

Swap hailed as 'huge step'

After Americans freed, Yemen sides swap prisoners

SANAA, Yemen, Oct 15, (AP): Yemen's warring sides on Thursday kicked off a long-awaited prisoner exchange, a day after the country's Iran-backed rebels freed two Americans and released the remains of a third who had died in captivity.

The exchange is part of a UN-brokered deal between the rebel Houthis and a Saudi-backed coalition backing Yemen's internationally recognized government in the yearlong civil war. It wasn't immediately clear if the swap was related to the freeing of the Americans the previous day but the timing of the events appeared significant.

The conflict in the Arab world's poorest country erupted in 2014, when the Houthis seized the capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north. The Saudi-led coalition,

backed by the US, launched a military intervention months later to restore Yemeni President Abed Rabu Mansour Hadi's government to power.

A rebel-run satellite TV channel broadcast the start of the swap as three planes carrying freed Houthi prisoners touched down in Sanaa.

Another two planes took off from Sanaa, one carrying freed Yemeni government prisoners and another carrying 15 Saudis and four Sudanese who had fought alongside government forces, the Houthis' Al-Masirah TV said. The planes headed to Seyun airport in southern Yemen and Abha airport in Saudi Arabia.

Last month, the UN announced that the Houthis and the government side had agreed to exchange more than 1,000 prisoners, marking the

first phase of a prisoner-release plan reached earlier this year. The swap was being coordinated by the International Committee of the Red Cross in Yemen.

Hundreds of Houthi politicians and military commanders lined up on the tarmac in Sanaa, where a red carpet was rolled out and a military band played. As they disembarked, the released rebels, all dressed in white robes, raised their clenched fists chanting "God is Great," and "Death to America and Israel."

Later Thursday, the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV aired live footage of freed Yemeni government prisoners disembarking from their plane in Seyun airport in the eastern province of Hadramawt, which is controlled by forces loyal to Yemen's Saudi-backed government.

So far, a total of 360 Houthi rebels arrived in Sanaa, and another 110 are still expected to arrive later today, Abdel Qader Mortada, the head of the Houthi Committee for Prisoners Affairs told reporters.

The exchange is expected to last through Friday with the release of another 200 Houthi rebels and 150 government prisoners, Mortada added at a news conference.

The prisoner-swap deal was seen as a breakthrough during 2018 UN-brokered peace talks in Sweden. Both parties agreed then to several confidence-building measures, including a cease-fire in the strategic port city of Hodeida. Implementation of the tentative peace plan, however, stumbled amid ongoing military offensives and distrust between the two sides.

The Houthis' Information Minister

Daif Allah al-Shamy hailed the swap as "a huge step."

"Today, it is not only the prisoners' families that feel happy, but all Yemenis," he said. "As for those who were not included in this swap, remain assured that we have plenty of tools for further exchanges."

Occasional releases of dozens of prisoners over the past two years have served as gestures of good faith, stoking hopes the factions would implement what the UN has described as the war's "first official large-scale" exchange. The two sides committed earlier this year to swap over 1,400 detainees.

On Wednesday, the Houthis freed US citizens Sandra Loli and Mikael Gadida and released the remains of Bilal Fateen, the White House and officials in the region said. That development was apparently the result of mediation by Oman, which has acted as a mediator in the Mideast.

Kieran Ramsey, director of the administration's hostage recovery cell, said Loli and Gadida would soon be on their way back to the United States. Kash Patel, a deputy assistant to President Donald Trump who worked on the deal, told The Wall Street Journal that Loli had been held by the Houthis for about three years and Gadida was held captive for about a year.

The Houthis, who did not comment on the release of the Americans, said about 240 rebels returned to Sanaa on two Omani flights.

Among the returnees were wounded rebels who traveled to Muscat during peace talks in Sweden two years ago.

News in Brief

JERUSALEM: Hundreds of Israelis protested outside Israel's Supreme Court on Wednesday, calling for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to be investigated in a scandal surrounding a \$2 billion submarine deal with Germany.

Several Israeli businessmen, including confidants of Netanyahu and a former commander of the navy, are suspects in a graft scandal connected to the purchase of warships and submarines from German conglomerate ThyssenKrupp.

The protesters, many in cars that had driven in convoys from northern and southern Israel, carried makeshift submarines on top of their vehicles as they passed the court.

Netanyahu, who is on trial in three other corruption cases, was questioned but not named as a suspect in the submarine scandal.

