



JEDDAH: Saudi football fans wearing paraphernalia and masks with their national team's colors and emblem pose for a picture inside a fan tent in this Red Sea coastal city yesterday ahead of their Russia 2018 World Cup Group A football match against Uruguay.— AFP

US withdraws from 'cesspool' UN rights body, cites Israel bias

WASHINGTON: The United States withdrew from the United Nations Human Rights Council on Tuesday, condemning the "hypocrisy" of its members and its alleged "unrelenting bias" against Israel. The US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, came to Washington to announce the decision alongside President Donald Trump's top diplomat, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Both insisted the United States would remain a leading champion of human rights but, for many, the decision will reflect Trump's general hostility to the world body and to multilateral diplomacy in general.

The announcement came after the top UN human rights official criticized Washington for separating migrant children from their parents who are seeking asylum after crossing into the country from Mexico. But Haley and Pompeo stressed the decision had been made after a long year of efforts to shame the council into reform and to remove member states that themselves

commit abuses. "These reforms were needed in order to make the council a serious advocate for human rights," Haley said. "For too long, the Human Rights Council has been a protector of human rights abusers, and a cesspool of political bias. Regrettably, it is now clear that our call for reform was not heeded."

The Geneva-based body was established in 2006 to promote and protect human rights worldwide, but its pronouncements and reports have often clashed with US priorities. In particular, the council's focus on Israeli behavior towards Palestinians in the territory it occupies on the West Bank and in Gaza has infuriated Washington. But, as Haley stressed, Washington also believes it comes up short on criticizing even flagrant abuses by US opponents like Venezuela and Cuba.

"Countries have colluded with each other to undermine the current method of selecting members," Pompeo said. "And the council's continued and well-documented bias against Israel is unconscionable," he said. "Since its creation, the council has adopted more resolutions condemning Israel than against the rest of the world combined." Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu welcomed the US move, branding the council "a biased, hostile, anti-Israel organization that has betrayed its mission of protecting human rights".

Haley, who issued a warning a year ago

that Washington would make good on its threat to leave the council if reforms were not carried through, used even starker language. "We take this step because our commitment does not allow us to remain a part of a hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights," she said. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres regretted the US decision, adding: "The UN's human rights architecture plays a very important role in the promotion and protection of human rights worldwide."

On Monday, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein - a Jordanian - had rebuked Trump over the US practice of splitting up migrant families detained on the Mexican border. "The thought that any state would seek to deter parents by inflicting such abuse on children is unconscionable," he said.

Independent watchdog Human Rights Watch criticized the move, warning Washington's absence at the council would put the onus on other governments to address the world's most serious rights problems. "The Trump administration's withdrawal is a sad reflection of its one-dimensional human rights policy: defending Israeli abuses from criticism takes precedence above all else," executive director Kenneth Roth said. "The UN Human Rights Council has played an important role in such countries as North Korea, Syria,



WASHINGTON: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo looks on as US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley speaks at the US Department of State on Tuesday.— AFP

Myanmar and South Sudan, but all Trump seems to care about is defending Israel."

US criticism stems from the fact that Israel is the only country that has a dedicated agenda item at council meetings, one defended in particular by the Arab bloc of countries. Known as "Item 7", this item means that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians comes under scrutiny at each of three annual sessions. The United States refused to join the body when it was creat-

ed in 2006, when George W Bush was in the White House and his ambassador to the UN was John Bolton - now Trump's UN-skeptic national security advisor. After Barack Obama came to power, Washington joined the council in 2009. But when Trump took office, he adopted a hostile approach to world governance, leading Washington to quit the UN cultural agency UNESCO, cut UN funding and planning to leave the Paris climate agreement.— AFP

In Syria, race to save precious...

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properties," he told AFP. "Those files represent the hope of return." FSL sprang into action after Homs city's registry was destroyed in a fire in 2013, which activists suspected was a regime bid to strip oppositionists of their land. Smuggling out original deeds from other towns was risky and could be considered tampering, so the FSL's 15 lawyers opted for the next best thing: digital copies. With help from civil society group The Day After, they travelled to Turkey to learn how to handle, photograph, and archive documents.

