

Huthis free 290 prisoners in Yemen

Yemen's Huthi rebels have freed 290 prisoners, including dozens of survivors from a Saudi-led coalition strike on a detention centre earlier this month, the ICRC said yesterday.

The International Committee of the Red Cross hailed the move as "a positive step that will hopefully revive the release, transfer and repatriation of conflict-related detainees" under a deal struck last year between the rebels and Yemen's government.

The Huthis recently announced the capture of hundreds of Yemeni loyalist forces in an August offensive near the Saudi border, but they were not among those freed on Monday.

The United Nations' special envoy for Yemen, Martin Griffiths, welcomed the initiative to "unilaterally release detainees".

"I hope this step will lead to further initiatives that will facilitate the exchange of all the conflict-related detainees as per the Stockholm Agreement," Griffiths said, referring to the 2018 accord.

He called on all parties to work together to speed up the release of prisoners, saying they and their families had "endured profound pain and suffering".

In a statement, he urged the parties to meet at the "nearest opportunity" to resume discussions on future exchanges.

The Huthis' own announcement on the prisoner release said there were 350 in the group, including three Saudis.

Mortaza reiterated Huthi claims that they had taken prisoner more than 2,000 fighters, including Saudi soldiers, in the August offensive near the southern Saudi region of Najran.

Footage aired by the Huthis on Sunday, which had been billed as showing proof of the mass capture, was short on details.



A protester attacks a police line during a demonstration in Jakarta, yesterday. Riot police fired tear gas at stone-throwing protesters as fresh protests erupted across Indonesia, sparked by a raft of divisive legal reforms including banning pre-marital sex and weakening the anti-graft agency.

PHOTO: AFP

Xi vows to uphold HK's special status

Chinese President Xi Jinping yesterday vowed to uphold Hong Kong's special status on the eve of a huge military parade in Beijing that risks being upstaged by more protests in the semi-autonomous city.

Some 15,000 soldiers will march across Tiananmen Square and the latest military technology will be displayed as part of the 70th anniversary celebrations, a patriotic show of strength to demonstrate the country's emergence as a global superpower.

But while Beijing is preparing for huge celebrations, pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong threaten to steal the spotlight, with authorities in the financial hub Monday warning of increased violence by "rioters".

Xi told a reception in Beijing yesterday night that China would "continue to fully and faithfully implement the principles of 'one country, two systems'" in Hong Kong.

"We are confident that with the full backing of the motherland and the concerted efforts of our fellow Chinese in Hong Kong and Macau who love the motherland... (Hong Kong) will prosper and progress alongside the mainland," Xi said.

The Chinese president is expected to speak again ahead of today's parade at the Gate of Heavenly Peace -- the same spot where Chairman Mao Zedong announced the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949.

After the military march a civilian parade will involve 100,000 civilians and 70 floats, with organisers releasing 70,000 doves and 70,000 balloons before an evening performance and fireworks in Tiananmen.

AFGHAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

Abdullah claims victory

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan chief executive Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory yesterday over incumbent Ashraf Ghani in the weekend's presidential election, far ahead of the release of any official results.

The move is likely to stir political tensions across Afghanistan and brings to mind the election Abdullah and his top rival Ghani bitterly contested in 2014 that sparked a constitutional crisis and prompted US intervention.

"We have the most votes in this election," Abdullah said at a news conference, without providing evidence.

"The results will be announced by the IEC (Independent Election Commission), but we have the most votes. The election is not going to go to a second round."

Abdullah's announcement came after one of Ghani's running mates, Amrullah Saleh, on Sunday claimed to have garnered the lion's share of votes.

"According to our information, 60 to 70 percent of the people have voted

for our team," Saleh told Voice of America's Dari- and Pashto-language services.

The claims come even before the IEC has finished tallying turnout from Saturday's election, with hundreds of

polling centres still unreported.

Preliminary results are not due until October 19, and if the leading candidate doesn't secure more than 50 percent of the vote the top two will run off in a second round.

