israeli mounted police-man disperses Palestinian protesters yesterday in East Jerusalem; Israeli police take aim at protesters in East Jerusalem; demonstrators in the West Bank city of Bethlehem react to tear gas fired by Israeli troops; and Israeli forces wrestle with a protester in a bid to foil demonstration in East Jerusalem.

PHOTO:
AFP, REUTERS



Iraq now free of IS

PM Abadi declares end of three-year war against jihadists

AFP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi yesterday declared victory in a three-year war by Iraqi forces to expel the Islamic State jihadist group that at its height endangered Iraq's very existence.

"Our forces are in complete control of the Iraqi-Syrian border and I therefore announce the end of the war against Daesh (IS)," Abadi told a conference in Baghdad.

"Our enemy wanted to kill our civilisation, but we have won through our unity and our determination. We have triumphed in little time," he said.

IS seized vast areas north and west of Baghdad in a lightning offensive in 2014.

With Iraq's army and police retreating in disarray at the time, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, spiritual leader of the country's majority Shias, called for a general mobilisation, leading to the formation

of Hashed al-Shaabi paramilitary units.

Iraq's fightback was also launched with the backing of an air campaign waged by a US-led coalition, recapturing town after town from the clutches of the jihadists in fierce urban warfare.



Iraq's close ally Iran already declared victory over IS last month, as the jihadists clung to just a few remaining scraps of territory.

But Abadi said at the time that he would not follow suit until the desert on

the border with Syria had been cleared.

The jihadists' defeat is a massive turnaround for an organisation that in 2014 ruled over seven million people in a territory as large as Italy encompassing large parts of Syria and nearly a third of Iraq.

On the Syrian side of the border, IS is under massive pressure too.

On Thursday, Russia's defence ministry said its mission in support of the Syrian regime to oust IS jihadists had been "accomplished" and the country was "completely liberated".

Despite the victory announcements, experts have warned that IS retains the capacity as an insurgency group to carry out high-casualty bomb attacks through sleeper cells.

It also retains natural hideouts in the deep gorges of Wadi Hauran, Iraq's longest valley stretching from the Saudi border up to the Euphrates River and the frontiers with Syria and Jordan.

Erdogan steps up attacks on 'occupier' Israel

AFP, Istanbul

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday described Israel as a "state of occupation" which used "terror" against the Palestinians, as he stepped up his criticism of the US recognition of Jerusalem as its capital.

Erdogan has been bitterly opposed to the decision of US President Donald Trump to recognise Jerusalem and has called a summit of Islamic countries on December 13 in Istanbul.

"Israel is a state of occupation," Erdogan said in a speech in Istanbul, referring to Israel's continued occupation of the West Bank and settlement building.

JERUSALEM AS ISRAEL CAPITAL

Saudis seen on board with US

REUTERS, Beirut/riyadh/amman

Saudi Arabia pulled no punches when it condemned President Donald Trump's move to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. But Palestinian officials say Riyadh has also been working for weeks behind the scenes to press them to support a nascent US peace plan.

Trump reversed decades of US policy on Wednesday with his announcement and instructions to begin the process of moving the embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, despite warnings that it would drive the wedge between Israel and the Palestinians deeper.

The Saudi royal court described the decision as "unjustified and irresponsible" and "a big step back in efforts to advance the peace process."

But Arab officials privately say that Riyadh appears to be on board with a broader US strategy for an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan still in its early phases of development.

Four Palestinian officials, who spoke on condition they not be named, said Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas discussed in detail a grand bargain that Trump and Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and adviser, are expected to unveil in the first half of 2018.

One official said Prince Mohammed asked Abbas to show support for the US administration's peace efforts when the two met in Riyadh in November.

Another Palestinian official said Prince Mohammed told Abbas: "Be patient, you will hear good news. This peace process will go ahead."

Palestinian officials fear, and many Arab officials suspect, that by closing the door on East Jerusalem as the future capital of a Palestinian state, Trump will align with Israel in offering the Palestinians limited self-government inside disconnected patches of the occupied West Bank, with no right of return for refugees displaced by the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967.

The Palestinian officials said they were concerned that



A Palestinian man carries his wounded daughter as she waits to receive treatment following Israeli airstrikes in the northern Gaza Strip on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

the proposal that Prince Mohammed communicated to Abbas, which purportedly came from Kushner, presents exactly that scenario.

As told to Abbas, the proposal included establishing "a Palestinian entity" in Gaza as well as the West Bank administrative areas A and B and 10 percent of area C, which contains Jewish settlements, a third Palestinian official said.

Jewish settlements in the West Bank would stay, there would be no right of return, and Israel would remain responsible for the borders, he said.

Trump's decision on Jerusalem is seen almost uniformly in Arab capitals as a sharp tilt towards Israel, which has only signed peace deals with Egypt and Jordan.

N Korea blames US 'nuke blackmail' for tensions

UN envoy ends rare visit to the pariah nation

AFP, Seoul

North Korea blamed US "nuclear blackmail" for soaring tensions over its weapons programme following rare meetings with a senior UN official, but agreed to regular communication with the organisation, state media said Saturday.