Back in Syria, they began working through abandoned registries in northern rebel towns: Harem, Azaz, Saraqeb. "We set up a little studio in the room with the most light," said an FSL lawyer still in Syria who identified himself as Samer. With just four Canon digital cameras, two laptops, flashes, and tripods, they photographed thousands of deeds, making sure names and dates were clearly visible. "As soon as we'd finish one 200-page ledger, we'd upload the SD card onto the computer. Meanwhile, the camera didn't stop. We'd put a new card in and start photographing again," Samer, 43, told AFP.

Each month, they emptied their computers onto external drives which they sent to Koronful in Turkey. They raced against air strikes that damaged cameras and wounded staff members, worrying registries would be bombed to pieces before they could finish. "When

we reached the last page, we'd be so happy to be finished. Whatever happens now, if we get bombed, we have a drive with everything on it," said Samer.

Sometimes they lost the race. In 2013, days before FSL was to begin photographing deeds in the northern town of Al-Bab, the Islamic State group swept in and destroyed the registry, Koronful said. They now struggle to get permission to enter registries from suspicious rebels, especially in jihadist-run Idlib, occasionally photographing in secret.

Since Syria's war erupted in 2011, more than six million people have been internally displaced and another five million have fled the country. More than 920,000 have been displaced this year alone, the UN said, the fastest rate yet in the seven-year war. A vast majority leave behind property-related papers, the Norwegian Refugee Council found in polls last year. That puts them at risk of losing access to their land through decrees like Law 10, which allows for property expropriation for urban development. Koronful fears the regime could also dispossess refugees through legislation on re-issuing damaged deeds.

A set of laws allows for missing titles to be restituted using digital copies, but it remains unclear if the government would accept a version produced by opposition-affiliated lawyers. "We're expecting a lot of people to ask for copies," said The Day After's Amr Shannan, pointing to similar post-conflict property disputes in Lebanon and Bosnia as precedents. For now, the digital titles remain tucked away on a pair of hard drives, one in Turkey and another in an undisclosed European city. They aren't yet searchable, but are archived in the same order as the originals. "If there's going to be a return of refugees, one of the most important factors is that they have homes or land to return to," said Shannan.— AFP

intense battlefield in the already-brutal Yemen war. The Yemeni government and its allies have insisted that the Houthis must fully withdraw from Hodeida and turn over the port to UN supervision. The rebels have so far agreed only to share control of the port with the United Nations.

Coalition spokesman Colonel Turki Al-Malki told Al Arabiya television that the alliance captured the airport yesterday and was now destroying nearby Houthi fortifications. He accused the group of placing tanks inside residential areas. "Hodeida port is operating as normal and the movement of ships is normal," Malki said. "We have humanitarian and development plans for when we liberate the city."

In a televised address, Houthi leader Abdul Malik Al-Houthi said fighting would not cease even if the coalition regained the whole country. "The western coast will be a swamp that drowns and finishes the forces of the invaders and the aggressors." Houthi authorities set up loudspeakers on Hodeidah's main streets playing martial chants and excerpts of Al-Houthi's speeches, another resident said. "The streets have been turned into a big audio stage to boost their fighters' morale." — Agencies

Trump signs order to end border...

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sought to blame Democrats, although it was his administration that implemented the policy of strict adherence to immigration law.

The Republican-controlled US Congress is also considering legislation to address the issue. The House of Representatives planned to vote today on two bills designed to halt the practice of separating families and to address other immigration issues. But Republicans said they were uncertain if either measure would have enough support to be approved. Trump told House Republicans on Tuesday night he would support either of the immigration bills under consideration but did not give a preference.

Earlier at a meeting with Republican lawmakers at the White House, Trump however made clear he was not easing up on his determination to shut down the border to illegal immigration, calling it a source of rampant crime and drugs. "We still have to maintain toughness, or our country will be overrun by people, by crime, by all of the things that we don't stand for and we don't want," he said.