Almost immediately, senior IEC official Habib Rahman Nang slammed Abdullah's announcement as premature.

"No candidate has the right to

declare himself the winner," Nang said. "According to the law, it is the IEC that decides who is the winner."

Abdullah, who is seeking the presidency for the third time after losing in 2009 and 2014, said his team would "make the new government".

Without giving details, Abdullah also mentioned reports of "some government officials" meddling in the election process.

His remarks follow the release on social media of several videos purporting to show election workers stuffing ballots in favour of Ghani.

Shortly after Abdullah's comments, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini called on candidates to respect the electoral timeline.

The IEC's complaints division head, Zuhra Bayan Shinwari, said the panel had so far received 2,569 complaints.

Previous Afghan polls have been marred by widespread allegations of systemic fraud, so the stakes are high for the IEC, which has promised a clean process this year with rigorous steps to curtail cheating.

British PM on defensive again over groping claim

AFP, Manchester

Britain's Boris Johnson is known for his colourful love life but the accusation he grabbed a young woman's thigh when he was a magazine editor risks a scandal as he seeks to unite his party over Brexit.

The prime minister, who is attending his Conservative party's conference in Manchester, northwest England, is accused of giving a female journalist's leg "a squeeze" while at a private lunch 20 years ago.

Johnson never comments on his personal life but his spokesman issued a clear denial -- an acknowledgement that the claim is more serious than gossip about his affairs.

It follows accusations that Johnson gave special access to a US businesswoman with whom he is alleged to have had a relationship when he was mayor of London.

He denies any impropriety, but it is

yet another headache after his defeats in parliament and the courts over his pledge to leave the EU on October 31, come what may.

In an article published in The Sunday Times, journalist Charlotte Edwards described a boozy lunch in the offices of The Spectator magazine around two decades ago, when Johnson was editor.

She was sitting next to him and wrote that "under the table I feel Johnson's hand on my thigh. He gives it a squeeze".

She said a woman she spoke with after the dinner, who was sitting on Johnson's other side, said the same thing happened to her.

Johnson was married at the time to his second wife. They are now divorced and he currently lives with his girlfriend Carrie Symonds.

Downing Street said Edwards' claim was "untrue", and the prime minister himself denied it in a television interview, while refusing to comment further.



World leaders pay final tribute to France's Chirac

AFP, Paris

Dozens of world leaders, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, yesterday paid their final respects to ex-president Jacques Chirac as France held a national day of mourning for the popular former head of state.

Putin and other world leaders joined President Emmanuel Macron for a funeral service at Saint-Sulpice church in Paris, a day after 7,000 people queued to view Chirac's coffin at the Invalides monument.

Chirac's death on Thursday aged 86 prompted a flood of tributes to the centre-right politician whose career spanned four decades, capped by 12 years as president from 1995 to 2007.

But it also sparked questions about how much the consummate political operator actually achieved and again threw the spotlight on a 2011 conviction for graft over his time as Paris mayor.

His coffin, draped in a French flag, was carried into the church by his former bodyguards, to applause from around 1,000 onlookers lining the square outside.

Other world leaders attending included Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier as well as former US president Bill Clinton.

A minute of silence was to be observed in all public institutions and schools yesterday afternoon.

Analysts have attributed the outpouring of emotion over the death to the warmth of a politician who was more comfortable working the crowd at the annual Paris agricultural fair than giving speeches in the gilded surroundings of the Elysee Palace.

One of Chirac's most significant steps on the international stage was his opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

On Sunday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo sent belated condolences, saying Chirac "worked tirelessly to uphold the values and ideals that we share with France."

Putin worked intensely with the Chirac in the first phase of his own presidency and the pair were notably united in their opposition to the Iraq invasion.



Patients and their relatives rest in beds as they waded through floodwaters during heavy monsoon rain at waterlogged Nalanda Medical College and Hospital in Patna in the northeastern state of Bihar, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump: I want to meet my accuser

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump said on Sunday he wants and deserves to meet the anonymous whistleblower at the center of the fast-moving scandal that has triggered an impeachment probe against him.

