

LOCAL

Amir's envoy delivers letter to Sultan Qaboos of Oman

Saudi King relays Amir's letter to Cabinet

KUWAIT CITY, March 6, (KUNA): His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah's Envoy, Deputy Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah delivered a letter on Tuesday to Sultan Qaboos Bin Saeed of Sultanate of Oman from His Highness the Amir.

In his letter, His Highness the Amir thanked Qaboos bin Saeed and the Omani people for their support and participation with the recently held Kuwait national celebrations.

His Highness the Amir's Envoy Deputy Sheikh Mohammad Al-Abdullah Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah, on Tuesday visited the Royal Opera House in Muscat.

Sheikh Mohammad, who was accompanied by Hussein bin Ali bin Abdulatif, Advisor at Sultan's court, toured the opera house halls.

Meanwhile, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz on Tuesday discussed with executives the contents of a letter he received from His Highness the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

Presiding over the Saudi Cabinet's weekly meeting, King Salman briefed the executive body on a phone conver-



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sation he held with Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Al-Abadi, in addition to his encounters with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri and Tunisian Interior Minister Lotfi Brahmi.

The Saudi Cabinet also discussed defense minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman's recent visit to Egypt, which resulted in a number of agreements sealed between both nations to deepen bilateral ties.

to include the grilling motion filed by MPs Riyadh Al-Adsani and Adel Al-Damkhi against him in the agenda for Wednesday's session.

Al-Adsani and Al-Damkhi submitted the grilling request to Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanim on Wednesday.

Al-Ghanim explained that according to Article 135 of the Assembly's bylaw, it is not permissible to discuss the grilling motion until at least eight days from the date of submission, that is, if it is not an urgent matter and with the concerned minister's approval.

In another development, Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Sheikh Khalid Al-Jarrah Al-Sabah announced the plan to build a new prison and deport foreign inmates to address the overcrowding issue in the Central Prison.

He made the announcement when the Assembly discussed Tuesday responses to parliamentary questions about the current situation in the Central Prison.

On the kingdom's participation in the 37th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva, the Cabinet said it proved the country's unwavering commitment to protect human rights. The Saudi officials commended neighboring Bahrain for foiling a number of "terrorist attacks" on its soil, while it denounced the ongoing violence in the besieged Syrian enclave of eastern Ghouta.

They include improving government services for private businesses, supporting private sector growth, developing and boosting the workforce and enhancing public financial sustainability.

Through these points Kuwait aims for a place in the first third of the ease of doing business World Bank rankings and for a 20 percent increase in private sector contribution to the GDP by 2021.

It also aims to increase the number of locals employed privately from 70,000 to 100,000, link education programmes to workforce needs, regulate the employment of foreign labour and limit the national financial deficit to less than KD 3 billion (USD 10 billion) all by 2021.

Sheikh Khalid affirmed the Interior Ministry is dealing with the current situation in the Central Prison; hence, the plan to build a new prison and deport foreign inmates whose countries are ready to accept them.

He disclosed the capacity of the Central Prison is 2,500 but the current number of prisoners reached 6,000; affirming he briefed the chairman and members of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee on the current situation in the Central Prison and plans of the Interior Ministry to solve the problem.

On the parliamentary question about the installation of jamming devices in telephones in the Central Prison, Sheikh Khalid clarified such devices were installed in the past but they have been removed.

KUNA adds:

An ambitious ongoing five-year state reform programme is focused on increasing Kuwait's economic com-

petitiveness through improving the level of government services and supporting businesses and the national labour force.

The national project for economic and financial sustainability, which has been in effect since 2016, was conceived through the combined effort of experts and local officials, ministers told a parliament session earlier.

It aims to hand the private sector a pivotal role in developing the economy and increase non-oil revenue through effective government management, which will improve the business climate on the mid-term.

It does not replace the currently ongoing development Kuwait 2035 Vision strategy, but supplements the project aimed to diversify from oil and gas reliance, they explained.

Kuwaiti lawmakers received an in-depth briefing on the matter from Deputy Prime Minister and State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh, Finance Minister Nayef Al-Hajref, Minister of Social and Labour Affairs and State Economic Affairs Minister Hind Al-Sebeeh and Minister of Commerce and Industry and State Youth Minister Khaled Al-Roudhan.

The national programme is being distributed amongst 50 government bodies, all of which are undergoing scrutiny through a governance system based on KPIs (key performance indicators).

A total 50 strategic articles have been summarized in four prominent points carrying clear goals and realistic deadlines.

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UAE tightens

and social values of the UAE," a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula home to Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

Those affected need to register by the end of June or face 5,000-dirham (\$1,360) fines.

The UAE, while liberal in many regards compared to its Middle Eastern neighbors, has strict laws governing expression.

Journalists working in the country require government-issued press cards. People also have been jailed for their comments online.

