

News

UK ship 'safe and well'...

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US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Theresa May discussed ways to maintain pressure on Iran during a phone call on Friday, the White House said in a statement yesterday. The statement, which did not mention the tanker incident, said: "They discussed cooperation ... to advance shared national security interests, including efforts to enforce sanctions on Syria, to ensure that Iran does not obtain a nuclear weapon, and to achieve the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea."

Authorities in Gibraltar, a British overseas territory on Spain's southern tip at the western entrance to the Mediterranean, said they suspected the tanker was carrying crude to Syria in violation of EU sanctions. The detention of the 330-m Grace 1 comes at a sensitive time in Iran-EU ties as the bloc mulls how to respond to Tehran announcing it is poised to breach the uranium enrichment limit it agreed to in a troubled 2015 nuclear deal.

The Grace 1 was halted in the early hours of Thursday by police and customs agencies in Gibraltar, aided by a detachment of British Royal Marines. Gibraltar's Supreme Court ruled Friday that the vessel can be held for 14 more days, the territory's attorney general said. The ship was detained four kilometres south of Gibraltar in what it considers British waters, although Spain, which lays claim to the territory, says they are Spanish.

Iran insists the vessel was intercepted in international waters and the foreign ministry official accused Britain's Royal Navy of taking action "tantamount to maritime banditry". A senior foreign ministry official "described the UK move as unacceptable" in a meeting with British ambassador Rob Macaire, who had been summoned to hear a formal protest, the ministry said in a statement. He "called for the immediate release of the oil tanker, given that it has been seized at the request of the US, based on the information currently available", the statement added.

The secretary of Iran's Expediency Council, a key advisory and arbitration body, warned that if Britain failed to release the tanker Iran would be forced to take tit-for-tat action against a British vessel. "If Britain does not release the Iranian oil tanker, the relevant authorities will be duty-bound to take reciprocal action and seize a British oil tanker," said council secretary Mohsen Rezai.

The Gibraltar authorities say the tanker was boarded when it slowed down in a designated area used by shipping agencies to ferry goods to vessels. "We have rea-

son to believe that the Grace 1 was carrying its shipment of crude oil to the Banyas refinery in Syria," Gibraltar's Chief Minister Fabian Picardo said. In a statement, Britain's Foreign Office said it welcomed Gibraltarian authorities "acting to enforce the EU Syria sanctions regime". Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell told reporters the vessel was detained at the request of the United States.

But Gibraltar insisted it acted of its own accord. "There has been no political request at any time from any government," Gibraltar's government said in a statement. "The decisions of Her Majesty's Government of Gibraltar were taken totally independently, based on breaches of existing law and not at all based on extraneous political considerations."

European Union sanctions against war-torn Syria have been in force since late 2011. The 28-member bloc has imposed sanctions on Syrian officials including government ministers over their role in the "violent repression" of civilians. Russia said the tanker's detention was a "targeted action aimed at further complicating the situation around Iran and Syria". The "enthusiastic remarks" by British and American officials following the seizure "show that this action was planned for a long time", the foreign ministry said in a statement.

The move by Gibraltarian authorities comes just days after Iran announced it would exceed the uranium enrichment limit set under the 2015 nuclear deal. Tehran took the action in response to Washington abandoning the deal last year and hitting Iran's crucial oil exports and financial transactions with biting sanctions. The International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN's nuclear watchdog, said Friday it would hold a July 10 emergency meeting on Iran.

