



An aerial view shows the wreckage of a train transporting gas after it derailed and exploded in the northeastern Bulgarian village of Hitrino yesterday. —AFP (See Page 10)

## US COMEDIAN'S SHOW CANCELED IN SAUDI ARABIA

**RIYADH:** A performance in Saudi Arabia by US stand-up comedian and actor Mike Epps has been cancelled, its organizers said, after complaints from Islamic hardliners. The show, scheduled for next week, was one of numerous events lined up to begin introducing entertainment to the conservative Islamic kingdom, where alcohol, cinemas and theatres are banned. "Dear clients, we regret to inform you that the Mike Epps event has been cancelled", the organizing company, Master Events, said on Twitter, promising a full refund.

Epps was to appear at Princess Noura bint Abdulrahman University, a campus exclusively for women. "The show was cancelled by the university and not by us as organizers," Master Events said. Twitter users had started a hashtag, "Hollywood at Noura University", calling for the show's cancellation because it would not fit with local traditions. Epps has featured in films including "The Hangover", about the aftermath of a drunken bachelor party in Las Vegas.

The university has denied being behind the Epps show, saying a third party rented the conference hall and the event "was licensed by the concerned authorities". Entertainment programs began in October when New York theatrical group iLuminate performed at the Princess Noura University. Hundreds of men and women, side-by-side, hooted their appreciation and clapped to the hip hop beat. The show was followed by WWE wrestling, which took place before a male-only crowd at a separate venue. Many Saudis spend their entertainment dollars in neighboring Bahrain and Dubai. — AFP

# TRUMP: AMERICA'S REALITY TV PRESIDENT IN WAITING

**NEW YORK:** If the 2016 presidential election was the planet's biggest circus then Donald Trump's transition from tabloid tycoon into leader of the Free World has become America's ultimate reality TV show. From cabinet appointments to his newly embraced flattery for President Barack Obama, from intimidating companies to heckling a union leader, Trump is spinning as only he knows how a news cycle obsessed with the most extraordinary political upset in modern US history.

Day after day, prospective appointees troop in and out of Trump Tower, ride up and down the golden elevators - the same props used in his long-running reality TV show "The Apprentice" - in full glare of television cameras. Trump uses some of the oldest reality tricks in the books: Cliffhangers, drama, parading contestants to be interviewed, allowing surrogates to leak information and then carefully timing his official announcements.

If he spends most of his time sequestered in his opulent penthouse, then with a single tweet he can reach an audience of millions at the flick of a wrist. "He's our first reality TV president, he's one of the first true celebrity presidents," says Richard Hanley, associate professor of journalism at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut. "I think it's a reflection that America has completely lost sight of the line between entertainment and reality," he told AFP. It's just business as usual for a real estate tycoon who fed tabloids for decades with affairs, divorces and escapades that made him, if not the richest billionaire in the country, then the most synonymous with wealth. Take for example his most prestigious appointment, secretary of state, yet to be announced. After weeks of fevered

speculation, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani was officially ruled out Friday.

### Stay tuned

Hanging by a thread is Mitt Romney, the Republican grandee and former Trump critic invited to dine at a famous society restaurant in New York only to be photographed smiling awkwardly next to a grinning president-elect. Trump dialed into an NBC breakfast show to say that a final decision was likely next week, throwing Romney a lifeline but quickly talking up the talents of Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson. Trump is said to want telegenic staff and so former general David Petraeus, Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and ex-Beijing ambassador Jon Huntsman have gone before the cameras to present themselves as articulate alternatives.

After meetings, he tweets his verdicts. "Very impressed!" he wrote of former CIA director Petraeus, still under probation for giving classified material to his mistress. When decisions are made, many are timed for effect, such retired general James "Mad Dog" Mattis announced as defense secretary during a rally in Ohio. He drops teasers, telling Iowa that he will announce a homeland security chief - reportedly retired general John Kelly - next week. In other words, stay tuned.

Then there are the eclectic back stories. Nine years ago, he shaved the head of the billionaire husband of cabinet nominee Linda McMahon on live television. McMahon herself is perhaps the only appointee to face a Senate confirmation hearing having been thrown around by wrestlers on television.

### Fasten seatbelts

Dom Caristi, professor at Ball State University, says "The Apprentice" showed Trump "in command, acting very businesslike, making smart business decisions, recognizing the mistakes of others, calling people out for those mistakes". So, too, has he sought to project the same image in his transition. He posed as the tough man fighting to save taxpayers' money by calling out Boeing for the "\$4 billion" cost of two new Air Force One jets, saying that the aerospace company had to bring the price down.

The tweet followed veiled criticism from Boeing about the incoming administration and the company's share price fell - but reports since claim the company is donating \$1 million to the inauguration. Trump also boasted of taking on air conditioning company Carrier to save jobs that would others have left Indiana for Mexico. But when a union leader took issue with Trump's claim that 1,100 jobs had been rescued - saying only 800 had been earmarked to move - he tweeted out at the leader, exposing him to a furious backlash.

Even his decision to stay on as executive producer of "The Celebrity Apprentice" - regardless of the potential conflict of interest - has blurred the lines between reality TV and the business of government. "We have yet to see what this presidency is going to look like. That's part of his goal to keep us off balance," said Jeff Morosoff, media studies and public relations professor at Hofstra University. "I think we need to fasten our seatbelts for one long rollercoaster ride." —AFP

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