Dan Halutz, a former military chief of staff, accused Netanyahu of hiding relevant information from defense officials when deciding to purchase the submarines from Germany.

Wednesday's protest took place after emergency restrictions limiting public demonstrations expired. Those restrictions, imposed under a new lockdown, allowed people to demonstrate only within a kilometer (half mile) of their homes.

Netanyahu is standing trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust in the three corruption cases in which he is accused of trading favors in exchange for lavish gifts and favorable news coverage.

He has professed innocence, saying the charges are trumped up by a biased justice system and a liberal media.

Netanyahu has also been facing growing dissatisfaction with his handling of the coronavirus pandemic and the economy, with weekly protests against him being held for over three months.

The country entered a second nationwide lockdown last month, dealing another blow to an economy already hit hard by the pandemic.

Netanyahu announced Wednesday that the lockdown has brought down infection rates and that the government will soon announce its plans for an exit strategy. (AP)

DUBAI: The UAE said on Thursday coronavirus cases increased by 1,398 to 111,437.

Two fatalities were registered as the death toll rose to 452, state news agency WAM, quoted health authorities as saying.

Meanwhile, some 1,666 people were cured from the virus, raising the total recoveries to 103,325. (KUNA)

MANAMA: Bahrain said on Thursday daily confirmed coronavirus cases rose by 349 as deaths increased by two to 288.

Some 397 new recoveries were also reported for a total of 72,561, as compared to 3,722 currently active cases, according to a health ministry statement. (KUNA)

DOHA: Qatar's health ministry said its coronavirus case tally on Thursday reached 128,803 after 200 people were confirmed as testing positive in the last day.

The number of recoveries in the Gulf state stands at 125,802 after 218 more people were cured, according to a ministry statement. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: Oman's Health Ministry on Wednesday reported 564 new coronavirus infections in the past 24 hours.

The total infections have climbed to 107,776, Oman New Agency (ONA) quoted the ministry's statement as saying.

Some 93,908 people recovered from the disease, while the mortalities stood at 1,061, it added. (KUNA)

TEHRAN: Iran's daily confirmed coronavirus cases rose by 4,616 on Thursday as 256 people succumbed to the deadly pandemic in the last 24 hours.

This brings the country's overall caseload to 517,835, ministry spokeswoman Dr Sima Sadat Lari said in a press statement.

The death toll has now reached 29,605, while on the other hand, a total 418,054 people have been cured since the beginning of the outbreak. (KUNA)

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Minister of Health Mai Al-Kaila announced Thursday eight deaths from COVID-19, as well as 442 cases in the past 24 hours.

The minister said in a statement that 81 recoveries took place as well. (KUNA)

CAIRO: The Egyptian Ministry of Health said Wednesday that 128 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus, while six others died due to the viral illness over the past 24 hours.

The latest figures took the overall infections up to 104,915 and the death toll to 60,77, the ministry's spokesman Dr Khaled Mujahed said in a press statement.

The number of treated virus patients went up by 79 to 97,920, he added. (KUNA)

RABAT: Morocco reported Wednesday 41

new coronavirus fatalities and 3,387 infections in the past 24 hours, according to the Ministry of Health's daily update on the killer virus.

The new figures take the overall number of COVID-19 related deaths and infections up to 2,726 and 160,333 respectively, noted the ministry.

It pointed out that there are currently 525 COVID patients receiving treatment at the intensive care units.

The ministry also reported the recovery of 2,497, raising the total to 133,959. (KUNA)

BEIRUT: Lebanon's Ministry of Public Health announced 1,377 new coronavirus infection cases, which raises the cumulative number of confirmed cases to 57,246.

In its daily briefing, the ministry added that 20 deaths have been registered over the past 24 hours as well, bringing the total number of deaths to 499.

Recoveries from the virus reached 25,164. (KUNA)

ALGIERS: The Algerian government announced on Wednesday end to the ban forced on the Friday congregational and 'Fajr' (early morning) prayers in mid-March as part of efforts to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Mosques nationwide, with occupancy of less than 1,000 worshippers, will be allowed to hold the Friday and Al-Fajr prayers as from Nov 6, provided that worshippers comply with the preventive measures, including social distancing and wearing face-masks, the government said in a statement.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, approved the decision after consultations with the higher Islamic affairs council and the interagency scientific committee, the statement added. (KUNA)

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's confirmed coronavirus cases climbed by 472 as related deaths rose by 19 over the past day, the health ministry said on Thursday.

