

It's small but hard-won victory

Muslim Americans welcome first NY Eid school holiday

NEW YORK, Sept 23, (AFP): New York marks a milestone in the fight for equality Thursday when 1.1 million children in America's largest school district will take the day off to mark Eid al-Adha.

It is a small but hard-won victory at a time when American Muslims complain of growing Islamophobia and worsening anti-Muslim rhetoric following the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

For the first time, more than 1,800 public schools in New York will close for the Muslim feast of sacrifice, a day after also closing for Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar.

Mayor Bill de Blasio unveiled the new policy in March, announcing that New York public schools would get two days

off for Eid al-Fitr, which falls during the summer, and Eid al-Adha, in addition to major Christian and Jewish holidays.

Since then, city hall has added a further day off — Feb 8, 2016 — for Lunar New Year, celebrated by Asian-Americans.

"It is a huge victory to actually see the day come," says Linda Sarsour, a member of the Coalition for Muslim School Holidays and a New York activist with three children.

"As an imam as well as a parent I am very happy," agreed Imam Shamsi Ali, director of the Jamaica Muslim Center in Queens.

"I'm sure this kind of policy from the government side will push Muslims further to feel a sense of belonging," he said.

Muslim New York parents previously faced a quandary: keep their children at home to observe the holiday and skip class, or send them to school and let celebrations fall by the wayside.

There are an estimated seven to 10 million Muslims in America, of whom a million are believed to live in New York — about 10 percent of the city's population.

New York follows at least seven other school districts that close for Eid in New Jersey, Massachusetts and Vermont, but activists are still campaigning in other parts of the country.

Activists hope that embracing Eid in the school calendar will make Islam more mainstream and counter Islamophobia.

"It's a very tense time," Sarsour told

AFP. "No one can talk about Islam without talking about terrorism."

In the last two weeks alone, a Sikh American was so viciously beaten in Chicago and called a "terrorist" because of his dark skin, beard and turban that he wound up in the hospital.

In Detroit, a mosque was refused planning permission and in Texas, a 14-year-old Muslim teenager who is the son of Sudanese immigrants was arrested for building a clock that teachers thought was a bomb.

At the weekend, Republican candidate for president, African-American retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, said a Muslim should not be president of the United States.

Billionaire Donald Trump, top of the Republican polls in the 2016 race, was roundly condemned for not challenging a town hall questioner who said Barack Obama was a foreign-born Muslim.

Then there are daily headlines about extremists in Syria, arrests of American sympathizers and Islamist terrorism that many say feeds paranoia about Muslims in the United States.

Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the country's largest Muslim civil liberties organization, agreed that the holiday comes at the right time.

"Amidst a spike in anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Muslim rhetoric in our society as we see with Trump, Ben

Carson, and the arrest of a Muslim teenager, which sends a negative message, this sends a very positive message of inclusion," he said.

But if New York sets a precedent, it is still an uphill struggle.

"It was fabulous, oh my gosh!" enthused activist Zainab Chaudry, who was disappointed when Montgomery county in Maryland refused to make Eid a day off and removed all religious references to pre-existing Christian and Jewish holidays.

"It came as a shock to us. It was not what we were asking for," said Chaudry, co-chair of the group Equality for Eid, a position she shares with a Jewish council member.

MPs voice

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coming period, starting with intensive public awareness campaigns and to hold liable any security body that contravenes regulations of the Interior Ministry.

On another issue, Educational Affairs Committee member MP Hamoud Al-Hamdan said education plays a vital role in the realization of the development goals of Kuwait. He lamented the country is suffering due to the poor quality of academic outputs; hence, the need for practical solutions to improve the educational sector.

He confirmed the committee will soon finalize discussions on Jaber University, disclosing the panel members found out that the decree on the establishment of the university requires amendment. He said four successive education ministers laid down a plan to address the issue which was referred to the Fatwa and Legislation Department and everything will be finalized soon.

He added the State Audit Bureau has asked the Parliament to monitor the performance of all ministries, emphasizing that the deans and heads of academic departments should act on the comments of the bureau for the benefit of the educational sector.

Pilgrims Stand,

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than 1.5 billion Muslims.

This year's gathering is about the same size as last year's, with 1.4 million foreign pilgrims joining hundreds of thousands of Saudis and residents of the kingdom.

They are undeterred by a construction crane collapse at Makkah's Grand Mosque earlier this month that killed 109 people, including foreign pilgrims.

About 400 people were injured by the crane which was working on an expansion of Islam's holiest site.

Previously marred by stampedes and fires that killed hundreds, the pilgrimage had been largely incident-free for the past nine years after safety improvements.