NATO 'forces'

He said troops from 19 member countries have stepped up training Iraqi forces in several fields.

NATO "is scaling up its training, like countering IEDs (improvised explosive devices), military medicine, maintenance of equipment and in some other areas", he said.

"We are also planning to help Iraqis to establish military schools and academies to educate their trainers to improve its capacity to form its own trainers," Stoltenberg said.

In addition, NATO will work with Iraq "on institutional reform, including fighting corruption", he added.

He also praised the "enormous transformation" of Iraqi forces since 2014, when IS launched its lightning offensive and seized swathes of territory.

"The Iraqi forces in 2014 are totally different from the Iraqi forces in 2018, there was an enormous transformation," the NATO chief said.

Pause in

Turkey and allied Syrian rebels are waging a weeks-long offensive on Afrin, which is held by a Kurdish militia that makes up the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

At a news conference on Tuesday, the SDF announced it would pull fighters out of areas of eastern Syria, where they have been fighting pockets of IS jihadists, in order to shore up defences in Afrin.

"We took the difficult decision to pull our forces out of Deir Ezzor province and battlefronts against DAESH (IS) to head to the Afrin battle," said Abu Omar al-Idlibi, an SDF commander, saying his fighters numbered 1,700.

Idlibi spoke to AFP in the football stadium in Raqqa, which the SDF captured from IS in October with help from the US-led international coalition.

US and coalition officials have said they will not get involved in the Afrin fighting and expressed concern it would detract from the SDF's operations against IS.

"We fought DAESH. We helped the coalition in Raqqa, but without the coalition defending its partners," Idlibi said.

"Our people in Afrin are our priority. Protecting them is more important than the international coalition's decisions."

He said his units, mostly made up of Syrian Arabs from the north of the country, were to be redeployed in the coming week.

Ankara and allied Syrian rebels launched their offensive against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Afrin on Jan 20.

They have since captured 40 percent of the enclave, including a strip along the border with Turkey, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based war monitor, said on Tuesday.

SDF commander Sevger Himo told AFP: "These forces leaving will affect the war against DAESH" even if fighting will continue on the Deir Ezzor front.

Kurdish men and women fighters had grown increasingly reluctant to fight IS in recent weeks, as fellow Syrian Kurds came under attack in Afrin.

The Pentagon said on Monday that Kurdish fighters had left the Deir Ezzor front, leading to an "operational pause" in their offensive against IS.

An SDF commander earlier told AFP that hundreds of fighters from Afrin had returned to defend their relatives.

The Observatory says more than 170 civilians have been killed since Jan 20.

Turkey denies the reports and says it takes the "utmost care" to avoid civilian casualties.

The monitor says 300 pro-Ankara rebels and nearly 320 Kurdish fighters have also lost their lives.

Since pro-regime fighters were deployed to help the Kurds in Afrin last month, some 58 of these "popular forces" have been killed, it said.

Violence halts

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the estimated 400,000 people trapped under the government's siege. The UN's humanitarian office said the convoy carried food for 27,500 people.

But it said the Syrian government offloaded 70 percent of the health supplies, including trauma and surgical kits and insulin, before allowing the convoy to enter eastern Ghouta.

The government routinely removes lifesaving medical supplies from aid convoys, in a pattern of denying such aid to civilians living in opposition areas. UN officials have complained for years about such actions by the Syrian government.

Russia's Defense Ministry said it was extending an offer to allow armed rebels to leave eastern Ghouta with their families and weapons. Russia has been a staunch ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, helping him turn the tide of the bloody civil war in his favor.

Meanwhile, Turkey's Foreign Ministry said the country plans to establish camps in nine locations in northern Syria to house people displaced by fighting amid Ankara's offensive against Syrian Kurdish fighters.

Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said on Tuesday that the camps would be built in a zone controlled by Turkish-backed forces, as well as in Idlib province where Turkish forces are trying to establish a "de-escalation zone" under an agreement reached between Turkey, Russia and Iran.

Aksoy said the camps would host a total of 170,000 people.

Plane crashes

A Russian military cargo plane crashed as it was descending to land at an air base in Syria on Tuesday, killing all 32 people onboard, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

The Russian military said an An-26, with 26 passengers and six crew members onboard, crashed just 500 meters (1,600 feet) from the runway. The military blamed the crash on a technical error.

Russia, a key ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, leases the Hemeimeem military base in Syria, near the Mediterranean coast.

The base is far from the front lines of the conflict, but came under shelling in December. The Russian military insisted the cargo plane did not come under fire, while saying it would conduct a full investigation.

The military did not immediately identify the victims.

President Vladimir Putin offered his condolences to the families of those killed in the crash after receiving a briefing by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the Kremlin said in a statement on Tuesday.