The death toll now stands at 5,127 as confirmed cases hit 341,062, according to ministry data, which showed the number of recoveries as having risen by 507 to 327,327. (KUNA)

BAGHDAD: Iraq's coronavirus deaths increased by 65 to over 10,086 as the confirmed cases rose by 3,587, the health ministry said on Thursday.

This brings the caseload across the country's provinces, including the Kurdistan Region, to 416,802, read a ministry statement.

On the other hand, a total 350,752 people have been cured of the virus, according to official figures. (KUNA)

AMMAN: Jordan said on Thursday it recorded 25 deaths and 2,459 new cases of COVID-19, summing up the total cases recorded to 33,009 and 282 deaths.

A joint statement by the Parliament and the Health Ministry said, 99 patients recovered with 27,500 tests done tallying up to 1,518 million lab samples since the virus began its dissemination.

All of Jordan's provinces are under extensive lockdown control since Thursday midnight until 12:00 am, as this lockdown will be imposed at the end of every week until further notice based on decisions by the government, in order to prevent the spread of the virus. (KUNA)

TEHRAN: Iran's cybersecurity authority acknowledged cyberattacks on two governmental departments this week, state media reported Thursday.

The cyberattacks occurred Tuesday and Wednesday and were under investigation, the state-owned IRAN daily newspaper said.

While the report did not say which government departments were targeted, it called the attacks "important" and said some other departments temporarily took down their online services as a precaution against further attacks.

The brief report did not blame any group or country for the attacks.

Iran occasionally says it has thwarted cyberattacks on its infrastructure, although it has disconnected much of its infrastructure from the internet after the Stuxnet computer virus, widely believed to be a joint US-Israeli creation, disrupted thousands of Iranian centrifuges in the country's nuclear sites in the late 2000s.

In December, Iran said it halted a massive cyberattack on unspecified "electronic infrastructure" but provided no specifics on the purported attack.

Last year, Washington officials said that US military cyber forces launched a strike against Iranian military computer systems, as President Donald Trump backed away from plans for a more conventional military strike in response to Iran's downing of a US surveillance drone in the strategic Arabian Gulf.

Tensions have escalated between the US and Iran since Trump in 2018 withdrew America from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers and began a policy of "maximum pressure" on Tehran.

Tensions rose further after a US airstrike killed a top Iranian general at Baghdad's airport in January. Iran retaliated with a ballistic missile strike on Iraqi bases housing American troops, wounding dozens of US troops. (AP)



In this photo released by UK Parliament, Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson makes a statement in the House of Commons in London on Oct 12, 2020. The British government has carved England into three tiers of risk in a bid to slow the spread of a resurgent coronavirus. The northern city of Liverpool is in the highest category and will close pubs, gyms and betting shops. (AP)

Waiting for 'Brexit': Another deadline, likely another delay

Trade deal has potential of saving many jobs

Libya says human trafficker sanctioned by UN arrested

CAIRO, Oct 15, (AP): Libyan security forces said they have arrested one of the country's most wanted human traffickers in the capital, Tripoli, more than two years after the United Nations' Security Council imposed sanctions against him.

The arrest of Abdel-Rahman Milad, who also commanded a Coast Guard unit in the western town of Zawiya, was announced in a statement late Wednesday by the Interior Ministry of the UN-supported government in Tripoli.

The ministry said Milad, better known as Bijia, is wanted on charges of human trafficking and smuggling of fuel.

France's Embassy in Libya welcomed the arrest as a key development in fighting human trafficking in the war-torn nation.

Libya has been plagued by corruption and turmoil since a NATO-backed uprising toppled and killed longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. It is split into two administrations. The one in the west, including Tripoli, is ruled by the UN-supported government, while the east-based government is supported by powerful military commander Khalifa Hifter.

Oil-rich Libya has emerged as a major conduit for people from Africa and the Middle East fleeing wars and poverty and hoping to reach Europe.

In June 2018, the Security Council imposed sanctions on Milad and five other leaders of criminal networks engaged in trafficking of people and migrants from Libya. At the time, Milad was described as the head of the Coast Guard unit in Zawiya "that is consistently linked with violence against migrants and other human smugglers."

UN experts monitoring sanctions claimed Milad and other Coast Guard members "are direct-

ly involved in the sinking of migrant boats using firearms." Milad denied any links to human smuggling and said traffickers wear uniforms similar to those of his men.