The Hajj is among the five pillars of Islam and every capable Muslim must perform it at least once in a lifetime.

This year's gathering takes place against a backdrop of increased jihadist violence in some Muslim countries, a surge of the potentially deadly MERS virus and the war in Saudi Arabia's neighbour Yemen.

About 100,000 police have been deployed to secure pilgrimage sites and manage the crowds.

Authorities say they are on alert for possible attacks by extremists, after Islamic State group jihadists bombed security forces and Shiite mosques in the kingdom in recent months.

This year's Hajj also comes with Saudi Arabia leading an Arab coalition conducting air strikes and supporting local forces in Yemen against Iran-backed rebels.

Most Yemeni pilgrims performing the Hajj this year already reside in the kingdom.

Among other challenges facing Saudi authorities is potential transmission of the deadly Middle East Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV).

The capital saw a jump in infections last month, but health officials say there has never been a case of MERS infection among pilgrims.

The health ministry has mobilised thousands of medical workers to help ensure a virus-free pilgrimage and to care for routine ailments.

Pilgrims began the Hajj on Tuesday by entering ihram, a state of purity in which they must not quarrel, wear perfume, or cut their nails or hair.

During ihram, men wear a seamless two-piece shroud-like white garment, while women must wear loose dresses, generally also white, exposing only their faces and hands.

The clothing emphasises their unity, regardless of whether they spend the Hajj in Makkah's five-star hotels or in shabby highrise hostels.

"I'm hoping for mercy and that Allah accepts our prayers," said Pakistani pilgrim Abdeghafour Abu Bakr, 38, who came with friends.

Father pleads

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highest court confirmed the death sentence, leaving his son's fate in the hands of the king.

Nimr warned that if his son is put to death the minority Shiite community could react violently, something he does not want to happen.

"We don't need that; we don't need even one drop of blood," he said.

The youth is a nephew of Nimr al-Nimr, a Shiite religious leader who is also on death row.

Mohammed al-Nimr, a Dammam businessman, was in Riyadh to visit his jailed brother for the Muslim feast of sacrifice, Eid al-Adha which falls on Thursday.

Nimr al-Nimr was a driving force

US-trained Syrian rebels probing alleged defection

Moscow sees growing chance for international deal on Syria

BEIRUT, Sept 23, (Agencies): US-trained rebels who recently returned to Syria said Wednesday they have lost contact with one of their officers and that they are investigating reports he defected and handed over his weapons to al-Qaeda's branch in the country.

The allegations come only days after the group of about 70 rebels returned to Syria after training in Turkey as part of the US program to train and equip rebels to take part in the fight against the Islamic State group.

If confirmed, defection among the ranks of US-trained rebels would be an embarrassment to the program, which has already been criticized as offering too little too late and failing to provide enough protection for those trained rebels once inside Syria.

US officials have begun an overhaul of the efforts, including suggesting that the newly trained fighters operate as the New Syrian Forces alongside Syrian Kurds, Sunni Arab and other anti-Islamic State forces.

The US Central Command confirmed Monday the graduates have re-entered Syria with their weapons and equipment and were to operate alongside existing western-allied forces.

Another previous batch of rebels trained by the US had previously been hit hard by their rival, al-Qaeda branch in Syria.

Meanwhile, Moscow sees a growing chance to reach international agreement on fighting terrorism in Syria and resolving a conflict which has killed a quarter of a million people, a Russian diplomatic source said on Wednesday.

Diplomacy has so far failed to find a solution to the crisis, now in its fifth year, with international powers supporting rival sides and unable to overcome their differences over the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

With Assad facing increasing pressure from Islamic State and Western-backed rebels, Moscow has stepped up support for its long-time ally at the same time as it pushes a new diplomatic offensive on Syria.

It has increased arms supplies to the Syrian army and increased its military presence inside Syria, drawing warnings from Western nations — which oppose Assad — that it was destabilising the situation further.

It is not clear what agreement could be reached on the main sticking points in the conflict, but the Russian diplomatic source said the growing threat posed by Islamic State was driving new international efforts for a deal.

The Syrian regime has intensified its

behind demonstrations that began four years ago in Eastern Province.

Most of Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia's Shiites live in the east, and have complained of marginalisation.

Ali al-Nimr's father admitted that his son, then a high school student, had joined thousands of other people in protest.

But he said he is innocent of numerous other charges including burglary, attacking police and using a Molotov cocktail.

France's foreign ministry appealed Wednesday for a stay of execution and expressed concern about the case of the youth, "condemned to death even though he was a minor at the time of the incident," a spokesman said.

