

# Mystery shrouds 'sabotage' of oil tankers in tense Gulf

**DUBAI:** Investigators sought yesterday to shed light on a series of mysterious attacks on ships off the coast of the UAE, as President Donald Trump warned Iran against doing anything to harm US interests. Washington and its Gulf allies stopped short of blaming Tehran for what the UAE and Saudi Arabia called the "sabotage" of four ships, including two Saudi oil tankers, on Sunday. But Trump vowed that Tehran would "suffer greatly" were it to "do anything" to threaten US interests.

"If they do anything, it would be a very bad mistake," Trump warned at the White House. "If they do anything they will suffer greatly." Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hit back, saying the Islamic republic was "too great to be intimidated by anyone". "God willing we will pass this difficult period with glory and our heads held high, and defeat the enemy," Rouhani said at a late night meeting with clerics. The attacks came after the United States deployed B-52 bombers and an assault ship to bolster an aircraft carrier in the region.

The dispatch of the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier group, the amphibious assault vessel, a Patriot missile battery and the bombers has triggered fears of a possible military confrontation. "In an environment of rising regional tensions, limited Iranian operations against the UAE and Saudi Arabia might be designed to dissuade Abu Dhabi and Riyadh and signal that war with Iran will not be limited to Iranian soil," said Alex Vatanka, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

A UAE government official said the Saudi oil tankers Al-Marzoqah and Amjad were attacked off the emirate of Fujairah along with the Norwegian tanker Andrea Victory and an Emirati ship, the A. Michel. No casualties were reported and none of the vessels sank. Saudi Arabia, Iran's regional arch-rival, condemned "acts of sabotage" and a "criminal act". The UAE minister of state for foreign affairs, Anwar Gargash, said the Emirates will probe the "deliberate sabotage". "The investigation will be conducted in a professional manner, the facts will be made clear, and we have our own readings and conclusions," he tweeted. Saudi Arabia said its two tankers suffered "significant damage" but there was no oil spill.

The attacks raised many questions, including the nature of the sabotage. The Andrea Victory's managers, Thome Group, said the ship had a hole in its hull "after being struck by an unknown object on the waterline". Asked whether the United States believed Iran played a role in the attacks, Brian Hook, the US special envoy for Iran, declined to comment, saying only that US authorities would be assisting the investigation at the request of the UAE.

Acting Pentagon chief Patrick Shanahan proposed a revamped military plan at a meeting with senior national security aides, The New York Times reported. The plan would see up to 120,000 US troops deployed to the Middle East were Iran to attack American forces or speed up nuclear weapons develop-



**AT SEA:** Photo shows the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) while conducting a replenishment-at-sea with the fast combat support ship USNS Arctic (T-AOE 9), as the MH-60S Sea Hawk helicopters assigned to the 'Nightdippers' of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron (HSM) 5, transfer stores between the ships. — AFP

ment, the newspaper said. The United Nations called on all sides to "exercise restraint for the sake of regional peace."

Oil prices initially spiked in response to news of the attacks, but were largely flat in trading yesterday. Fujairah port is the only Emirati terminal located on the Arabian Sea coast, bypassing the Strait of Hormuz through which most Gulf oil exports pass. Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the strait in

case of a military confrontation with the United States. "If, and it's an 'IF', there really has been a deliberate attempt to damage these oil tankers, then it's possibly a warning from Iran about the consequences of anybody taking military action against Iranian targets anywhere in the region," said Middle East analyst Neil Partrick.

Iran and the United States have engaged in a war of words in recent weeks since Tehran

began to roll back commitments set out in a landmark 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. Trump withdrew the United States from the deal last year and has unilaterally reimposed tough sanctions on Iran. Last month, Washington designated Iran's revolutionary guards as a "foreign terrorist organization", the first time the classification has been applied to a branch of a foreign government.— AFP

## Opposition MPs urge PM to quit...

Continued from Page 1

A few weeks ago, the committee ruled that a similar grilling filed by MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri was in breach of the constitution and it was not debated. MP Abdulkarim Al-Kundari, who filed the grilling this time accusing the prime minister of failing to implement development programs and curb corruption, said by refusing to face two grillings, the prime minister who cannot face a lawmaker is incapable of running a country.

In the meantime, opposition MPs issued two statements, each signed by seven MPs (a total of 10 MPs in both) calling on the prime minister to resign, saying that there is no hope to establish any cooperation with the government. In the first statement, the opposition MPs described the procedures in the Assembly yesterday by the majority of MPs to refer the premier grilling to the legal committee as "unconstitutional and illegal".

The statement held the Assembly Speaker responsible for accepting the motion and allowing the voting to

take place in violation of the Assembly internal charter. The statement described what happened as an attempt to stop grilling and weaken parliamentary supervision which calls for non-cooperation with the government for violating the constitution and the law.