Jeffrey Feltman flew to Beijing Saturday after wrapping up a five-day visit to Pyongyang aimed at defusing the crisis, just a week after North Korea said it test-fired a new ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States.

His trip -- the first by a UN diplomat of his rank since 2010 -- saw him meet Foreign Minister Ri Yong-Ho and vice foreign minister Pak Myong-Kuk, and visit medical facilities supported by the UN, the North's state news agency KCNA said.

"At these meetings, our side said the US policy of hostility toward the DPRK (North Korea) and its nuclear blackmail are to

blame for the current tense situation on the Korean peninsula," the report said.

It added that the North had agreed with the UN "to regularize communications through visits at various levels".

Feltman, the UN's under-secretary-general for political affairs, visited the country just after US and South Korea launched their biggest-ever joint air exercise.

Pyongyang reiterated its view that these manoeuvres were a provocation, accusing the drills of "revealing its intention to mount a surprise nuclear pre-emptive strike against the DPRK".

US President Donald Trump has engaged in months of tit-for-tat rhetoric with Kim, pejoratively dubbing him "Little Rocket Man" and a "sick puppy".

Kim has called the 71-year-old president a "dotard", meaning a weak or senile old man -- an insult that was renewed yesterday as the North condemned Trump for recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital.



Burned homes are seen at the Monserate Country Club after a wildfire swept through their community in Bonsall, California. Inset, A DC-10 aircraft drops fire retardant. Unrelenting winds fanned towering flames in southern California, where hundreds of thousands of people have been forced to flee multiple devastating fires.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Saudi Arabia hosts first-ever concert by female singer

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Saudi Arabia has allowed a female singer to perform solo at a public concert for the first time in the country's history.

Lebanese singer Hiba Tawaji took to the stage this week at the King Fahd Cultural Centre in the capital Riyadh.

Thousands attended the historic, all-women event and danced to renditions of Celine Dion, as well as Arab classics.

Welcoming the singer onto the stage, the announcer called the event a "proud moment" for the country.

"All women should express their appreciation for a fact that a woman for the first time is performing at a concert in Saudi Arabia," they said, according to NBC.

Tawaji reiterated the sentiment between songs, saying: "This is my first time



Modi faces test in home turf

First round of voting records 68 percent turnout

AFP, Ahmedabad

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state of Gujarat went to the polls on Saturday, in a key electoral test of his popularity after a series of controversial economic reforms.

Voters, with their election cards in hand, started lining up at polling booths early in the morning in Gujarat where Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has held power for 22 years.

Modi built his reputation as an economic reformer in Gujarat which boomed under his rule, attracting investments from around the globe.

But his recent reforms -- a new national tax and a shock currency ban to fight graft -- have hit India's growth and hurt the very constituency of traders and small business owners who were his biggest supporters in the western state, polls found.

Experts say this election is a serious challenge to Modi as his rivals ride a wave of discontent over the stuttering economy, adding that voter anger over the reforms and a desire

for change could boost the flagging fortunes of the opposition Congress Party.

Voting wrapped up at 5:00 pm local time (1130 GMT) in the first stage of the election yesterday, with around 68 percent turnout reported, the Election Commission of India said after polls closed, revising its earlier figure of nearly 50 percent.

Saturday's turnout was lower than the 71.3 percent registered at the last state election in 2012.

The Congress campaign has been spearheaded by Rahul Gandhi -- the man likely to challenge Modi for premiership at the next general election in 2019.

The election is seen as a chance for Gandhi to finally prove his mettle before he is named president of the party his mother Sonia has led for more than two decades.

A little over 21 million voters were eligible to cast their ballots yesterday when 89 constituencies were up for grabs across 19 districts of Gujarat, according to the Election Commission of India.

The next stage of voting is on December 14.

GUJARAT STATE POLLS



Saudi-led strike on Yemen TV station kills four

AFP, Sanaa

A Saudi-led coalition air strike hit Yemen's rebel-controlled state television station in Sanaa overnight, killing four guards, rebel media said yesterday.

"Air bombardment by the Saudi-American enemy targeted the building of the Yemen TV satellite channel, killing four citizens," the rebel Al-Masirah news outlet said, taking a jab at US support for the Saudi-led coalition.

More than 8,750 people have been killed since Saudi Arabia and its allies joined the government's fight against the Huthis in 2015, triggering what the UN has called the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

TERROR FINANCING

Two Lafarge bosses charged in France

AFP, Paris

Two senior executives at French-Swiss cement maker LafargeHolcim, including its former CEO, were charged on Friday over claims that top management turned a blind eye to payments to jihadists in Syria, a judicial source said.

Lafarge is accused of paying the Islamic State group and other militants through a middleman between 2013 and 2014 so that the company's factory in Jalabiya, northern Syria, could continue to operate despite the war.

Four people had already been charged over the case.

At Friday's hearings in Paris, Bruno Lafont, chief executive from 2007 to 2015, and the group's former Syria chief Christian Herrault, appeared in court and were charged with "financing a terrorist organisation and "endangering the lives of others" and remanded in custody.

On Thursday Eric Olsen, who took over from Lafont as CEO after the company merged with Switzerland's Holcim, was charged with the same crimes.

The three men have been in detention since Wednesday.

Three former officials at the Jalabiya factory were charged in the case last week.