The announcement followed a request by the US, which under Trump has forged ahead with a policy of "maximum pressure" against Iran in coordination with its allies Israel and Saudi Arabia. White House National Security Advisor John Bolton, a champion of the hawkish policy towards Tehran, tweeted the interception of the supertanker was "excellent news". According to specialized shipping trade publication Lloyd's List, which analyses vessel-tracking data, the 1997-built ship is laden with Iranian oil. It reported that the ship loaded oil off Iran in April and sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Tensions are high in the Gulf following last month's attacks on vessels near the Strait of Hormuz, a vital oil shipping route, and Iran's downing of a US drone. Washington and Saudi Arabia have directly blamed Iran for the attacks on tankers, something Tehran denies. The attacks have raised fears of a broader confrontation in the region where the United States has boosted its military presence over perceived Iranian threats. — Agencies

Sudanese who fled abroad will return to the country. And this country will then be a beautiful country," the 19-year-old said. The deal was hailed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which have been sympathetic to the ruling generals. "We hope that the next phase will be the establishment of a strong constitutional system that strengthens the role of institutions," UAE minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash wrote on Twitter. The Saudi foreign ministry called the agreement an "important step" which could pave the way for "a new phase of security and stability" for Sudan.

Rights group Amnesty International said it hoped the deal ends the "horrific crimes" committed against Sudanese people for decades. "This agreement must be judged by how those in power now live up to their responsibilities to respect people's fundamental rights," Amnesty's Kumi Naidoo said in a statement. Lebutt said the two sides had postponed the establishment of a transitional parliament.

Before talks collapsed in May, the generals and protest leaders had agreed on a 300-member legislature, with two-thirds of lawmakers hailing from the protest movement. Lebutt said the two sides have also agreed to "a detailed, transparent, national, independent investigation into all the regrettable violent incidents that the country faced in recent weeks", including the June 3 raid.

At least 136 people have been killed nationwide since June 3, including more than 100 on the day of the raid, according to doctors close to the protesters. The health ministry says 78 people have been killed nationwide over the same period. The military council insists it did not order the violent dispersal of the sit-in, although witnesses have said the raid was carried out by men in military fatigues. — AFP

hanging gardens, the Tower of Babel, and the Ishtar Gate. Excavation began there in the early 1800s and artefacts were sent abroad, including parts of the Ishtar Gate which remain in museums across Europe. The site was substantially impacted by new structures built under dictator Saddam Hussein and further damaged by soldiers during the US-led invasion that toppled him in 2003.

UNESCO on Friday said the site's "extremely vulnerable condition" sparked "serious concerns, with many structures in urgent need of conservation and several on the verge of collapse". But it opted not to designate Babylon as a World Heritage Site in Danger after objections from Iraq, and instead said it would work with local authorities to set a plan of action for conservation. "Babylon is the largest populated city in ancient history," said Qahtan Al-Abeed, who heads the Basra Antiquities Department and led efforts to get the site listed. "The Babylonians were the civilization of writing, administration and science," he told AFP. The UNESCO designation "will encourage research and development of the site," and would "be free publicity for tourists," he added excitedly.

Babylon is one of 7,000 archeological sites across Iraq, many of which were destroyed by the Islamic State group or ravaged by lucrative artefact smuggling. Five have been listed by UNESCO, including the Arbil citadel in northern Iraq and the southern Mesopotamian marshes. The three others are also on the agency's "World Heritage in Danger" list and include Hatra, an ancient city in northern Nineweh province damaged by IS in 2014. Samarra, along the Tigris River, was added in 2007 and Ashur, the capital of the Assyrian empire, in 2003. Iraq has another 11 "tentative" sites hoping to be listed by UNESCO.

After decades of back-to-back conflict, the country declared victory against IS in 2017 and is now basking in a period of relative calm. It has sought to attract both international investors and tourists, and hopes its prominence on UNESCO's lists can do both. — Agencies



The 'Pamplonesa' municipal music band performs during the 'Chupinazo' (start rocket) to mark the kickoff at noon sharp of the San Fermin Festival in front of the Town Hall of Pamplona in northern Spain on Friday. — AFP

India hikes duty on gold...

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We were expecting reduction in the custom duty," Anantha Padmanabhan, chairman of All India Gem and Jewellery Domestic Council (GJC) told Reuters, adding the hike has effectively raised smugglers' margins.