MPs Abdulkarim Al-Kundari, Riyadh Al-Adasani, Abdulwahab Al-Babtain, Bader Al-Mulla, Shuaib Al-Muwaizri, Hamdan Al-Azemi and Omar Al-Tabtabai signed the statement.

The second statement, also signed by seven MPs, said that the government boycott of the special session on Sunday and the killing of two grillings against the prime minister, indicates that the aggression of the government on the rights of the National Assembly has become a permanent methodology.

The lawmakers declared their non-cooperation with the government, calling for the resignation of the government and appointing a new prime minister. Kundari described the eight years since the prime minister was appointed as the worst political period and the worst National Assembly with some MPs refusing the government to be touched. The Speaker said that the Assembly will hold sessions today and tomorrow and that it will hold six sessions in June to approve the budgets and a number of legislation.

bility and quickly fixed it. "This isn't someone trying to steal private messages or personal details," Storey said that disclosing vulnerabilities was a good thing and likely would lead to other services looking at their security.

The Financial Times initially reported on the WhatsApp vulnerability that allowed attackers to inject spyware on phones via the app's phone call function. The FT said the spyware was developed by Israeli cyber surveillance company NSO Group - best known for its mobile surveillance tools - and affects both Android and iPhones.

Asked about the report, NSO said its technology is licensed to authorized government agencies "for the sole purpose of fighting crime and terrorism" and that it does not operate the system itself while having a rigorous licensing and vetting process. "We investigate any credible allegations of misuse and if necessary, we take action, including shutting down the system," the company said. "Under no circumstances would NSO be involved in the operating or identifying of targets of its technology, which is solely operated by intelligence and law enforcement agencies."

Social media group Facebook bought WhatsApp in 2014 for \$19 billion. Facebook co-founder Chris Hughes last week wrote in The New York Times that fellow co-founder Mark Zuckerberg had far too much influence by controlling Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, three core communications platforms, and called for the company to be broken up. Facebook's shares were down about 1.1 percent in New York. — Reuters

son in empathy and compassion, one that is never forgotten after fasting the month of Ramadan, and which makes it so much easier to share our resources with the disadvantaged.

Finally, all the above symptoms of the modern man lead to depression, which is common today. Fasting Ramadan is a way to start overcoming depression because it has several positive results simultaneously: a renewed sense of purpose, realizing your personal strength, increased involvement with others, awareness of blessings that you formally took for granted, taking control of yourself through managing your needs, desires and thoughts, and drawing closer to your Creator and the Provider of all your needs.

Fasting the month of Ramadan definitely has its benefits in this life, especially in the modern age. And this is just the tip of the iceberg, because there are medical and spiritual benefits, as well as blessings that accrue in the Hereafter. The total benefits of fasting are known only to God, who says in the Quran, "... and it is better for you to fast, if you only knew" (2:184).

*Courtesy of the TIES Center: the TIES Center aims at empower Kuwait's expats through social and educational services that promote a positive and productive role in society, and to facilitate opportunities for intra- and interfaith interactions that promote social solidarity. For more information, you can contact TIES at Tel: 25231015/6; Hotline: 94079777; e-mail: info@tiescenter.net.*

## Warships and wives: Debate in Indian election turns ugly

**NEW DELHI:** From jibes over the prime minister's wife to criticism of the main opposition leader's family holiday three decades ago, one trend stands out in this year's general election campaign in India: this time, it's personal. The world's largest democracy, with around 900 million eligible voters, wraps up polling held over six weeks on Sunday. Results will be known on May 23.

Election observers say this has been an unusually hostile campaign even by Indian standards, devoid of real policy debate to the expected benefit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). "The last few elections were about corruption or inflation," said Harsh Pant, a political analyst at the Observer Research Foundation think-tank in New Delhi. "This time, there are no real issues being discussed."

Modi won a surprise majority in 2014, riding a wave of anger over perceived graft by the Congress party, which has governed India for the majority of the seven decades after the end of British rule in 1947. He entered

this election cycle under pressure, losing three state polls in December amid rising anger over weak farm incomes and unemployment.

But the early phase of campaigning was dominated by national security after a suicide car bomb attack by a Pakistan-based militant group killed at least 40 Indian paramilitary police in the disputed region of Kashmir. "The opposition were caught off guard by the national security narrative and after that it became very difficult to contest on that," Pant said. "Then it became all about Modi, to the advantage of the BJP."

On Monday, the leader of a powerful regional party urged women not to vote for Modi because he had abandoned his wife as a teenager. "How can he (Modi) respect others' sisters and wives when he has left his own innocent wife for political gains," said Mayawati, head of the Bahujan Samaj Party. The BJP has previously said that Modi's marriage was arranged by his family and existed in name only. — Reuters

## WhatsApp calls for update after...

Continued from Page 1

can about who may have been impacted from their community. That's really where our highest concern is," the spokesman said. Citizen Lab tweeted: "We believe an attacker tried (and was blocked by WhatsApp) to exploit it as recently as yesterday to target a human rights lawyer."