As countries marked World Refugee Day yesterday, British Prime Minister Theresa May, Canadian Prime

Minister Justin Trudeau, the Council of Europe and Pope Francis all took issue with Trump's "zero tolerance" policy. May said images of migrant children kept in cage-like units were "deeply disturbing," and the Council of Europe, a global human rights watchdog, said Trump had abdicated any claim to moral leadership in the world. "A person's dignity does not depend on them being a citizen, a migrant, or a refugee. Saving the life of someone fleeing war and poverty is an act of humanity," the pope said on Twitter.

After a downturn last year, since October, the number of migrants seeking to cross the southwest US border from impoverished Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, as well as from Mexico, has surged. From March to May this year, more than 50,000 people a month were apprehended for illegally crossing the border from Mexico. About 15 percent of those are arriving as families, and eight percent as unaccompanied children.

Nearly all of the families, and many others, are officially asking for asylum, citing the incessant violence in their home countries. Aiming to deter more arrivals, in early May, the Trump administration announced it would arrest and criminally charge all adults. Meanwhile, any children entering the country with them, including infants, would be taken away and held separately. The issue has stuck an emotional chord, amid accounts of children screaming and crying in the tent camps prepared for them in southern Texas.— Agencies

Tehran signals compromise for...

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"OPEC could keep the same deal with compliance going back to 100 percent," said an OPEC source who is aware of Iran's stance. OPEC Secretary-General Mohammad Barkindo said he was confident there would be a deal when the producer group meets in Vienna tomorrow. Russia has proposed OPEC and non-OPEC producers raise output by 1.5 million barrels per day (bpd), effectively wiping out existing production cuts of 1.8 million bpd that have helped rebalance the market in the past 18 months and lifted oil to \$75 per barrel. Oil traded as low as \$27 in 2016.

Saudi Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih also said yesterday that the market demanded more oil in the second half of this year and that OPEC was moving towards "a good decision". Ecuador said OPEC and its allies could agree to a compromise increase in output of around 0.5-0.6 million bpd. A decision to increase output could be taken even with Iran refusing to sign up, as has happened before in OPEC.

Iran has so far been the main barrier to a deal, with Zanganeh saying OPEC should not yield to pressure from US President Donald Trump to raise output. He said Trump had contributed to the rise in prices by imposing sanctions

on OPEC members Iran and Venezuela, which will likely lead to lower exports. Zanganeh said he would leave Vienna tomorrow even before OPEC holds talks with non-OPEC producers the next day, but efforts were underway yesterday to convince Iran to participate in a deal.

Sources said Saudi Arabia did not want to be seen as putting too much pressure on Iran and hence Russia was instead trying to convince Tehran. Zanganeh was due to attend a ministerial committee today, two sources said. Iran is usually not part of the committee, which includes Russia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Kuwait, Algeria and Venezuela. Iraq and Venezuela have also opposed a relaxation of production cuts, fearing a slump in prices. Iraqi Oil Minister Jabar Al-Luaibi said yesterday he hoped there would be agreement when OPEC meets but added: "The oil market has not reached the level of stabilization."

Gulf producers usually aligned with Saudi Arabia - the UAE, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain - have also cautioned against a large output increase and signalled they have been rattled by Riyadh's close coordination with Russia, sources have said. Gulf oil producers' views still differed yesterday on how much to increase production and whether such a move should be gradual, sources said. They nevertheless tried to bring Iran on board for a deal, with ministers from the UAE, Kuwait and Oman meeting Zanganeh yesterday. Oman's oil minister Mohammed bin Hamad Al-Rumayh said he believed Iran would agree to an output increase tomorrow. He said the meeting would tackle over-compliance with oil output cuts and that Iran was "very cooperative". — Reuters

Coalition seizes Hodeida airport...

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The Norwegian Refugee Council said the fighting had already disrupted water supplies, putting people at high risk of contamination. "As of 19 June, the water supply has been disrupted in several areas and people are reportedly relying on water from mosque wells," it said in a statement. "Access to adequate and safe water is now a major concern, particularly in light of the ongoing cholera emergency."

Hodeida's residents are now bracing for what they fear will be devastating street fighting, as tanks and buses carrying uniformed troops roll through the empty streets of the once-bustling city. Some 5,200 families fled their homes this month as pro-government forces advanced up the Red Sea coast, according to the UN. The offensive, dubbed Operation Golden Victory, is now the most