

INDIA AND UAE TARGET SECURITY TRADE AS CROWN PRINCE VISITS

NEW DELHI: India and the United Arab Emirates are eyeing a string of defense, infrastructure and other deals when Abu Dhabi's crown prince starts a visit to New Delhi late Wednesday, an official said. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan will hold talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the two-day trip aimed at bolstering trade which reached \$59 billion last year. The trip comes six months after Modi became the first Indian premier in three decades to visit the UAE, as he seeks to attract more foreign investment, including from the oil-rich state's sovereign wealth fund.

"The visit takes place after we decided to elevate our relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership during the PM's August visit," India's foreign ministry secretary (east) Anil Wadhwa told reporters. The crown prince, deputy chief of the UAE armed forces, arrives late Wednesday accompanied by a large business delegation, before talks with Modi the next day. Counter-terrorism is expected to be on the

agenda, with India seeking exchanges of information with the UAE about regional security threats. The UAE is part of the US-led coalition against the Islamic State group that has seized parts of Syria and Iraq.

Delhi hopes to advance agreements on jointly producing defense equipment, as India undertakes a massive modernization of its ageing military, Wadhwa said, without specifying any deals. Delhi is also seeking to secure investment in major infrastructure projects as the government overhauls its dilapidated railway and road networks. Abu Dhabi is the largest of seven emirates making up the UAE, which is India's third largest trading partner after the US and China and is a major supplier of oil. The UAE is also home to around 2.6 million Indian expatriates who mostly work on construction sites. UAE state minister for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash said ahead of the visit the two countries were seeking to increase trade by 60 percent within five years. — AFP



NEW DELHI: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (left) and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan wave to the crowd after the prince arrived at an air force base yesterday. — AFP



MOSUL: This file photo taken on January 31, 2016 shows the Mosul Dam on the Tigris River. — AFP

IRAQ SAYS RISK TO MOSUL DAM AFFECTING COMBAT AGAINST IS

GROWING CONCERN OVER KEY BUT FRAGILE STRUCTURE

BAGHDAD: The risk of Iraq's largest dam collapsing and unleashing a huge wave onto Mosul is affecting plans to retake the city from jihadists, an adviser to the premier's office said. The army is deploying thousands of soldiers to a northern base in preparation for operations to recapture the city, the largest urban centre in the Islamic State group's self-proclaimed caliphate.

Concern has grown that a failure of the unstable dam, which is about 40 kilometers northwest of the city, could wipe out much of Mosul and flood large parts of Baghdad. The Americans "frequently refer to Katrina" and say a collapse of the Mosul Dam would be "a thousand times worse", the adviser to the office of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told reporters.

Hurricane Katrina ravaged the US city of New Orleans in 2005, killing nearly 2,000 people and leading to a wave of violence and looting that completely overwhelmed the authorities. "If the dam busts, the centre of Mosul goes under water by about a 40-50 foot wave," the adviser said, speaking on

condition of anonymity. "It just disappears, so 500,000 people (are) killed within a few hours."

He said another dam in Samarra, hundreds of miles downstream, would also burst. It is estimated the wave would still be several meters high when it reaches Baghdad. A US assessment published Monday on the Iraqi parliament's website said Mosul Dam was "at a significantly higher risk of failure than originally understood."

'Nightmare scenario'

High-level contacts have taken place between the US administration and Baghdad, with Washington pushing for repair work to be undertaken urgently. Since the dam's completion in 1984, Iraq has sought to shore up the foundation by injecting mortar-like grout into cavities that develop under the structure. Regular minor seismic activity in the area is now seen as a potential threat. There are also fears that IS could weaponise the dam.

"If the attack on Mosul goes well, there is a nightmare scenario that

Daesh (an Arabic acronym for IS) could itself strike the dam as they withdraw from Mosul," the adviser said. He said the US-led coalition, whose primary role in retaking Mosul would be to carry out air strikes, is concerned that a major bombing campaign could have an impact on the dam.

"They are worried about it, they are thinking carefully about what kind of munitions they use in the Mosul operation," he said. Colonel Steve Warren, the spokesman for the international anti-IS operation, said the dam was far enough from Mosul for strikes not to be a threat to its integrity. Another concern as Iraq begins deploying troops southeast of the city is a mounting economic crisis.

'Moral responsibility'

The government of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region is struggling to pay its peshmerga forces, who currently control the dam and will likely play a significant part in any Mosul assault. Speaking in Rome yesterday, Abadi said "we have a moral responsibility, a national responsibility to guar-

antee the protection of this dam." Iraq has awarded a contract to Italy's Trevi to repair and maintain the dam.

"We need to speed up the arrival of this company in Iraq and also to guarantee the security of its technicians and workers," said Abadi. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who has said Rome would deploy some 450 troops to protect the dam, stressed yesterday that Iraq and Italy were "working together for the security of the area."