Ireland's Data Protection Commission (DPC), WhatsApp's lead regulator in the European Union, said WhatsApp had notified the agency late on Monday of a "serious security vulnerability" on its platform. "The DPC understands that the vulnerability may have enabled a malicious actor to install unauthorized software and gain access to personal data on devices which have WhatsApp installed," the regulator said in a statement. Cyber security experts said the vast majority of users were unlikely to have been affected.

Scott Storey, a senior lecturer in cyber security at Sheffield Hallam University, believes most WhatsApp users were not affected since this appears to be governments targeting specific people, mainly human rights campaigners. "For the average end user, it's not something to really worry about," he said, adding that WhatsApp found the vulnera-

## Ramadan therapy...

Continued from Page 1

You will find a self-disciplined, patient, flexible and resilient person. Another byproduct of our modern lifestyles is isolation. Families are often separated and must resort to social media to keep in touch. Social media also enable us to have friends from around the world that we meet in virtual spaces. However, this has had a negative impact on the "in-person" relationships with those around us, with many people preferring to relate to others through their phones. Ramadan helps this situation because there are many communal meals, whether at home, in mosques, or special gatherings for social groups.

In addition, the extra attention on prayer brings neighbors together in the mosques daily, which builds stronger communities. Finally, zakat ul-fitr, or the pre-holiday charity, requires us to reach out to someone less fortunate in the spirit of sharing and celebration. Modern life can sometimes lead to apathy, which is caring little for others, and a sense of entitlement, which is overestimating your rights.

Feeling the hunger and thirst of fasting makes you keenly aware of the blessing of food and clean water in your life, and more aware of the fact that many people do not have what you will now consider a luxury. Feeling the deprivations of the poor is a wonderful les-

## Spain pulls its frigate from US military...

Continued from Page 1

No link has officially been drawn between the incidents and US accusations concerning "imminent" attacks by Tehran against US interests in the region. Britain, France and Germany on Monday urged the US not to further escalate tensions over the Iran nuclear deal.

### Houthi drone attacks

Meanwhile, drone attacks claimed by Iran-aligned Yemen rebels shut down one of Saudi Arabia's main oil pipelines yesterday, further ratcheting up Gulf tensions after the mysterious sabotage of several tankers. Days after the United States deployed bombers and an assault ship to bolster an aircraft carrier in the region, the world's largest crude exporter said two pumping stations had been targeted yesterday.

They lie on the East West Pipeline, able to pump five million barrels of oil a day from the oil-rich eastern province to a Red Sea export terminal. The announcement came hours after Yemen's Houthi rebels said they had targeted vital installations in Saudi Arabia, which leads a military coalition against them. Energy Minister Khalid Al-Falih said Saudi Aramco had "temporarily shut down" the pipeline to "evaluate its condition" but added that oil production and exports had not been interrupted.

"The company (Saudi Aramco) is working on restoring the pumping station before resuming operations," he said in a statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency. The stations reportedly targeted lie west of Riyadh, at Dawadmi and Afeef. Falih said yesterday's incident was an "act of terrorism... that not only targets the kingdom but also the security of oil supplies to the world and the global economy". Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdusalam wrote on Twitter that the attacks were "a response to the aggressors continuing to commit genocide" against the Yemeni people.

### Kuwait condemns attack

Kuwait condemns in the strongest words the terrorist drone attack on two pumping stations in Dawadmi and Aff Governorates in Saudi Arabia, said an official source of the Foreign Ministry. The source affirmed that Kuwait stands side by side with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and fully supports all measures taken to maintain its security and stability while fighting terrorist acts that undermine the security and stability of the kingdom and the region. The source prayed Allah Almighty to bestow security and stability on the kingdom, and safety on its citizens.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates intervened in the Yemen war to bolster the internationally-recognized government's efforts against the Houthis in March

2015. The 1,200-kilometre pipeline reportedly hit yesterday serves as an alternative for Saudi crude exports if the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf were to be closed. Iran has repeatedly threatened to close the strait in case of a military confrontation with the United States.

The reported pipeline attacks came after the UAE said four ships were damaged in "sabotage attacks" off the emirate of Fujairah, close to the Hormuz, on Sunday. Washington and its Gulf allies stopped short of blaming Riyadh's regional arch-rival Tehran for the sabotage, but US President Donald Trump warned Iran against doing anything to harm US interests. "If they (Iran) do anything, it would be a very bad mistake," Trump warned at the White House. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hit back, saying the Islamic republic was "too great to be intimidated by anyone".

The attacks came after the United States deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier group, an amphibious assault vessel, a Patriot missile battery and B-52 bombers, triggering fears of a possible military confrontation. "In an environment of rising regional tensions, limited Iranian operations against the UAE and Saudi Arabia might be designed to dissuade Abu Dhabi and Riyadh and signal that war with Iran will not be limited to Iranian soil," said Alex Vatanka, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

### 'Deliberate sabotage'

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