

Putin talks oil, Gaza, Ukraine on ME trip

REUTERS, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin was due to meet Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Saudi Arabia yesterday, during a rare trip abroad, and discuss oil production, OPEC+ and the wars in the Gaza Strip and Ukraine.

Putin's meeting with the prince, known as MbS, comes after oil prices fell despite a pledge by OPEC+, which groups the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and allies led by Russia, to further cut output.

Putin arrived in Abu Dhabi for talks with President Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan who called Putin his "dear friend". He is due to then travel to Saudi Arabia for his first face-to-face meeting with MbS since October 2019.

The Kremlin said they would discuss energy cooperation, including as part of OPEC+, whose members pump more than 40 percent of the world's oil.

New Dutch MPs sworn in Wilders seeks coalition partners

AFP, The Hague

Dozens of new Dutch MPs took their seats yesterday for the first time since Geert Wilders' stunning election victory, as the far-right leader battles to form a government with reluctant partners.

The 150-seat parliament includes 37 MPs from Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) after a dramatic swing to the far-right that sent shockwaves through the country and further afield.

Also taking their seats in the new-look House of Representatives are 20 MPs from the New Social Contact (NSC) party of anti-corruption Pieter Omtzigt, who only formed the group in August.

The fragmented nature of Dutch politics means that, unlike in Britain or the United States for example, no single party gains enough seats in parliament to govern alone.

Months of horse-trading typically takes place to form a coalition. Talks are especially tricky this time, as potential Wilders partners are wary of his anti-Islam views.

Wilders wants a four-way coalition involving his PVV, the NSC of Omtzigt, the BBB farmers' party and the centre-right VVD party of current Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

China launches world's first 4G nuclear reactor

AFP, Beijing

China began commercial operations of the world's first next-generation, gas-cooled nuclear reactor power plant, state media reported yesterday.

The Shidao Bay plant in eastern Shandong province is powered by two high-temperature reactors cooled by gas rather than pressurised water, according to state news agency Xinhua, making it more efficient and cost-effective.

Conventional reactors produce electricity from nuclear energy.

However, these advanced models -- known as small modular reactors, or SMRs -- can be used for other applications that include heating, desalination or steam for industrial needs.

Xinhua news agency also said the 200 megawatt (MW) high-temperature, gas-cooled reactor (HTGR) plant developed jointly by state-run utility Huaneng, Tsinghua University and China National Nuclear Corporation, uses a modular design.

China is seeking to free itself from coal-fired power plants and reduce its dependence on foreign technologies against a backdrop of tensions with Western countries.

More than 90 percent of the Shidao Bay plant's equipment is of Chinese design, project manager Zhang Yanxu told Xinhua.

Construction of the plant began in 2012 and the first SMR was connected to the power grid in 2021.

According to proponents, multi-use SMRs could play a central role in decarbonisation and energy transition thanks to their compact and simplified architecture, with their modular design reducing costs and construction time.



Palestinian children collect food at a donation point provided by a charity group in the southern Gaza Strip city of Rafah, yesterday, amid continuing battles between Israel and Hamas. PHOTO: AFP

'They beat us day and night'

Released Palestinians allege mistreatment, deprivation in Israeli prisons

AFP, Ramallah

Released under a prisoner-hostage exchange between Israel and Hamas, former Palestinian detainees have described beatings, deprivation and a radical deterioration in conditions in Israeli jails following Israel's Gaza offensive on October 7.

On that day, Hamas fighters streamed across the Gaza Strip's militarised border into Israel, kidnapping around 240 people, Israeli officials say.

In response, the Israeli military launched a campaign to eradicate Hamas that has since killed more than 16,000 people, most of them women and minors, according to Gaza's Hamas-run government.

The only respite in fighting was a seven-day truce that ended Friday and saw scores of Israeli hostages freed by Hamas in exchange for more than 200 Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails.

One of those prisoners, 23-year-old activist Rouba Assi, told reporters after her release last week that Israeli prison authorities "took everything away" from Palestinian detainees.

Since October 7, they had been subject to a "state of emergency" announced by prison officials.

For detained Palestinians, there would be no more leaving their cell -- and therefore no more visits -- no more buying food from the canteen, no more power



in their electrical outlets, and more frequent surprise searches, authorities said in a statement.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club, an advocacy group that keeps a tally of detainees from the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem, has said visits from representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also stopped.

Under its guidelines on confidentiality, the ICRC has not commented on that claim.

Assi is uniquely placed to compare life on the inside before and during the war. Between 2020 and 2022 she was jailed for 21 months on charges of throwing stones and belonging to an illegal organisation, the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

She was arrested again after the start of the current war, along with 3,580 other Palestinians detained

so far, according to the Prisoners' Club. There are around 7,800 Palestinians prisoners in Israeli jails, the Club says.