The timing of his arrest raises questions, given that he moved freely in western Libya over the past two years and fought alongside Tripoli-allied militias to repel a yearlong attack on the capital by Hifter's forces. Milad appeared in a video footage in June threatening to uncover alleged corruption of ruling bodies in Tripoli.

His arrest could threaten the western Libya militia alliance and give their rivals - Hifter's forces - a window to rally support. This could also explain why Tripoli authorities have not dared arrest Milad or other militia leaders in the past years.

Later, hundreds of Milad's supporters rallied against his arrest in Zawiya and elsewhere in western Libya, accusing Interior Minister Fathi Bashaga of cracking down on certain armed group in Tripoli while sparing others, such as militias from the city of Misrat, from where the minister is from.

A spokesman for Libya's Interior Ministry did not immediately respond to phone calls and messages seeking comment.

Jalel Harchaoui, a research fellow specializing in Libyan affairs at the Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, said Bashaga has an interest in showing strength to his multiple audiences, including the international one.

"Bija had become somewhat a celebrity outside Libya over recent years," he said, adding that there is a tendency to focus on individuals, blaming them for the migrant situation in Libya, rather than a structurally dysfunctional system involving many foreign governments and international players.

BRUSSELS, Oct 15, (AP): It is yet another deadline day in the tortuous, four-year trek called Brexit but - Spoiler Alert! - most likely nothing will happen.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had set the first day of the European Union summit on Thursday as the deadline to get a trade and security deal to replace its EU membership that expired on Jan 31. A transition period is set to end on Jan 1, forcing negotiators to work fast if any deal still is to get legislative approval and legal vetting in the little time left.

EU leaders opening their two-day summit have left the talks to the bloc's negotiating team, but with the need for haste they are aiming to re-inject momentum into negotiations that have been sluggish on the most important issues.

"It is for the UK now to commit itself and there are far too many areas where things don't progress as they should," said Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte.

Beyond the call for speed, the leaders are also set to flaunt their unity, something Britain has failed to dent during years of talks on the withdrawal conditions and now on a bare trade deal with the new non-member. It is indicative that Johnson's call that Oct 15 would be the deadline has made little impact.

Johnson's office said after a video call with EU leaders Charles Michel and Ursula von der Leyen that the prime minister "looked forward to hearing the outcome of the European (Summit) and would reflect before setting out the UK's next steps."

Few doubt that Johnson will lean toward continuing the talks for a few more weeks. The negotiations remain in a deep rut over differences on the issues of state aid, common standards of regulation and fishing rights.

"Britain has already imposed so many deadlines that came and went," said Rutte, arguing it was time to concentrate on content instead. During the Brexit divorce talks several deadlines were imposed as a final chance to get a deal, only to see both sides grudgingly negotiate further afterward.

All acknowledge that little progress was made recently on the key issues. Johnson's office said that the prime

minister in his talks with the two EU leaders "expressed his disappointment that more progress had not been made over the past two weeks."

A trade deal has the potential to save hundreds of thousands of jobs and would avoid worsening the economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic.

"With COVID-19 having such a devastating impact on society and on the economies in the United Kingdom and across Europe, obviously I think leaders will not want to hit citizens with a shock in terms of what a no-deal would represent, a significant additional shock to our respective societies and economies," Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin said.

Overall, the EU says Britain is trying to retain the advantages of EU membership without the commitment to play by the bloc's rules. Britain says it is baffled it can't get a quick deal with generous free trade concessions like Canada got a few years ago.

But EU nations like France want the access of UK companies to the EU market to be very strict because of the nation's sheer proximity and the similarity in goods and service that are traded.

They want to make sure British firms won't be able to undercut their continental rivals with weaker environmental and social regulation and excessive state subsidies.

France is viewed, especially by Britain, as one of the nations most unwilling to compromise, especially on the issue of French boats' access to British fishing waters. "Under any circumstance, our fishermen should not be sacrificed for Brexit," French President Emmanuel Macron said. The fisheries issue was supposed to be settled in July to give the industry time to adapt, but that was another deadline which fell by the wayside.

Since last month, the member states have also become ardent in demanding legal guarantees on governance of any deal after Johnson introduced legislation in September that breaches the Brexit withdrawal agreement he himself signed with the EU only last year.

If left trust in the Johnson government shattered, and the European Parliament, which must approve any deal, has vowed not to approve any trade deal if the UK government doesn't withdraw this legislation, Britain says it will keep the legislation, with the option to use it if necessary.