

International

Egypt withdraws from US-led anti-Iran security initiative

Cairo doubts seriousness of 'Arab NATO' initiative

WASHINGTON: Egypt has pulled out of the US effort to forge an "Arab NATO" with key Arab allies, according to four sources familiar with the decision, in a blow to the Trump administration's strategy to contain Iranian power. Egypt conveyed its decision to the United States and other participants in the proposed Middle East Security Alliance, or MESA, ahead of a meeting held Sunday in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, one source said.

Cairo did not send a delegation to the meeting, the latest gathering held to advance the US-led effort to bind Sunni Muslim Arab allies into a security, political and economic pact to counter Shi'ite Iran, the source said. Egypt withdrew because it doubted the seriousness of the initiative, had yet to see a formal blueprint laying it out, and because of the danger that the plan would increase tensions with Iran, said an Arab source who, like the others, spoke on condition of anonymity.

Uncertainty about whether US President Donald Trump will win a second term next year and whether a successor may ditch the initiative also contributed to the Egyptian decision, the Arab source said. "It's not moving well," a Saudi source said of the initiative. The initiative, which Saudi Arabia first proposed in 2017, also is aimed at limiting the growing regional influence of Russia and China, according to a classified White

House document reviewed by Reuters last year.

The Egyptian Embassy in Washington and the White House did not respond immediately to requests for comment. In addition to the United States and Saudi Arabia, the MESA participants include the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Jordan. Two days after the Riyadh meeting, Egypt President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi visited Washington for talks with Trump. Before the meeting Trump said they would talk about security issues, but it was not clear whether they discussed MESA issue.

Setback

Two sources said the countries remaining in MESA were moving ahead with the initiative and would press Egypt diplomatically to revoke its withdrawal, with one saying that the decision did not appear to be final. "We all want them back," said the other source. The Arab source, however, said Cairo could not be convinced to return. The withdrawal of Egypt, which has the Arab world's largest military, is the latest setback to the MESA initiative, informally referred to as the "Arab NATO."

The plan already was complicated by international outrage over the October 2018 murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, which Turkish officials and some US lawmakers have accused Saudi Crown



WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump, right, speaks during a meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington, DC. — AFP

Prince Mohammed bin Salman of ordering. Riyadh denies the allegation against Salman. Other obstacles have been feuds among the Arab allies, especially a Saudi-led economic and political boycott of Qatar. The problems have forced several postponements of a summit meet-

ing in the United States at which a preliminary accord on the alliance would be signed. John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser, has been a key proponent of the MESA plan and an architect of the administration's strategy for containing Iran, according to US officials. —Reuters

Red Cross to send Venezuela aid

CARACAS: Embattled Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro announced an agreement Wednesday with the International Committee of the Red Cross to bring humanitarian aid into a once-rich country now enduring acute shortages of food, medicine and such basics as soap and toilet paper. As the economy of the oil-rich nation implodes, Maduro is locked in a power struggle with the increasingly popular leader of the opposition, national assembly speaker Juan Guaido.

In an about-face, Maduro said on national TV and radio that his government and the Red Cross had agreed "to work together with UN agencies to bring into Venezuela all the humanitarian aid that can be brought." Maduro denies that Venezuela is suffering from a humanitarian crisis and blames US sanctions for its economic woes. Guaido is now recognized as Venezuela's legitimate interim president by more than 50 countries, led by the US. He blames government incompetence and corruption for his country's crisis.

Previous aid effort foiled

In January, Guaido tried to spearhead a drive to bring in donated food and medicine from Colombia, Brazil and the island of Curacao but the effort failed as the army, which is loyal to Maduro, blocked shipments at the border. Maduro argued that letting in such assistance, much of it provided by the US, would be the first step towards a US intervention. Guaido is pressing the military to dump Maduro and side with the people. Maduro is a former bus driver who worked his way up the political ranks and is the handpicked successor of the late socialist firebrand

Hugo Chavez.

In his announcement Wednesday, Maduro said this new aid campaign should be "managed without political maneuvering, without farcical politicization and through the channels of legality and respect." A quarter of Venezuela's 30 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, an internal UN report said last month. UN estimates say 3.7 million Venezuelans are malnourished and 22 percent of children younger than age five suffer from chronic malnourishment.

Besides the shortages of food and medicine, Venezuela is saddled with hyperinflation running at an estimated 10 million percent this year. That leaves people's wages all but worthless. Last week the Red Cross issued a statement saying it was "concerned by the serious impact" that the situation in Venezuela was having on people especially those without access to basic services. The government is saddled with a drop in revenue from oil—the source of 96 percent of its hard currency—and its banishment from financial markets because of US economic sanctions.

The US increased pressure on Maduro Wednesday as Vice President Mike Pence asked the United Nations to recognize Guaido as the legitimate leader of Venezuela, telling the Security Council: "Nicolas Maduro must go." Washington will present a draft UN resolution aimed at recognizing the opposition leader, revoking the credentials of Maduro's UN envoy and appointing Guaido's representative as the ambassador to the world body, Pence told the council.

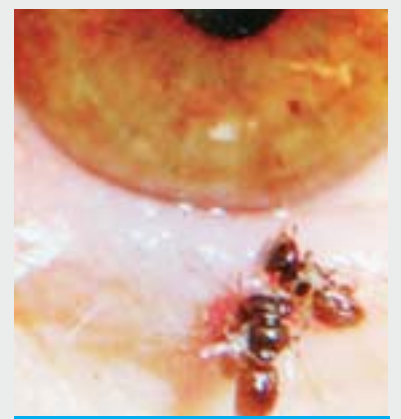
"The time has come for the United Nations to recognize interim president Juan Guaido as the legitimate president of Venezuela and seat his representative in this body," Pence said. Maduro shot back by saying in a televised speech that he had seen Pence "making a fool of himself in the United Nations Security Council" with his appeal. "I cannot understand his arrogance and self-importance, his racial supremacism," Maduro said. —AFP

Woman finds insects in eye

TAIPEI: Four "sweat bees" that had been living in a Taiwanese woman's eye were removed by a doctor who described his surprise at finding a "leg with hair, protruding from the eyelid". The tiny insects, which are just three millimeters long, were discovered after the woman—known only as Ms Ho—sought treatment for an itchy and swollen left eye, Dr Horng Chi-ting said.

"I think the Halictidae mistook the eyelid for an armpit," he said, using another name for "sweat bees" that are attracted to sweat, adding it could be the first case of its kind worldwide. Horng looked closely at the woman's streaming eye and "was surprised to find a back leg with hair protruding from the eyelid. I didn't know what the insects were," he told AFP. He then sent the insects to a professor at National Taiwan University for identification.

The 29-year-old woman's ordeal began when she was out weeding her ancestors' graves at the end of last month and felt a gust of wind blow something into her eye, Horng said. "Luckily the Halictidae didn't attack her eye and they were removed relatively quickly," he said. "She thought the itching was caused by her contact lens and did not rub her eye. That would have crushed the poisonous bees to blind her." It took Ms Ho three days to recover, Horng said. —AFP



TAIPEI: This handout photo shows tiny sweat bees in a patient's eye in the southern Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung. — AFP