The Interfax news agency quoted a spokeswoman for Russia's Investigative Committee, which handles high-profile cases, as saying Russian investigators have been dispatched to Syria to look into the crash.

Syrian market

UN war crimes investigators said Tuesday that a Russian plane was apparently behind an airstrike in November on a Syrian market that killed 84 people, an attack which could amount to a war crime.

The findings, reported by the UN's Commission of Inquiry on Syria, were the first time the group has pinned responsibility for civilian deaths in Syria directly on Russia.

In the same report, the Commission of Inquiry said the US-led coalition in the war against the Islamic State group failed to properly vet the target of a March 20, 2017 air raid that killed 150 civilians sheltering in a school in northern Syria.

"The international coalition should have known the nature of the target," the report said, adding that the oversight had put the coalition in violation of humanitarian law. The coalition took responsibility for the strike, saying it had targeted 30 IS fighters it believed were hiding in the building.

"All parties share guilt for completely disregarding the rules of war," said the commission's chairman, Paulo Pinheiro, at a press conference introducing the report. He said parties were resorting to "increasingly cynical methods" to secure objectives in Syria's complex civil war.

The report documented widespread abuses of international law, including leveraging aid in combination with siege warfare to force civilians "to surrender or starve." It said pro-government forces had bombed hospitals and clinics in opposition-held territory in northwest Syria.

Newswatch

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CAIRO: A passenger on an EgyptAir flight from the Gulf state of Oman to Cairo assaulted crew members on Tuesday but was quickly overpowered and handed over to authorities, Egyptian aviation officials said.

The Boeing 737-800 with 78 passengers returned to Muscat, Oman's capital, 30 minutes after it took off from there, and the crew handed over the passenger to the police.

The plane later left for Cairo, arriving four hours behind schedule. (AP)

BERLIN: Lawmakers from Germany's far-right AfD party were in Syria on Tuesday, expressing "surprise" at scenes of normal life in Damascus as they push their bid for Berlin to start sending refugees back to the war-torn country.

The group of six, comprised of four members from Germany's national parliament and two state lawmakers, arrived in Damascus on Monday for talks with pro-regime officials and a tour they say is aimed at getting a real idea of the situation on the ground.

"Since the German media's reporting does not offer a trustworthy way of assessing the actual situation in Syria, the goal of the trip is to get an understanding of the humanitarian situation on the ground and the rebuilding efforts in the areas liberated from terrorists," they wrote in a statement. (AFP)

BANGKOK: The senior UN official for human rights says it is impossible to send Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh safely back to Myanmar because it appears that widespread and systematic violence against them inside Myanmar, amounting to ethnic cleansing, is continuing.

UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights Andrew Gilmour said in a statement Tuesday that during a four-day visit to Bangladesh, refugees told him "credible accounts of continued killings, rape, torture and abductions, as well as forced starvation" in the western Myanmar state of Rakhine. Myanmar's government denies such abuses and announced in January that it was ready to accept the refugees back. (AP)

WASHINGTON: The top US defense intelligence official said Tuesday that it's not just Russia but China too that is seeking faster, futuristic weapons to challenge America's know-how of state-of-the-art military technology.

Army Lt Gen Robert Ashley told the Senate Armed Services Committee that China is developing long-range cruise missiles — some capable of reaching supersonic speeds. He says China also is working on a bomber with a nuclear mission, which would give Beijing a nuclear triad of land, air and sea-based nuclear weapon systems. (AP)

WASHINGTON: The Trump administration says it's launching a new effort to make electronic medical records easier for patients to use. Medicare will play a key role.

The MyHealthEData initiative will be overseen by the White House Office of American Innovation, headed by presidential son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Electronic medical records were ushered in with great fanfare but it's generally acknowledged they've fallen short. Different systems don't communicate. Patient portals can be clunky to navigate. Some hospitals still provide records on compact discs that newer computers can't read. (AP)

SANAA: Dozens of Yemeni mothers have marched in the southern city of Aden to demand information about their sons, who are allegedly detained by the United Arab Emirates in secret prisons.

The protesters carried pictures of missing relatives and banners demanding that the Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemeni rebels, which includes the UAE, either charge or release their relatives.

Female police officers prevented marchers from filming the event. Lawyers have been pressing authorities to allow families to visit their imprisoned relatives. (AP)

THE HAGUE: Nearly 200 people who joined the jihad in Syria and Iraq as well as at least 175 children have ties to the Netherlands and are still in the strife-torn countries, mostly with the Islamic State group, Dutch authorities said Tuesday.

"More than half of the minors are younger than four years, with at least two-thirds having been born on the battlefield," the Dutch intelligence and security agency AIVD said in its 2017 annual report.

Of around 280 people who have left the Netherlands since the start of Syria's civil war in 2011 to join jihadist groups, about 185 were still in the region, said the AIVD, also warning that an increasing number of them were coming back home. (AFP)

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