

News

Hariri says he's free in Saudi and will return 'soon'

BEIRUT: Saad Hariri, whose resignation as Lebanon's prime minister a week ago sent shockwaves across the region, said yesterday he is "free" in Saudi Arabia and will return to Lebanon "very soon". In an interview from Riyadh with his party's Future TV, Hariri brushed aside rumours that he was under de facto house arrest in the kingdom, from which he announced his surprise departure. "I am free here. If I want to travel tomorrow, I will," Hariri said. "I will return to Lebanon very soon," Hariri said, adding later that he would land in Beirut "in two or three days".

Hariri, 47, announced he was stepping down from his post in a televised address on November 4 from Riyadh, and has yet to return to his native Lebanon. The statement sent shockwaves across the region as tensions rise between Riyadh and Tehran, which back opposing sides in power struggles from Lebanon and Syria to Yemen.

At the time, Hariri accused Iran and its Lebanese ally Hezbollah of taking over his country and destabilizing the broader region. "We cannot continue in Lebanon in

a situation where Iran interferes in all Arab countries, and that there's a political faction that interferes alongside it," he repeated yesterday in apparent reference to rival movement Hezbollah. "Maybe there's a regional conflict between Arab countries and Iran. We're a small country. Why put ourselves in the middle?"

'Rescind resignation'

Wearing a suit and tie and with a Lebanese flag in the background, the former premier looked tired yesterday and spoke softly but firmly throughout the interview. Hariri, who also holds Saudi citizenship, told journalist Paula Yaacobian that he wrote his resignation himself and wanted to submit it in Lebanon, "but there was danger". He also appeared to lay down an exit strategy, saying he would be willing to "rescind the resignation" if intervention in regional conflicts stopped. "We need to respect the disassociation policy," Hariri said, referring to an agreement among Lebanese political factions that they would not interfere in Syria's six-year war.

He appeared to be alluding to Hezbollah's military intervention on behalf of the Syrian government, to which Hariri is opposed. Lebanese President Michel Aoun has yet to formally accept Hariri's resignation and said the premier has been "restricted" in his movements. Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah said Friday that Hariri was "detained in Saudi Arabia, he is banned from returning to Lebanon". — AFP

Qatar investigates alleged currency...

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"If this financial warfare is true, it is disgraceful and dangerous not only to Qatar's economy but the global economy," Sheikh Saif told AFP. "One of the financial institutions stopped trading in riyals for a few days and it was only when we reached out to them" that it resumed, he said. Qatar's intelligence agencies are carrying out an investigation and "have engaged with law enforcement officials in the relevant jurisdictions", he said.

The Qatari claim comes just days after The Intercept, a US-based investigative website, said it had

uncovered a UAE plot to "wage financial war" on Doha. It claimed leaked emails belonging to the UAE's ambassador in Washington, Yousef Al-Otaiba, revealed a complex plan to attack the riyal through bond and derivatives manipulation. The plan allegedly aimed to destabilize Qatar's economy to the extent that it would have to give up the right to host the football World Cup in 2022.

Sheikh Saif said Qatar had become aware of the currency issue in July but was revisiting the issue following recent media reports. "Definitely they are attacking 2022 in one way or another," he said. Qatar is the first Arab country to be chosen to host the FIFA World Cup and has launched massive construction projects in preparation, triggering a huge influx of migrant labor. The UN's labor agency on Wednesday closed a three-year probe into the alleged mistreatment of those workers, praising a reform plan agreed by the emirate. — AFP

Trump offers to mediate in South...

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cooperation, including joint development and jointly strive to uphold peace and stability in the South China Sea," Xinhua reported.

China claims nearly all of the strategically vital sea, through which \$5 trillion in shipping trade passes annually. It is also believed to sit atop vast oil and gas deposits. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also have claims in the sea, and the dispute has long been seen as a potential trigger for conflict in Asia. Vietnam has courted support from Washington in the row, as it and other claimants have been powerless to stop China's efforts in recent years to cement its claims by building artificial islands in disputed areas.