"When the Italian force comes in, the Italian force is responsible for the security of the dam, so there's no dispute over who's responsible," and Kurdish forces who hold the dam will withdraw, the adviser said. He said Abadi hoped the contract-estimated at 284.5 million Euros (around \$320 million) — would be signed within two weeks. The World Bank is helping to finance it. A warm winter could lead to early snow melt and Trevi is expected to swiftly begin work with a seven-month phase to repair the dam's lower gates. Another 18 months are needed for the rest of the major work. — AFP

ACTIVISTS RECALL MUBARAK OUSTER AS A DISTANT DREAM

CAIRO: As the sun began to set on February 11, 2011, the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square wavered between hope and despair, waiting for a signal that Egypt's autocrat would step down. Hosni Mubarak had been expected to resign the day before, after 30 years in power. Instead, he delivered a truculent speech insisting he would stay on until September.

But the military had already decided his fate: he would have to go after days of protests had paralyzed the country. So just before sunset, the announcement came. Mubarak was gone, the army was now in control and Cairo exploded in euphoric celebration. Five years later, that day has a dreamlike quality for activists who say they are now living through the darkest times of their lives. "I was ecstatic," said Mona Seif, a human rights campaigner who was in Tahrir Square that night. Seif said she knew then that activists like her still had a struggle ahead. But she said she thought "the hardest thing has passed", referring to Mubarak's overthrow.

There are now more activists in prison than at any point during Mubarak's reign. Seif has a brother behind bars-prominent leftwing activist Alaa Abdel Fattah-and her sister Sanaa was in jail until being pardoned recently. Their father, Ahmed Seif, died in 2014 with both children incarcerated. Egypt's preeminent human rights lawyer, he spent his last year alive in courtrooms, trying to free them and other activists. Alaa and Sanaa were allowed to attend his funeral, but wearing white prison garb.

Bloodiest crackdown

Egypt is now ruled by another leader who came from the military. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was elected in 2014 after overthrowing the unpopular Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, and unleashing the bloodiest crackdown on dissent in the country's modern history. Protests that are not approved by the police are banned. Alaa, Sanaa and many other activists were jailed for violating that law.



CAIRO: Egyptian human rights activist, Heba Morayef, poses for a photograph. — AFP

Hundreds of protesters, mostly Morsi supporters, have been shot dead in the streets, and the government is locked in a war with Islamist jihadists who have killed hundreds of policemen and soldiers. Reports of police abuses are also on the rise. Activists who had remained sanguine as the country lurched from one crisis to another after Mubarak's ouster are now reluctant even to talk about that day. "No, leave me alone. It's too depressing," one dissident said. For them, February 11 was not just about removing a dictator, although that in itself had been unimaginable just 18 days previously when the protests began.

It was also about empowerment, social justice and self respect in a country that brimmed with daily humiliations and abuses by corrupt officials and police. "The nature of despair (now) is so different," said Seif. "Under Mubarak, you didn't have a lot of hope. But you haven't experienced a moment with the full potential of hope and open space and then the fall down from it."

'The undoing'

Timothy Kaldas, a non-resident fellow with the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, was also in the square on February 11 five years ago. "This is the undoing of what they accomplished," he said of what has happened since. "What makes it so difficult to stomach and upsetting is not simply that the situation is very bad right now, but the fact that for a brief moment we created an opening, we forced open political space and public discourse."

Heba Morayef, a prominent rights defender who went to Tahrir to celebrate Mubarak's ouster, remembers that day as "pure joy". But "very soon we were back to doing the usual work as human rights activists". Rights activists fought abuses and military trials during the interim period of army rule until mid-2012, and then were busy during Morsi's year in power, which was marred by crackdowns on opponents. — AFP

ERDOGAN BLAST US OVER SUPPORT FOR SYRIA KURDS

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday launched a bitter attack on NATO ally the United States over its support of Syrian Kurdish groups, saying it was creating a "pool of blood" in the region. In an impassioned and sometimes angry address, Erdogan asked whether the United States was an ally or was working with groups Ankara lists as terror organizations. Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its People's Protection Units (YPG) militia to be terror groups allied to Kurdish rebels inside Turkey, a position not shared by Washington.

"Hey America... As you have never recognized them (as terror groups) the region has turned into a pool of blood," Erdogan said. "Hey America! How many times have we had to tell you?" he said. "Are you together with us or are you with the PYD and YPG terror groups?" Erdogan launched the attack in one of his regular speeches at the presidential palace to loyal municipal leaders known as muhtars that have become a forum for his most vehemently anti-Western comments.

"Is there a difference between the PKK and the PYD? Is there a difference with the YPG?" growled Erdogan. "We have written proof! Allies don't tell each other my enemy's enemy is my friend. You must have principles. But there are no principles here."

'Friends can disagree'

His remarks escalated a row between Washington and Ankara over the role of Kurdish fighters in the struggle against Islamic State (IS) jihadists in Syria. The dispute also risks further complicating the search for a solution to Syria's five-year conflict, drawing a wedge between two key members of the anti-IS coalition and driving another nail into the coffin of a process of peace talks. In a further

twist, a Syrian Kurdish group yesterday opened a representation in Moscow, which is currently in the throes of a diplomatic crisis with Ankara and is working to tighten ties with the Kurds.