During her latest stint, Assi found things were very different.

"In Damon prison (in northeast Israel) seven of us slept in a cell designed for three detainees, on the bare floor, without a mattress or a cover, despite the cold and regardless of one's age," she said.

Ramzi Abbasi, a Palestinian activist from east Jerusalem, was freed under the Israel-Hamas deal from Ketziot prison in the Negev desert. "They beat us day and night," the 36-year-old told AFP.

"Some prisoners had their legs or arms broken after October 7 and received no care." Approached several times by AFP, Israeli prison authorities declined to comment on the allegations.

Italy formally withdraws from China's Belt and Road project

AFP, Rome

Italy has formally withdrawn from China's vast Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, more than four years after becoming the only G7 nation to sign up, a government source said yesterday.

The long-expected decision was communicated to Beijing three days ago, according to Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera, without any official statement from either side.

An Italian government source confirmed to AFP that Rome had pulled out, without giving details beyond saying it was done in such a way as to "keep channels of political dialogue open".

Before coming to power last year, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said the decision by a previous government to join in 2019 was a "serious mistake".

Critics have denounced trillion-dollar investment scheme as a predatory "Trojan horse" aimed at buying political influence.

Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani said in September that membership "has not produced the results we were hoping for".

Indonesians protest against Rohingya refugees

Clash with police

AFP, Banda Aceh

More than one hundred Indonesians protested yesterday against Rohingya refugees who arrived on a western island by boat last week, calling for them to be relocated and clashing with police. The mostly Muslim Rohingyas are heavily persecuted in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, and thousands risk their lives each year on sea journeys to try and reach Malaysia or Indonesia. The last month has seen a spike in journeys to Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh from Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh -- a voyage of about 1,800 kilometres (1,120 miles) -- with more than 1,000 arrivals in the biggest such wave since a 2017 Myanmar military crackdown. A group of 139 refugees including women and children landed on Sabang island on Saturday, but locals threatened to push them back to sea and demanded that authorities move them. They were then relocated to a dock where they were kept in tents. Yesterday, dozens of police blocked a group of around 150 protesters who were trying to breach a gate and pushing officers to get to the area where the refugees were sheltering, according to footage shared on social media. "The people can convey their aspirations. We were only securing (the area)," said Sabang police chief Erwan.

Taylor Swift named Time person of the year

AFP, New York

Time magazine named US pop superstar Taylor Swift as its person of the year yesterday, calling the musical force of nature the "hero of her own story." Swift has smashed industry records this year with both her tour and the film of the globetrotting musical cavalcade that is estimated to bring in almost \$2 billion of revenue as her adoring fans flock to see her in the flesh. "Taylor Swift found a way to transcend borders and be a source of light... Swift is the rare person who is both the writer and hero of her own story," Time editor-in-chief Sam Jacobs wrote in a statement. "Much of what Swift accomplished in 2023 exists beyond measurement. She mapped her journey and shared the results with the world: She committed to validating the dreams, feelings, and experiences of people, especially women, who felt overlooked and regularly underestimated." The huge \$92.8 million opening earlier this year of Taylor Swift's "The Eras Tour" film set the tone for the 33-year-old "Cruel Summer" singer's 2023. Advance ticket sales for the movie topped \$100 million worldwide, theater operator AMC said, making it the best-selling feature-length concert film in history. ("Fans) had to work really hard to get the tickets... I wanted to play a show that was longer than they ever thought it would be, because that makes me feel good leaving the stadium," Swift told Time. This year, Swift's blossoming romance with Kansas City Chiefs player Travis Kelce has also brought the NFL a whole new wave of fans as her hundreds of millions of social media followers checked out her new squeeze. Born in Pennsylvania, Swift started writing country songs on guitar in her early teens.



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Myanmar's Yangon hit by fuel shortage

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's commercial hub Yangon is facing a fuel shortage, residents and junta-controlled media said yesterday, with hundreds of vehicles queuing up at dawn in the hope of securing petrol.

The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar newspaper said the shortage had begun on Tuesday and was "due to delays in oil delivery from Thilawa Port to filling stations", without providing further detail.

Most of Yangon's fuel arrives through the port, but the local kyat currency has plunged against the dollar since the military seized power in 2021, hitting importers' ability to pay for fuel shipments.

Dozens of cars and motorbikes lined up in the early morning in Yangon, AFP correspondents said.

In Bago region north of Yangon, some stations were limiting sales to 20 litres per customer.



Protesters hold a placard reading "The dead can't hear your apologies" during a gathering outside the UK Covid-19 Inquiry building in west London, yesterday as Britain's former prime minister Boris Johnson is inside giving evidence regarding his management of the pandemic. Johnson apologised for "the pain and the loss and the suffering" caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. PHOTO: AFP