The whistleblower, who could testify soon before Congress, fears for their safety if their identity is revealed, according to a lawyers' letter released by CBS News.

Battling the deepest crisis of his presidency, Trump in a series of tweets railed against accusations that he should be impeached for urging Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to investigate Joe Biden, his potential 2020 White House challenger.

"Like every American, I deserve to meet my accuser, especially when this accuser, the so-called 'Whistleblower', represented a perfect conversation with a foreign leader in a totally inaccurate and fraudulent way," Trumped said.

Trump accused top Democratic lawmaker Adam Schiff of lying to Congress last week about what Trump said to Zelensky in the July phone call.

"He wrote down and read terrible things, then said it was from the mouth of the President of the United States. I want Schiff questioned at the highest level for Fraud & Treason," he wrote.

Trump's Republican aides have sought to turn the tables on Democrats pushing for his impeachment, insisting that the president was the true "whistleblower" as he had asked Ukraine to investigate Biden and his son for corruption.

"This individual is a saboteur trying to undermine a democratically elected government," Trump advisor Stephen Miller insisted on "Fox News Sunday."

"Getting to the bottom of a corruption scandal in Ukraine is in the American national interest."

Trump's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani -- who has emerged as his point man in the Ukraine scandal -- led the charge along with Miller in combative Sunday talk show appearances.



Brandishing what he said were affidavits incriminating Biden's son Hunter over his work at a Ukrainian company, Giuliani said Trump was duty bound to raise the issue with Kiev.

"If he hadn't asked them to investigate Biden, he would have violated the constitution," Giuliani told ABC's "This Week," charging that "Donald Trump was framed by the Democrats."

The Democratic-led House of Representatives launched an official impeachment inquiry last week accusing Trump of a "mafia-like shakedown" of Zelensky aimed at damaging Biden.

Trump and his allies claim Biden, as Barack Obama's vice president, pressured Kiev to fire the country's top prosecutor to protect his son Hunter, who sat on the board of a gas company, Burisma Holdings, accused of corrupt practices.

Those allegations have largely been debunked and there has been no evidence of illegal conduct or wrongdoing in Ukraine by the Bidens.

But a transcript of the July call shows Trump pushing for Kiev to revisit the matter, saying both Giuliani and US Attorney General Bill Barr would be in touch.

For Democrats, that amounted to a smoking gun, leading Speaker Nancy Pelosi to finally approve an impeachment process she opposed as a risky distraction from the 2020 battle.

Shabaab claims attack on US base in somalia

AFP, Mogadishu

The Al-Shabaab militant group claimed responsibility for an attack on a US base in Somalia yesterday, as the European Union confirmed a separate strike against a convoy of Italian advisers.

The militants struck the US base at Baledogle, about 110 kilometres (70 miles) northwest of the capital Mogadishu, with explosives before gunmen opened fire on the compound.

The Shabaab claimed they had killed dozens in the attack, however the US Mission to Somalia and a Somali military official said there were no casualties.

Late monsoon fury kills 100 in India

AFP, Patna

At least 100 people have died in northern India over the last three days in unusually heavy late monsoon rains which have submerged streets, hospital wards and houses, officials said yesterday.

Dozens of boats were pressed into service on streets overflowing with gushing rain water in Patna, the capital of the eastern state of Bihar, after torrential downpours far stronger than the normal.

At least 27 people have lost their lives across the state and another 63 in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh since Friday, authorities said. With more rain predicted, weather experts say September could end as the wettest in more than a hundred years.

It has also been raining heavily in southern India and in the western state of Gujarat.

The annual monsoon usually lasts from June to September.

With the Indian Meteorological Department Monday predicting excess rainfall across 15 states, this year's monsoon will end as the wettest since 1917, the mass-circulation Times of India said.

"There are no signs of withdrawal for at least four-five days," senior IMD officer Mrutyunjay Mohapatra told the daily.

The monsoon, which is vital for farmers across the South Asian region, killed some 650 people in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan in July this year.