Those islands are capable of serving as military bases, and some of the rival claimants are concerned that China will soon establish de facto control of the waters. Tensions spiked this year when Vietnam suspended an oil exploration project in an area of the sea also claimed by Beijing, reportedly over pressure from its powerhouse communist neighbor. In 2014, China moved an oil rig into waters off Vietnam's coast, sparking violent protests in several Vietnamese cities. Trump's offer came just before he flew to the Philippine capital of Manila for another regional summit.

However, his proposal was not immediately accepted by the Philippines, which under President Rodrigo

Duterte has sought to defuse tensions with China over the row in favor of closer economic ties. "We thank him for it. It's a very kind, generous offer because he is a good mediator. He is the master of the art of the deal," Philippine Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano said when asked about Trump's offer. "But of course the claimant countries have to answer as a group or individually and not one country can just give an instant reply because mediation involves all of the claimants and non-claimants."

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said he had discussed the dispute with Xi when they met on the sidelines of APEC in the Vietnamese city of Danang on Saturday. "He assured us again: 'Do not worry, you have all the rights of safe passage. That will also be applicable to all countries,'" Duterte told reporters after arriving back in Manila. But that assurance appeared to be based on a premise of China controlling the waters, and whether it would allow other countries to pass through them.

Today, China and ASEAN are expected to announce in Manila that they have agreed to begin talks on a code of conduct for the sea. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang will promote the agreement as an important breakthrough. Filipino foreign department spokesman Robespierre Bolivar told reporters last week. However, the talks are not expected to begin until "sometime next year" and, at China's insistence, any agreement will not be legally binding, Bolivar said. Vietnam had been pushing for the code to be legally binding. But with the Philippines acceding to China's demands, ASEAN agreed in August that it would not have any legal force. China agreed in 2002 to begin talks on a code, but has delayed actually doing so while carrying out its expansionist strategy. — AFP

Isolated Qatar campaigns to protect 2022 World Cup

SHEFFIELD, England: The birthplace of modern football is now an unassuming site: A couple of pitches with no stands for supporters, and a ramshackle indoor facility where damp rises on the walls and paint peels from the goalposts. When Sheffield FC formed in this northern English steel city 160 years ago, the wealth awash in the modern game was unimaginable to the founders of the world's first soccer club. The symbol of how vastly football has changed is thousands of miles away in the Gulf, where stadiums are springing up in the Qatari desert and tens of billions of dollars are invested in infrastructure to ensure a tiny nation can host the 32-team World Cup in 2022.

But Olive Grove, where the first rules of the modern game were conceived by Sheffield FC's founders, was the latest stop this week for Qatar World Cup leader Hassan Al-Thawadi on a mission to convince the global football community that his country remains a worthy host of the FIFA showpiece. Seven years after the controversial vote and five years until kickoff, doubts linger about Qatar's suitability and right to host the Middle East's first World Cup.

"I believe we will always be in campaign mode," Thawadi, secretary general of Qatar's World Cup organizing committee, said at the self-styled "Home of Football" in an interview with AP. "Most host nations or host cities suffered from criticism." Perhaps, but none on the scale faced by Qatar, which was unprepared for the sharp scrutiny that followed victory in the secret ballot that took the game's biggest showcase to the smallest country yet.

The greatest threat to Qatar's hosting status initially came from corruption investigators, who were troubled by some of the bid conduct but ultimately found there was no improper activity that swayed the vote. Censure came from labor watchdogs who believed a form of modern slavery formed the backbone of World Cup construction, and Qatar was compelled to safeguard rights and conditions for migrant workers. While progress has been made in a region unaccustomed to providing such protections, Qatar still faces demands to be more transparent about the cause of worker deaths and to eradicate exploitative practices like the "kafala" sponsorship system which binds workers to their employer. "The World Cup is a catalyst and an engine for accelerated reforms," Thawadi said.

