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Syria army cuts off main towns in rebel enclave

Regime gains ground in intensified assault on Ghouta

Battered maid presses charges against sponsor

KUWAIT: The Philippines Embassy has initiated legal action against the sponsor of a Filipina maid, who said she has been facing abuse since she started working with the family a year ago. A security source said the victim's sponsor - who is a police officer - attempted to resolve the problem by going to the embassy to urge the victim to drop charges, but his request was rejected. The maid was able to escape while the officer and his family were at a camp and headed to the embassy.



The source said instructions were given to the domestic help department to investigate the incident, which revealed inhumane treatment by the family. The interior ministry is expected to take legal action and will refer the person who caused the injuries to court. The ministry added it also reviewed a video clip on social media about the attack on the Filipina. — Al-Anbaa



DOUMA, Syria: Syrian men check the damage following Syrian government shelling on this town in the rebel-held enclave of Eastern Ghouta yesterday. — AFP

DOUMA, Syria: Syrian regime forces yesterday cut off the largest town in Eastern Ghouta from the rest of the opposition enclave in a blow to beleaguered rebels defending their last bastion near Damascus. Government troops and allied militia have recaptured half of the besieged region in a blistering assault launched on Feb 18 that has left nearly 1,000 civilians dead and prompted global outcry. They have pursued a divide-and-conquer strategy, eating away at rebel-held towns and successfully isolating Ghouta's main town of Douma yesterday.

Regime fighters seized control of the road linking Douma with the town of Harasta further west, and also captured the town of Misraba, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. "Regime forces have therefore divided Eastern Ghouta into three parts - Douma and its surroundings, Harasta in the west, and the rest of the towns further south," the Britain-based monitor said.

Shelling and air strikes slammed into Douma yesterday, trapping residents inside cellars transformed into makeshift bomb shelters, an AFP correspondent in the town said. Rescue workers and medics were struggling to navigate the town's rubble-littered roads to bring wounded residents back to field clinics. Douma's opposition-run local council issued an urgent "distress call" yesterday to international organizations. "The bomb shelters and basements are full, and people are sleeping in the streets and in public gardens," the statement said. "For three days, it has been hard to bury the dead because of the intense bombing on the cemetery," it added.

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News in brief

BAE inks Saudi deal for 48 jets

LONDON: Britain has signed a multi-billion-pound preliminary order from Saudi Arabia for 48 Eurofighter Typhoon fighter jets, military equipment maker BAE Systems said on Friday. The lucrative deal was unveiled on the third and final day of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Britain. BAE Systems added in a statement that the order would help Riyadh modernize its armed forces under the kingdom's 'Vision 2030' economic plan. The news comes after Qatar inked a deal late last year to buy 24 Typhoon jets for some \$8 billion. Friday's blockbuster announcement follows long-running discussions with Saudi Arabia, which already has a total of 72 Eurofighter Typhoon planes in its fleet. The news also comes just two weeks after BAE posted sliding annual net profits - but forecast improving defense budgets across its major markets. — AFP

Qatar reforms labor complaints

DOHA: Qatar yesterday said it will introduce a labor panel to assess grievances by migrant workers later this month, a major reform agreed by the 2022 World Cup host with the United Nations. A government spokesman confirmed that the panel would begin its work on March 18. Labor disputes have, until now, been dealt with inside the court system, but the panel will be overseen by the labor ministry. The panel was part of a package of wholesale reforms agreed by Qatar last November as it sought to head off an enquiry being launched by the UN's International Labor Organization (ILO). Doha says the proposed reforms will dismantle the "kafala" sponsorship system and place workers on a contractual system instead. — AFP

Turkey-Arab ties 'not in best state'

DUBAI: A senior United Arab Emirates official said yesterday Turkey's policy towards neighboring Arab states was not reasonable and advised it to respect their sovereignty. Relations between the two countries have been strained by Ankara's support for Qatar after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt imposed sanctions on Doha last year. "It is no secret that Arab-Turkish relations aren't in their best state," UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted. "In order to return to balance, Ankara has to respect Arab sovereignty and deal with its neighbors with wisdom and rationality," he said. — Reuters



MOSCOW: Russia's President Vladimir Putin speaks with US NBC news network anchor Megyn Kelly at the Kremlin on March 1. — AFP

Putin: Maybe Jews meddled in US election

WASHINGTON: Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested in a US television interview that Ukrainians, Tatars or Jews could have meddled in the 2016 US presidential election - but not the Kremlin. "Why have you decided the Russian authorities, myself included, gave anybody permission to do this?" Putin asked in the often-combative interview with NBC television.