"This is a historical moment for the Kurdish people," claimed Merab Shamoyev, chairman of the International Union of Kurdish Public Associations, adding that those present at the ceremony had ties to the PYD. Turkey on Tuesday summoned the US envoy to Ankara in protest after the US State Department said Washington did not recognize the PYD as a terror group and would continue to support its operations in Syria. "Even the best of friends aren't going to agree on everything," State Department spokesman John Kirby said Monday. "Kurdish fighters have been some of the most successful in going after Daesh (IS) inside Syria." Ankara has also expressed outrage over a visit last week by US presidential envoy Brett McGurk to the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane where he met YPG fighters.

'Serious Crisis'

Turkey says the Syrian Kurdish groups are simply a branch of the rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is recognized as a terror group by the United States, and has carried out a string of deadly attacks in Turkey in the last few months. Can Acun, a researcher with the Ankara-based Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, said Turkey was facing a "serious crisis" with the United States on the issue. "We don't know if the US is using the Syrian Kurds for short term tactical reasons or in the long term. If it's the second, then bilateral relations will fray," he said. Air strikes by the Syrian regime and its Russian allies have sent tens of thousands more people fleeing to the border with Turkey, which is already home to some 2.5 million refugees from Syria and hundreds of thousands from Iraq. — AFP

SYRIANS RECOUNT 'HELL' OF ALEPPO LIFE UNDER FIRE

KILIS: Syrian farmer Mahmud Turki was sitting on his couch at sunset watching the news with his family after eating supper. Then an air strike hit his home and turned his life upside down. His story is typical of accounts of the "hell" that is life in the war-scarred region around the northern city of Aleppo, where up to 31,000 people have fled as government forces press an offensive against rebels, according to the UN.

"The moment of the air strike... nobody can describe it," Turki-stitches still in his head and his body covered in bruises-said from his hospital bed in neighbouring Turkey, where he was among just a few allowed across for treatment. "I lost consciousness. The roof fell on me and on my children. I remember hearing the voice of my wife asking me if I was alive or dead," he said. Turki, 45, was admitted to hospital in the border town of Kilis on Friday after being pulled alive by his friends from the rubble of his home in Minnigh.

'How can we endure it?'

Fierce fighting in Aleppo province-sparked by a week-long government assault backed by Russian air support-have displaced tens of thousands of people. Alaa Najjar also arrived in Turkey on Friday to be treated for a shoulder injury incurred during an aerial bombardment in Marea, also just north of Aleppo.

"It was like hell. We couldn't stand the bombings. Even the animals couldn't stand them," he told AFP, saying there were up to four air strikes a day. "I had a kitten. When the kitten heard the sound of the planes, she ran directly under the bed. If animals were intimi-

dated that much, how can human beings endure it?"

Russia launched a bombing campaign in Syria last year at the request of President Bashar Al-Assad, saying it was targeting the Islamic State group and other jihadist organizations. The West has accused Russia of targeting more moderate factions that oppose Assad's regime, and Syrian activists say the strikes have killed civilians, allegations Moscow dismisses as "absurd". Russian backing has helped Assad's forces make significant advances in recent months - including its latest offensive seeking to encircle rebel-held areas of Aleppo and sever their supply lines to Turkey.

Surrounded on all sides

Rebel fighter Mohammad crossed the border on Tuesday, walking with crutches and bandages around his right leg and a finger. "The situation is very bad. People are fleeing. The town was completely destroyed by Russian air bombardment," the 30-year-old-whose father was killed when six Russian air strikes hit his town-said. "We are besieged by the Russians on one side, the YPG (Syrian Kurds) from the west and Daesh (Islamic State) from the east, and the (Syrian) regime from the other side." Aleppo was once Syria's thriving economic powerhouse, home to several World Heritage sites including its famed ancient souk and citadel.

But it has been ravaged by war and divided since mid-2012 between government control in the west and rebel control in the east. Regime air strikes in the east, where they also use barrel bombs, have caused

massive destruction, rendering parts of whole neighborhoods virtually unlivable.

Rebels also fire mostly crude and unguided missiles into the west, often killing civilians. Fleeing Syrians have been massing for days around the Bab Al-Salama border gate across from Turkey's Oncupinar border point, which remains closed.

'The murderer Putin'

Turkish officials say the border is kept open for "emergency situations," including the evacuation of the injured like Turki and Najjar. Ambulances and aid trucks are seen coming back and forth throughout the day. Turki was taken to Turkey in an ambulance before his family who arrived three days later.

Taking AFP to their room where his daughter Raghad was sleeping and four-year-old son Mussa was with his wife, Turki said his two children had skull fractures that required surgery. The father asked little Mussa, with a bandage on his head: "Who attacked us?" Mussa answered: "Bashar's air strikes."

Turki lashed out at the international community for lack of action on Syria and denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin over Moscow's bombing campaign. "There is no international community, no United Nations, no Geneva. NGOs are just a lie. The Security Council is also a lie," he said. He poured scorn on Putin's claim only to be targeting Islamic State and other jihadist groups, pointing sarcastically to his children and saying: "They are Daesh members hit by Putin's air strikes." "They are Daesh. The murderer Putin, the killer of children." — AFP