France opposes the death penalty in all circumstances, the spokesman added.

On Tuesday, UN rights experts also called for Ali al-Nimr's life to be spared. A statement said the youth he was reportedly tortured, coerced into a confession and denied adequate access to a lawyer before and during a trial that did not meet international standards.

"Any judgement imposing the death penalty upon persons who were children at the time of the offence, and their execution, are incompatible with Saudi Arabia's international obligations," the experts said.

Jazeera 'pens'

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attend the United Nations General Assembly.

Fahmy's wife Marwa Omara said she learned of the news from a TV set that was on at the prison while she was visit-



In this Sept 21 photo, Maamoun Abdul-Karim, the head of the Museums and Antiquities Department, shows a Syrian artifact preserved in Damascus after being delivered from various parts of Syria. Experts, conservators and local res-

idents are scrambling to document Syria's millennia-long cultural heritage that has been damaged by the country's war since 2011, by battles against the Islamic State group and by its intentional destruction. (AP)

Scientists slip 3-D cameras into Syria to scan antiquities

Experts scramble to document heritage

BEIRUT, Sept 23, (AP): Scientists are slipping 3-D cameras into Syria to local activists and residents to scan antiquities. A US-funded project aims to provide local conservators with resources to help safeguard relics. Inside Syria, volunteers scramble to document damage to monuments and confirm what remains.

The rush is on to find creative and often high-tech ways to protect Syria's millennia-long cultural heritage in the face of the threat that much of it could be erased by the country's war, now in its fifth year. Giving the drive new urgency, experts are desperate to stay a step ahead of the Islamic State group, which has ruthlessly destroyed and looted sites that fall into its hands as it spreads across Syria and neighboring Iraq.

The efforts are tempered by a

recognition of the realities — that in some cases the best that can be hoped for is to document ancient monuments in as great detail as possible so that if they are destroyed they can still be studied in the future, or possibly accurate replicas could one day be built. All acknowledge that nothing short of a military or political solution can stop the danger posed by the militants and the conflict.

The campaigns are also fraught with risks. Getting supplies to activists on the ground can expose them to retribution from IS militants or others suspicious of outside powers. As a result, the various efforts underway are mostly cloaked in secrecy, with their organizers reluctant to give specifics on their activities for fear of endangering those on the ground.

But among experts, there's a

feeling that something — anything — must be done.

"I don't want to be having this conversation with somebody three years down the road, and they say, 'Gee why didn't you start in 2015 when they (IS) only controlled three percent of the sites,'" said Roger Michel, whose Million Image Database, an Oxford Institute of Digital Archaeology project, began distributing hundreds of 3-D cameras around the region to activists.

Historical sites have been damaged constantly since the war began, struck by shelling and government airstrikes or exposed to rampant looting. Syrian government officials already say they have moved some 300,000 artifacts from around the country to safe places over recent years, including from IS-controlled areas.

air strikes on the jihadist-held ancient city of Palmyra, killing more than 100 people including civilians in recent days, a monitoring group said Wednesday.

The fierce raids follow the delivery by Russia of new arms including warplanes

to its ally Syria.

Raids by warplanes and helicopters using barrel bombs and missiles left at least 12 civilians and 20 jihadists dead on Tuesday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

Prominent Egyptian activists Yara Sallam and Sanaa Seif were also among those pardoned, according to MENA. Egyptian presidents usually pardon convicts for health or other reasons ahead of the Eid al-Adha, is one of the most important holidays in the Islamic calendar.

Fahmy's lawyer, Khaled Abu Bakr, confirmed the pardon for his client and said he hopes it will be "repeated with many others jailed."

"I was sure the president was going to issue such a decision. Mohammed is a professional and innocent journalist," Abu Bakr told the AP. "This decision will have positive impact on the media and international level."

On Tuesday in Australia, Greste attended the dedication of a war correspondents memorial at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull spoke to him and vowed to press Egypt for a pardon for him and his colleagues, according to Turnbull's Facebook page.

The long-running trial of the three Al-Jazeera staff is entangled in the wider political conflict between Egypt and Qatar, where Al-Jazeera is based, following the Egyptian army's 2013 ouster of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood member.

Meanwhile, Egypt's military announced Wednesday it was winding down its largest campaign in the Sinai against Islamists, following a 16-day operation in which it said scores of Islamic State group jihadists were killed.

The army said the campaign in the Sinai Peninsula had "achieved its goals" in destroying militant hideouts and equipment, in joint operations by special forces, armoured divisions and the air

forces. Dozens more were wounded in the strikes against targets including a militant headquarters in the city, which the Islamic State group seized along with its UNESCO-listed world heritage site in May.

force.

