

International

Saudi, US must pursue efforts for Yemen's peace: Mattis

Mattis praises Saudi humanitarian aid for Yemenis

WASHINGTON: Saudi Arabia and America must pursue "urgent efforts" to bring a peaceful end to Yemen's war, US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman yesterday. The two men met at the Pentagon as part of Prince Mohammed's tour of the United States, which began this week with a White House visit.

"As you discussed with President (Donald) Trump on Tuesday, we must also reinvigorate urgent efforts to seek a peaceful resolution to the civil war in Yemen and we support you in this regard," Mattis told Prince Mohammed.

Mattis praised Saudi Arabia for the "significant amounts of humanitarian aid" it had provided to civilians in Yemen. The Saudi-led coalition said earlier this year it would commit \$1.5 billion in humanitarian aid for the country.

The war in Yemen has displaced more than 2 million people and driven the country - already the poorest on the Arabian Peninsula - to the verge of widespread famine. Nearly 1 million people have been infected with cholera. On Tuesday, the US Senate killed a resolution seeking an end to US support for Saudi Arabia's campaign in Yemen.

The Senate voted 55-44 to dismiss the resolution, which sought for the first time to take advantage of a provision in the 1973 War Powers Act that allows any senator to introduce a resolution on whether to withdraw US armed forces from a conflict not authorized by Congress.

The vote was largely along party lines, al-

though a handful of Democrats voted with the majority Republicans to kill the measure, and a handful of Republicans supported the failed effort to let it move ahead. During Senate debate before the vote, some backers called the three-year-long conflict in Yemen a "humanitarian catastrophe," which they blamed on the Saudis. The United States provides refueling and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition. Before the start of his meeting at the Pentagon, which was delayed by 30 minutes due to his late arrival, Prince Mohammed said the two countries were working together on combating a number of threats.

"Under the leadership of you, Mr. Secretary, the cooperation has improved tremendously between the two ministries of defense and we will continue doing so in the future," the crown prince said. He was speaking through a translator. President Donald Trump gave a warm welcome to the crown prince during a meeting at the White House earlier this week and credited US defense sales to Saudis with boosting American jobs.

Mattis said he believes Saudi Arabia is "part of the solution." "They have stood by the United Nations-recognized government and we are going to end this war, that is the bottom line. And we are going to end it on positive terms for the people of Yemen, but also security for the nations in the peninsula," Mattis added. Saudi Arabia leads a coalition in Yemen fighting the Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The devastating three-year-old conflict was an



ARLINGTON, VA: US Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis (third right) speaks during a bilateral meeting with Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammad Bin Salman (third left) yesterday at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. — AFP

early proving ground for the prince, who is also the minister of defense, but it has been beset by allegations of atrocities against civilians, and strategic drift. Just hours after the prince left the White House on Tuesday, the US Senate rejected a bipartisan bid designed to curtail US support for the war, which includes air-to-air refueling of Saudi jets as well as target and intelligence sharing. Speaking through a translator, Prince Mohammed told Mattis that cooperation between the Pentagon and the kingdom had "improved

tremendously." More than 9,200 people have been killed and tens of thousands wounded in Yemen's war, which is seen as both a civil conflict and a proxy war between regional titans Saudi Arabia and Iran.

US President Donald Trump and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman discussed the situation in war-torn Yemen during a meeting on Tuesday, including Houthi rebel and Iranian activity and the humanitarian crisis, the White House said. — Agencies

US denies entry to son of former Sri Lankan president

COLOMBO: A controversial Sri Lankan opposition legislator yesterday said US authorities prevented him from taking a flight to Texas from Moscow where he was an observer for the Russian presidential election.

Namal Rajapakse, son of former strongman president Mahinda Rajapakse, said the airline had been instructed not to allow him to board the flight to Houston.

Rajapakse said on Twitter that he had been informed by Emirates Air "I won't make my Houston Flight as #US Officials instruct them to not let me board.

"Sure it has nothing to do with my name, being part of #lka opposition or my travel from #Russia." The 31-year-old was invited by the Russian government to be a monitor of the presidential election won by Vladimir Putin.

US authorities do not comment on individual cases, but official sources said his name was likely on a travel watch list as a result of money laundering charges he faces at home.

Namal Rajapakse and a sibling have been charged with money-laundering. Other family members face corruption allegations. — AFP

In world first, Air India crosses Saudi airspace to Israel

JERUSALEM: Air India launched yesterday the first scheduled service to Israel to be allowed to cross Saudi airspace, a sign of a behind-the-scenes improvement in ties between the Arab kingdom and the Jewish state. The inaugural flight took off from New Delhi at 1230 GMT and was to land in Tel Aviv at 1945 GMT, the Indian state carrier says.

"We will be flying non-stop from New Delhi to Tel Aviv from March 22 over Saudi airspace," Air India spokesman Praveen Bhatnagar told AFP. There will now be three flights weekly in each direction, ending a decades-long Saudi ban on the use of its airspace for commercial flights to Israel. Israel's national carrier El Al currently operates an India service to Mumbai that takes a detour over the Red Sea to avoid flying over Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Saudi Arabia and Israel have no official diplomatic relations, like much of the Arab world. Egypt and Jordan are the only two Arab countries with peace treaties with Israel. The flight approval comes after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu described relations with the Arab world as the "best ever", with common concerns over Iran drawing them closer together.

Leaders of Arab countries have not publicly made similar comments, though that does not necessarily mean they dispute Netanyahu's claim. They face sensitivities within their own countries, where the Jewish state is often viewed with intense hostility.

Israeli analyst Jonathan Spyer said that the Saudi concession

showed that positive signals were being sent despite the lack of an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty, long seen as a prerequisite for relations between the Jewish state and the Arab world.

"I think that what this shows is even in the absence of that you can have small gestures that are of real meaning," Spyer, director of Israel's Rubin Centre for Research in International Affairs, told AFP. "That's what I think that this Saudi decision to allow the overflights consists of. It's small but significant," he said.

'General rebranding'

During a May 2017 Middle East tour, US President Donald Trump flew from Riyadh to Tel Aviv on Air Force One in what is believed to have been among the few direct flights from Saudi Arabia to Israel. Trump says he is working on a plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Spyer said that his administration appears to see Riyadh as "crucial for much of what they want to do on the Israeli-Palestinian track".

Sunni-ruled Saudi Arabia and Israel have a common enemy in Shiite-dominated Iran, with both seeking to limit what they view as the Islamic republic's expanding influence in the Middle East.

Trump's first presidential foreign trip took in Riyadh and Israel, while his son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner has reportedly formed a bond with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Prince Mohammed, the kingdom's de facto political leader, is pursuing economic and social reforms long sought by the West. The self-styled moderniser who has sought to project a liberal image of Saudi Arabia to investors has, however, also consolidated power to a level unseen by previous rulers. The relaxation of the overflight ban, said Spyer, is part of "warming relations behind the scenes" with Israel. "Presumably it fits in also with the more general rebranding that Mohammed Bin Salman is trying to achieve for the Saudis." — AFP