The leading US intelligence agencies concluded last year that Putin personally directed an intelligence effort to influence

the 2016 US presidential election to undermine Democrat Hillary Clinton's campaign and boost Republican Donald Trump. Last month US Special Counsel Robert Mueller, who is conducting a widespread probe into Russia's role in the campaign, indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian companies for allegedly backing Trump, maligning Clinton, and engaging in other election interference.

"So what if they're Russians?" Putin said of the allegations, according to transcripts of the NBC interview released late Friday. "There are 146 million Russians. So what?... I don't care, I couldn't care less... They do not represent the interests of the Russian state. Maybe," Putin said, "they are not even Russians but Ukrainians, Tatars or Jews, but with Russian citizenship, which should also be

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Madagascar's hidden battle against leprosy

FIANARANTSOA, Madagascar: Joseph Ralaiharo has lived cut off from society in a remote village in central Madagascar for more than half a century. His battle with leprosy, an infection that causes unsightly sores, nerve damage as well as eye and respiratory problems, has left him shunned by society. "I can't go home anymore because nobody wants to see me," said 65-year-old Ralaiharo. "We

can no longer go to wells to collect water, or into the fields. Even our own land has been sold by our relatives."

Despite winning the battle against the infection, having been cured, Ralaiharo continues to live in the colony, such is the lifelong stigma. He came to Ilena in Madagascar with his mother when he was just 13 years old after becoming infected with leprosy, also known as Hansen's disease. He has not left the village since. Ilena lies at the top of a small hill, surrounded by trees, miles from the nearest town, Fianarantsoa, and was built in 1892 as a dedicated community for those with leprosy.

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MORAMANGA, Madagascar: Leprosy diagnosed Vololonirina Ranorvelo poses for a photograph at a leprosy treatment center on Feb 28, 2018. — AFP

Kim an enigma for Washington

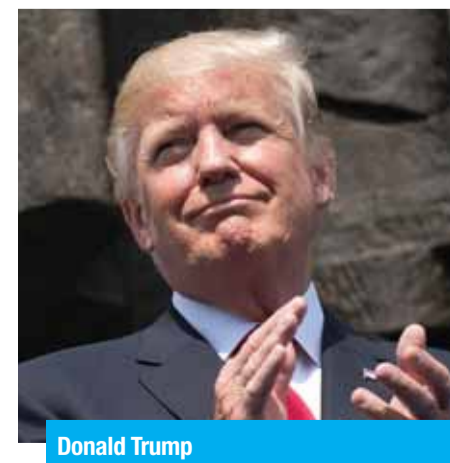
WASHINGTON: Kim Jong Un has been accused of executing generals, murdering relatives, presiding over global criminal operations and has threatened the United States with nuclear Armageddon. But a string of surprising diplomatic openings - including Thursday's stunning offer to meet US President Donald Trump - has only deepened the enigma surrounding the North Korean leader. At a lengthy dinner he hosted for South Korean officials on Monday, the man once dismissed by the West as irrational and paranoid presented himself as gracious and confident.

With Trump now planning to meet Kim possibly in May, US officials are working overtime to get a better understanding of what makes him tick. The prince-like Kim, 34, and his isolated country, remain one of the most impenetrable targets for US intelligence. The most prominent American to have met him is former NBA star Dennis Rodman, who has visited the basketball-mad Kim several times.

Kim's determined push to gain a long range nuclear ballistic missile capability to threaten not only Japan but the United States, and his threats to use it, made US intelligence officials concerned last year that he had a precarious understanding of the world outside Pyongyang. Kim didn't



Kim Jong-Un



Donald Trump

know the kind of danger he was putting his country in, they said. In December, CIA Director Mike Pompeo openly

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