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Panel increases annual leave to 35 days in private sector

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KUWAIT: (Left) HH the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah attends Kuwait University's annual graduation ceremony for honor students for the academic year 2017-2018 yesterday at the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Jaber Al-Sabah Theater at the KU campus in Shuwaikh. (Right) HH the Amir receives a memento from National Assembly Speaker Marzouq Al-Ghanem and Assembly delegation members yesterday. — KUNA (See Pages 2 & 3)

By B Izzak

KUWAIT: The National Assembly's health and social affairs committee yesterday agreed to increase annual leave in the private sector to 35 days from 30 currently as part of a number of amendments to the labor law, a lawmaker said. MP Osama Al-Shaheen said the amendment applies to both Kuwaitis and expatriates employed in the private sector. Annual leave was raised to 30 days - not including Fridays - several years ago, when the labor law underwent major changes.

Shaheen also said the committee approved a draft law regulating charity in the country. The bill stipulates tougher penalties for those who raise charity funds without a valid license and also raises penalties against those who disparage charitable work. The lawmaker said MPs intend to request that the Assembly gives priority to debate two legislations in today's regular session.

The first requires foreigners visiting Kuwait to have a medical insurance for the period of their stay in the country. The bill also states that the interior ministry will not issue a visit visa for foreigners without the medical insurance. It aims at preventing foreigners from coming to the country for medical treatment. The second bill deals with the call to establish a food authority, the lawmaker said.

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US downgrades its Palestinian diplomatic mission

JERUSALEM: The United States downgraded its diplomatic mission to the Palestinians yesterday, the latest in a series of steps by President Donald Trump's White House. Palestinian leaders say it is aimed at wiping out their cause. The move, following a decision announced in October, closes the US Jerusalem consulate general that had acted independently and served as a de-facto embassy to the Palestinians since the Oslo accords of the 1990s. It will be merged with the US embassy to Israel.

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Tornadoes kill 23 in Alabama; Amir sends condolences

BEAUREGARD, Alabama: Rescuers in Alabama stepped up the search for survivors yesterday after two back-to-back tornadoes ripped across the southern state, with the death toll of 23 expected to rise further. "The devastation is incredible," Lee County Sheriff Jay Jones told the local CBS affiliate. "It looks

almost as if someone took a giant knife and scraped the ground," he said. "There are slabs where homes formerly stood, there is debris everywhere, trees are snapped, whole ... forested areas are just snapped. I cannot recall at least in the last 50 years ... a situation where we have had this loss of life," Jones said.

He said the death toll stood at 23, some of them children. One of the dead was just six years old, with the toll likely to rise. "We have several people who are still unaccounted for," Jones said. "Unfortunately, we anticipate the number of fatalities may rise as the day goes on." Other people were hospitalized, some with "very serious injuries".

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BEAUREGARD, Alabama: A man carries items from his mother's home yesterday after it was destroyed in a tornado. — AFP

News in brief

US deploys THAAD to Israel

JERUSALEM: The US military has deployed its most advanced air and missile defense system to Israel for the first time, US and Israeli military officials said yesterday. The deployment, which began in March, was intended to test the US military's ability to rapidly deploy such weapons around the world, said a spokeswoman for US European Command. — Reuters

Pakistan airspace fully reopened

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan fully reopened its airspace yesterday, authorities said, days after it closed its skies to all air travel, leaving thousands stranded worldwide as tensions with nuclear arch-rival India soared. But the backlog means major delays are still expected and authorities have urged passengers to check for more information with their airlines. — AFP

Qatar defiant on arms purchases

DOHA: Qatar yesterday told rival Saudi Arabia not to meddle in its potential arms purchases from Russia, as the state weighs the purchase of the S-400 air defense system. "Regarding the arms sales that Qatar has with Russia... we believe that Saudi Arabia, or any other countries, it is none of their business," Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said at a news conference with his visiting Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov. — AFP

Saudi envoy's killer hanged

DHAKA: A Bangladeshi man was hanged in a jail outside Dhaka over the murder of a Saudi diplomat in 2012, an official said yesterday. Khalaf Al-Ali, 45, was shot in the capital's diplomatic zone in front of his rented apartment. Police at that time said 30-year-old Saiful Islam, who was hanged on Sunday, led the gang who tried to rob the diplomat. — AFP

'Momo' image creator says has destroyed doll

TOKYO: The Japanese artist behind the images that sparked the recent viral "Momo Challenge" hoax told AFP yesterday he destroyed the creepy doll long ago and never meant to harm anyone. The scary image with goggle eyes and a pained expression was based on a Japanese ghost called "ubume" - of a woman who dies during childbirth, explained Keisuke Aiso, head of Tokyo-based firm LINK FACTORY, which makes props for TV dramas.

The silicon-based sculpture, which stands

about one meter high, was first shown at a ghost-themed exhibition in Tokyo's swanky Ginza district in 2016 but attracted little attention at the time. It was one of many ghost-themed sculptures in Aiso's repertoire and the artist said: "It was meant to scare people, yes, but it wasn't meant to harm anyone." Aiso, 43, destroyed the sculpture last year because it began to deteriorate. "That was nothing to do with the recent case," he stressed.

The terrifying image has been at the center of a viral hoax, as reports surfaced that children were being induced by "Momo" into dangerous tasks and even self-harm and suicide. However, there is no evidence this is true and the myth seems to have been propagated mainly by concerned parents via social media. Aiso appeared bemused by the reports and told AFP: "I'd be happy if such a challenge never existed." — AFP



TOKYO: This handout picture taken in Aug 2016 shows the silicon-based sculpture Momo on display. — AFP

Award-winning Egypt journalist freed from jail

CAIRO: Award-winning Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid was released yesterday after spending nearly six years in prison following his arrest while covering a bloody crackdown on protests. The photographer, widely known as Shawkan, faces five years of strict supervision and will be required to spend every night sleeping at his local police station, but he vowed to resume his work. Last year Shawkan received UNESCO's World Freedom Prize for his "courage, resistance and commitment to freedom of expression," disarming the Egyptian authorities who accused him of "terrorist and criminal acts".

Speaking at his home in Giza, he said the first moments of his release felt "as if I was flying". Imprisonment "was an experience that I can never forget," the 31-year-old told AFP. "It's bitter but it lets one look at life from a different perspective, a new perspective that one can't see except from this place," he said. He is determined to return to his career despite the restrictions placed on him, saying: "I will continue my work as a photojournalist in Egypt." His mother fears his journalism will expose him to more risk. "As a mother I always urge him to stay out of trouble... but he always says journalism is in my blood," said 61-year-old Reda Mahrous.

The Committee to Protect Journalists called on the Egyptian authorities "to end their shameful treatment of this photojournalist by removing any conditions to his release". Shawkan said he would take legal steps to try to end the restrictions.

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CAIRO: Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, widely known as Shawkan, carries a camera at his home yesterday. — AFP