Gold smuggling surged in India after the government raised the import duty to 10 percent in Aug 2013. Grey market operators - businesses that smuggle gold from overseas and sell it in cash to avoid the duties - got a further boost in 2017 when India imposed a 3 percent sales tax on bullion. The south Asian country also raised import duty on gold dore or non-refined mined gold, to 11.85 percent from 9.35 percent and to 11 percent from 8.5 percent on silver dore, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in her first federal budget speech on Friday.

Kuwait cleared to compete in...

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Minister of Information and Minister of State for Youth Affairs Mohammad Al-Jabri said the move to lift the ban came after years during which "damage was inflicted in all factors of Kuwaiti sports". Speaker of the National Assembly Marzouq Al-Ghanem tweeted: "Congratulations to every Kuwaiti, and to the athletes in particular... and a thousand thanks to all those who worked to achieve this goal."

Last August, the IOC acknowledged the progress made and provisionally lifted the suspension, a decision which enabled athletes to compete in the Asian Games and the Youth Olympics. Football's world governing body FIFA suspended the Kuwait Football Association for the same reason in October 2015, lifting the ban in Dec 2017.

KOC President Sheikh Fahd called on Kuwait's sportspeople to work hard and sincerely to put Kuwaiti sport on the world map. In a press statement on Friday, Sheikh Fahd congratulated HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah, HH the Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf, HH the Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah and the

India has been trying to bring transparency in bullion trading by curbing cash transactions but the hike "will dilute efforts to reduce cash transactions", said Somasundaram PR, the managing director of the World Gold Council's Indian operations. Gold futures jumped over 2 percent after the announcement to a record high of 35,100 rupees (\$512.82) per 10 gm. The high local prices may also further weaken demand, said Snehal Choksey, director at Shobha Shringar Jewellers.

Shares of jewelry makers such as Titan, P C Jeweller, Tribhovandas Bhimji Zaveri Ltd and Thanga Mayil Jewellery Ltd fell as much as 7.8 percent. Up to 95 tons of gold was smuggled into India in 2018, according to the WGC. "Legal imports would fall and smuggling could rise above 200 tons this year," said a Mumbai-based dealer with a gold importing private bank.

Industry officials fear the higher duties could prompt customers to buy jewelry from some informal jewelers who use smuggled gold to make ornaments. "The increase in custom duty makes gold sold by organized retailers more expensive and encourages customers to buy from unorganized jewelers," said Vaibhav Saraf director of Aishpra Gems & Jewels. — Reuters

Sudan protesters hail landmark...

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but prominent protest leader Ahmed Al-Rabie told AFP it would comprise six civilians, five of them protest movement nominees, and five military representatives. The SPA said the transition would last three years and three months, with the first 21 months presided over by a military nominee, and the last 18 months by a civilian.

UN chief Antonio Guterres called on "all stakeholders to ensure the timely, inclusive, and transparent implementation of the agreement and resolve any outstanding issues through dialogue", his spokesman said. Leaders from the umbrella protest movement, the Alliance for Freedom and Change, said later on Friday that the final agreement could be signed next week in the presence of regional heads of states. They said the alliance would also be ready to name its candidates for the sovereign council and the prime minister by next week.

People celebrated on the streets of Khartoum well into Friday, chanting "the martyrs' blood has not been shed in vain" and "civilian rule, civilian rule". In Khartoum's eastern district of Burri, a hotbed of demonstrations, 51-year-old Hannan said the residents had faced "difficult hardships" since the protest movement began. "A lot of our young people were chased and beaten by the security forces," he said, alongside family and neighbours at a gathering celebrating the agreement.

Mohamed, with the Sudanese flag painted on his cheeks, was hopeful about the future. "One day, all the

UNESCO adds Bahrain burial mounds...

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enabled the inhabitants to develop an elaborate burial tradition applicable to the entire population".

They are the third site in Bahrain to be designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Head of the Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities, Shaikha Mai bint Mohammed Al-Khalifa, said the tombs were "living proof of Bahrain's distinguished cultural heritage", according to the kingdom's official BNA news agency. Bahrain's other two UNESCO sites are the Bahrain Citadel, listed in 2005, and a major pearling site in the city of Muharraq included in 2012.