The next phase would see the military and police assert full control over the North Sinai towns of El-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah, it said in a statement.

In previous statements on the campaign, the military had announced having killed scores of militants and captured dozens.

Oman helps

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itself as a quiet mediator by hosting talks involving the rebels and other parties.

It also has been involved in other hostage releases in Yemen, including that of Houthi-held American freelance journalist Casey Coombs. Also released in August was World Bank consultant Isabelle Prime, a French national who thanked Oman's sultan for aiding her release.

For Oman, there's a vital self-interest in helping neighboring Yemen end its war before the unrest seeps across the border.

"Oman considers itself a vulnerable country because it's a small country which is in the middle of many issues, like Yemen to the south, Pakistan to the north, Iran to the north and Saudi Arabia," said Marc Valeri, the director of the Center for Gulf Studies at Britain's Exeter University. "This vulnerability means they want to be friendly with all the other parties around."

That doesn't stop Oman from criticizing its neighbors. On Saturday, Oman summoned Saudi Arabia's ambassador to protest what it called a coalition airstrike on its ambassador's

residence in Yemen's rebel-held capital, Sanaa. Oman demanded an explanation for the "unacceptable" attack and warned that a continuation of the war "might pose a threat to the region's stability." Saudi Arabia denied carrying out the strike.

Oman, more than any of the other five Arab states that make up the Saudi Arabia-dominated Gulf Cooperation Council also has made a point of cultivating ties with its larger, non-Arab neighbor, Iran.

Oman and Iran share control of the vital Strait of Hormuz, the narrow and heavily trafficked waterway at the mouth of the Arabian Gulf that is the route for nearly a third of all oil traded by sea. Qaboos has paid visits to Iran, including a 2013 trip that made him the first foreign leader to visit since President Hassan Rouhani took office.

Newswatch

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Abu Bakr al-Turkmani, who died September 10 in a strike in Tal Afar in northern Iraq, was a "slave facilitator" who had been involved in the sexual trafficking of Yazidi minority women, a US defense official separately told AFP.

"He was an ISIL administrative emir, he was part of Al-Qaeda in Iraq before joining ISIL and was a close associate to multiple ISIL senior leaders in Iraq," Pentagon press secretary Peter Cook told reporters, using an alternative acronym for the Islamic State group.

DIYARBAKIR: Turkish jets launched air strikes on a Kurdish militant camp in northern Iraq late on Tuesday, targeting a facility being used as an "education and logistics" hub, security sources said.

The jets took off from an air base in Diyarbakir, southeast Turkey, the sources added. Turkish security forces have regularly targeted camps belonging to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) since the collapse of a ceasefire in July. (RTRS)

CAIRO: Ali Salem, a famed Egyptian satirical writer whose works include one of the Arab world's most popular comedy plays, died Tuesday in his home in Cairo of natural causes, Egypt's state-run Middle East News Agency said. He was 79.

Salem's writings include 15 books and 25 plays. His most famous work was "School of the Troublemakers," a

1971 comedy play about a class of riotous teenagers reformed by a female teacher.

Salem courted controversy by visiting Israel in 1994, travelling by himself without even telling his wife or three daughters. He

drove a car across the border after Israel and the Palestinians signed the 1993 Oslo peace agreements. He said he had been thinking about visiting the country since late President Anwar Sadat made the trip in 1977, leading to Egypt's becoming the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel, in 1979.

Salem's book "A Drive to Israel" sold more than 60,000 copies, a best-seller by Egyptian standards. But he was shunned in Egypt for the visit and fellow writers labeled him a sellout or collaborator. (AP)

TEHRAN: Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency is reporting that the country's army has unveiled a new locally-made reconnaissance drone that can stay aloft for up to six hours.

The Tasnim report Wednesday says the drone dubbed Mohajem (91 miles a range of 500 kilometers (312 miles) with a maximum speed of 200 kph (125 mph). The report says it was manufactured by the self-sufficiency department of the Islamic Republic Air Force.

Since 1992, Iran has had a self-sufficiency military program to produce light and heavy weapons. (AP)

PARIS: Global aviation regulators are being urged to delay plans to introduce mandatory tracking of passenger jets, 18 months after the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370, according to an industry magazine report.

The move to require all aircraft using remote skies to report their position every 15 minutes is the first stage in a broader plan under discussion at the United Nations' aviation agency, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

It follows widespread calls for better aircraft tracking triggered by the disappearance of MH370 in March last year carrying 239 passengers and crew. (RTRS)