Now more powerful forces are at play threatening the



SHEFFIELD: Hassan Al-Thawadi poses for a photo following an interview on Nov 9, 2017. — AP

World Cup: Four Arab countries have severed diplomatic ties and placed Qatar under a blockade since June in a move claimed to stop the natural-gas-rich country from supporting terrorism - charges denied by Thawadi. "For whoever may want to bring this World Cup into a political debate, that is an action that they are doing unilaterally," he said.

However sure Thawadi is, the World Cup will be played as scheduled from Nov 21 to Dec 18, 2022 - contentiously chosen by FIFA to avoid the fierce summer heat in the usual June-July slot - and he is clearly troubled by attempts to undermine the tournament. A day after speaking to AP in Sheffield, Thawadi ducked out of the royal box at Wembley Stadium in London just before watching England play Germany to launch a broadside against what he perceives as efforts by Qatar's regional rivals to bring down the World Cup.

Dubai's security chief has already said the only way to end "Qatar's crisis" was to give up the event, though he later said he was referring to the financial impact of hosting. An Emirati minister followed up by tweeting that Qatar's hosting of the tournament should "include a repudiation of policies supporting extremism & terrorism". Lobbying firms backed by the nations opposing Doha have increasingly targeted the World Cup, while Twitter has been promoting anonymous paid posts attacking Qatar's fitness as a tournament host, citing corruption allegations and worker abuses.

"We refuse to have this World Cup used as political pawn or a political tool because we believe in separating politics from sports ... and using sports as a means of resolving conflict," Thawadi said in the Wembley library. "I hope that the blocking nations see reason to be able to participate and join for the sake of the region benefiting out of this World Cup." — AP

Dubai Air Show opens with Emirates'...

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"As your president I'm going to do everything I can to unleash the power of the American spirit and to put our great people back to work," Trump said at the time. "This is our mantra: Buy American and hire American."

Sheikh Ahmed made a point to say the deal will help create more jobs, echoing Trump's mantra. The deal was signed in the presence of Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, who also serves as the United Arab Emirates' prime minister and vice president. "The order will take Emirates' total (number of) wide body aircraft of the Boeing to 204 aircrafts, units worth over \$90 billion," Sheikh Ahmed said. "This is a long-term commitment that supports hundreds of thousands of jobs, not only at Boeing but also throughout the aviation supply chain."

Trump and the White House made no immediate comment on the sale amid the president's trip to the Philippines yesterday. Emirates' business has suffered under Trump's travel bans affecting predominantly Muslim nations, as well as the recent ban on laptops in airplane cabins. Emirates said it slashed 20 percent of its flights to the US in the wake of the restrictions, though Dubai International Airport remains the world's busiest international travel hub.

Emirates now relies solely on the Airbus 380 and the Boeing 777 for its flights, making it the largest operator of both. It now has 165 Boeing 777s in its fleet today. Last week, the US plane manufacturer secured an order valued at more than \$37 billion at list price for 300 of its single-aisle and double-aisle planes during Trump's visit to China. Trump also was present for the signing ceremony last month between Boeing and Singapore Airlines for 39 new aircraft, including 19 of the 787 Dreamliner, in a deal worth up to \$14 billion.

While a big sale, the Dubai Air Show opened yesterday on what seemed to be a quieter note. The only other major sale for airplane manufacturers involved Azerbaijan Airlines, which will buy five Boeing 787-8s, two other freighter aircraft and landing gear maintenance from it for some \$1.9 billion. It's a far cry from 2013, when airlines made \$140 billion in new orders before the collapse of global oil prices. Prices have rebounded recently to around \$60 a barrel.

Other airlines than Emirates are taking part, but missing from the trade show this year is one of the region's largest long-haul carriers, Qatar Airways, amid a diplomatic fallout between Qatar and four Arab nations. Qatar Airways previously had played a big role in the Dubai Air Show, reserving a large pavilion and displaying its latest aircraft to visitors. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Bahrain cut ties with Qatar in June over its ties with Iran and its support of Islamist groups, accusing the small Gulf state of supporting extremists, charges it denies. The Arab quartet cut direct flights with Qatar and closed their airspace to Qatari aircraft. — AP



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