

SAUDI KING SALMAN STARTS EGYPT VISIT

CAIRO: Saudi King Salman yesterday started a five-day visit to Cairo in a show of support for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, with the leaders due to sign a raft of investment deals. Saudi Arabia has been the key backer of Sisi since the then-army chief in 2013 overthrew his Islamist predecessor Mohamed Morsi, whose Muslim Brotherhood movement was viewed with suspicion by Riyadh.

It has pumped billions of dollars in aid and investment into Egypt's battered economy, and the two heads of state are expected to ink more investment agreements on Friday amounting to about \$1.7 billion. Live footage on state television showed Sisi greeting the 80-year-old Salman at Cairo airport, before heading off in a convoy to the presidential palace.

The two will hold meetings later in the day and on Friday, when they will sign 14 agreements that include a \$1.5 billion deal to invest in the Sinai Peninsula, an Egyptian government official said. Salman is expected to address the Egyptian parliament on Sunday, state media reported.

Egyptian media gave full coverage of the visit, with state television welcoming Salman to his "second country" and playing celebratory music as his plane touched down in Cairo. "This is the first official visit by King Salman, whose valuable and honorable positions in support of Egypt and its people will never be forgotten," the presidency said in a statement. "Egypt accords great importance to this visit," it said, adding the leaders would discuss regional issues and economic cooperation.

The visit follows months of reports in both Saudi and Egyptian newspapers of strained ties over Cairo's unwillingness to participate fully in Saudi-led military operations in Yemen. Egypt had announced it would join the operations against Iran-backed Shiite rebels in Yemen with ground troops if needed, but appears to have balked at the prospect of becoming mired in the conflict.

However, Saudi Arabia has played a key role in propping up Egypt's economy, whose vital tourism industry has been devastated by years of political turmoil and jihadist attacks. For Saudi Arabia, which is in competition with regional rival Iran, keeping Egypt under its aegis is crucial.—AFP

MONEY, JIHADIST THREAT DRIVE SUPPORT FOR NEW LIBYA GOVT

TRIPOLI: In seeking to establish its authority in the chaos of Libya, the UN-backed new unity government has two major trump cards—control of state funds and fears of rising jihadist influence. Prime minister-designate Fayez Al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord has so far managed to win broad support, experts and local sources say.

It faces major challenges, and suffered a setback on Wednesday when the head of a rival Tripoli-based authority, Khalifa Ghweil, contradicted an earlier announcement from his administration that it would stand down. But by undercutting support for its rivals among Libya's armed groups and positioning itself as a bulwark against the Islamic State group, the Sarraj government appears to be gaining ground.

After losing control of state coffers to the new administration, the Tripoli authority is unable to keep up payments to the armed groups that propelled it to power, a politician close to the unity government told AFP. "Some members of armed groups are no longer being paid and others fear suffering the same fate," he added, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"These armed groups prefer supporting the unity government" for now, he said, warning that "the risk of violent clashes remains" if Sarraj's administration does not bring the militias fully on board. Sarraj, who is operating under a UN-sponsored power-sharing deal agreed by some Libyan lawmakers in December, surprised observers with a sudden arrival in Tripoli under naval escort last week.

Winning militia support

He has since moved to restore some semblance of order to Libya, which collapsed into disarray after the 2011 ouster and killing of longtime dictator Moamer Kadhafi. The country has been split between rival powers since a militia alliance seized control of Tripoli in mid-2014, forcing the government backed by the internationally recognized parliament to flee to the country's far east.—AFP



CAIRO: A handout picture released by the Egyptian Presidency on April 7, 2016 shows Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi (right) meeting with Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz in the capital.—AFP

FOUR AUSTRALIANS DETAINED IN LEBANON ON KIDNAP CHARGES

SUSPECTED OF SMUGGLING CHILDREN OUT OF THE COUNTRY

BEIRUT: Lebanese authorities have detained four Australians, including journalists, on suspicion they were involved in the abductions of two children in Beirut the previous day, police officials and Australian media said yesterday.

A British citizen has been detained as well on suspicion that he planned to smuggle the children out of Lebanon on his boat, the officials also said. The five are being questioned over the kidnapping of Noah and Lahela Al-Amin, the son and daughter of a Lebanese man and an Australian woman. The children have been living in Beirut since their father Ali Al-Amin brought them from Australia last year, the officials said.

The kidnapping, in which the children were taken Wednesday after an attack on their Lebanese grandmother as she was taking them to school near their home in Beirut, was part of a family dispute, the police said. Yesterday, police first said the mother and the children were at the Australian Embassy but later, the Lebanese intelligence department declared the mother was detained and was being held by police with her children, state-run National News Agency reported. It did not say where they were found but added that the children were safe.

'Risky operation, risky story'

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media, did not give the names of the Australians and the Briton. The Australian detainees include journalists working for Channel Nine's 60 Minutes, who were filming an episode on the issue in Lebanon. Among the detainees is TV presenter Tara Brown.

60 Minutes reporter Michael Usher told Nine News in an interview broad-

cast yesterday that Australian consular officials in Beirut were in contact with the 60 Minutes crew. "Our obvious concern is that we have not been able to speak to the crew for going on 15 hours now and that's obviously been very concerning for all of us here," Usher said.

Usher added that the journalists detained in Beirut are very experienced and prepared for the difficulties of covering what he called, "a risky operation, a risky story - this desperate Australian mum trying to get her two Australian children home."

A Beirut police official said the five detainees were being held at a police station near the place where the boat was parked in the Lebanese capital. During questioning, the journalists said they came on a humanitarian mission and that their aim was not to kidnap the

children, he added.

Channel Nine issued a statement earlier Thursday saying that: "We can confirm a crew from 60 Minutes has been detained in Beirut. We won't be giving out any more details, other than to say we are working with authorities to get them released and back home ASAP." A Channel Nine employee told The Associated Press in Australia that the 60 Minutes crew was not physically present when the children's kidnapping took place.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said her ministry has been in contact with Channel Nine. A statement from Bishop said Australian authorities are "urgently seeking to confirm the crew's whereabouts and welfare, and have offered all appropriate consular assistance." —AFP



BEIRUT: Two employees enter a compound that houses the Australian Embassy.—AP