On Friday, UNESCO's World Heritage Committee voted to list the sprawling Mesopotamian metropolis of Babylon as a World Heritage Site after three decades of lobbying efforts by Iraq. Iraq had been trying since 1983 to have the site - a massive 10-sq-km complex of which just 18 percent has been excavated thus far - recognized by UNESCO. Straddling Iraq's Euphrates River about 100 km south of Baghdad, the city was the center of the ancient Babylonian empire more than 4,000 years ago.

"What is the world heritage list without Babylon? How to tell the history of humanity without the earliest of old chapters, Babylon?" said Iraq's representative to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee ahead of the vote. "It fills a gap that was evident on the list and indeed, this is a type of site that we can say this convention was actually designed to protect," said Tunisia's delegate. After the successful vote, Iraq's delegation clasped hands and invited all delegates "to visit Babylon, the cradle of civilization".

Babylon developed as a walled city of mudbrick temples and towers, known internationally for its

Crews assessing damage as...

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pointed to huge piles of smashed wine bottles and other merchandise thrown to the floor by the quake as he walked through his store. "We've never seen anything like this, this is the biggest and most impactful quake that I've ever experienced," he told AFP.

Two news presenters on local TV station KCBS looked distraught as the quake hit while they were on the air, gazing up repeatedly to see if anything was falling. "We are experiencing very strong shaking. I think we need to get under the desk," one presenter said, then did just that as the station cut to a commercial. Around 3,000 people in Ridgecrest and the surrounding area are without power, the local utility company said. In the town of Trona some buildings collapsed, gas pipelines ruptured and power was knocked out. Officials would know more as the day progresses, said Mark Ghilarducci, director of the California governor's Office of Emergency Services. There were "significant reports" of fires caused by gas leaks, as well as breaks to power, water and communications lines in the region, he told a press conference. The latest quake was 11 times stronger than the 6.4-magnitude quake "foreshock" the previous day, according to the United States Geological Survey.

The two major quakes, along with multiple aftershocks, have revived fears of the "Big One" - a powerful tremor along the San Andreas Fault that could devastate major cities in Southern California. "This is an earthquake sequence. These earthquakes are related," said Caltech seismologist Lucy Jones. There was a 10 percent chance of Friday's quake being followed by another magnitude 7.0 or higher quake in the next

week, she added. Abdullatif, the shop owner, said he is holding off on cleaning up from the quake because of the warnings there could be yet more seismic activity. "The anxiety is definitely very high," he said. "It's definitely a scary time."

Terri Brantley, who lives in a mobile home in Ridgecrest, said the quake's fury was stunning. He and his wife were in bed when it hit but they managed to get out. "It literally picked up the house in the air, and threw it to the west about three feet," he told AFP. "I've experienced other quakes before, many times, but nothing like this. This was absolutely terrifying," Brantley said.

Numerous gas leaks were reported near the epicenter, including in the towns of Trona and Argus. "Firefighters have secured leaks where possible and evacuated residents from homes with leaks that cannot be secured," the San Bernardino fire department tweeted. In Los Angeles, the fire department deployed vehicles and helicopters, and reported fallen power lines and localized electricity outages.

But Mayor Eric Garcetti said there were no reports of serious damage in the city. Numerous visitors to Disneyland in Anaheim reported on Twitter that rides were shut for safety inspections after the quake. Patrons at movie theaters in the Los Angeles area evacuated due to the quake. "Everyone remained calm as the theater began to shake and then the shaking got stronger. We all headed to exits and down the stairs. No panic but one woman sobbing. This one was scary," wrote NBC journalist Lester Holt on Twitter. No damage was reported at Los Angeles International Airport following inspections.

In Las Vegas, 150 miles east of the quake, an NBA summer league game was postponed when the tremor hit, causing the scoreboard and several overhead speakers to sway. The earthquake was the largest in Southern California since 1999, when a 7.1-magnitude quake struck the Twentynine Palms Marine Corps base, according to The Los Angeles Times. — AFP