



Kashmiri men fish in a boat on Dal Lake after rainfall during a lockdown in Srinagar on Friday. — AFP

## Families survive on one meal amid...

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Buhera is home to around 300,000 people and experiences dry spells even during good rainy seasons. It is one of the areas hardest hit by the drought. To make matters worse, it was in the path of Cyclone Idai which devastated Mozambique and parts of eastern Zimbabwe earlier this year.

According to the UN, most of Zimbabwe's 60 districts will have exhausted their staple maize stocks by October. The Kufakunesu family and neighboring villagers have been lucky to have boreholes to draw water for drinking, washing and watering the garden - but the water is drying up due to the heat and scanty rain. The

UN's World Food Program has been handing out food parcels - cooking oil and porridge for children under five - and US\$8 in cash per month for every family member. But the payouts are only restricted to the so-called lean months.

At Joni, a neighboring village, 49-year-old Fungai Mugombe, one of three wives and a mother of seven, used the money set up a simple wire mesh making project. "People buy the mesh wire for fencing, and we make a small profit. I sometimes exchange the fences with food," Mugombe said outside a cluster of huts where a red bougainvillea adds color to a bleak dusty landscape.

Freeman Mavhiza, the district administrator, said the government was providing villagers with irrigation facilities and seed for drought resistant crops such as millet and sorghum. President Emmerson Mnangagwa has said the government had budgeted \$120 million for the production of "strategic crops, such as maize, soya beans and cotton". — AFP

## Aussies held in Iran return...

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months on accusations of circumventing US sanctions on military equipment had also been released and returned home. Australia's attorney general Christian Porter confirmed in a statement that he had stopped the extradition of Reza Dehbashi to the United States.

But he dismissed "speculation" over the case, amid media reports including in the Sydney Morning Herald that it could be part of a prisoner swap involving the bloggers.

Porter declined to comment further "particularly when any such response from me may diminish our government's capacity to deal with future matters of this type in Australia's best interests". State media in Tehran said Dehbashi, a PhD student at the University of Queensland, had been detained on allegations of "attempting to purchase and transfer advanced American military radar equipment via Dubai to Iran". It said Dehbashi had dismissed the charges as "a misunderstanding".

An Iranian state channel showed footage of what it said was Dehbashi arriving at Tehran's Imam Khomeini International Airport and hugging a tearful woman apparently from his family. The Australian couple sought privacy, however. They said in their statement that intense media coverage "may not be helpful" in the negotiations for the release of a third Australian detained in Iran in an unrelated case.

Melbourne University Academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert, who specializes in Middle East politics with a focus on Gulf states, had been detained for "some months" before King

and Firkin were arrested. Her case also came to light last month. Moore-Gilbert is accused by Iranian authorities of "spying for another country". Negotiations over the fate of the university lecturer are "very long term", Payne said.

"She has been detained for some considerable time and has faced the Iranian legal system and has been convicted and sentenced," the minister said. "We don't accept the charges on which she was convicted and we would seek to have her returned to Australia," Payne added, declining to comment further on the case. Payne has maintained the cases of those detained were not related to diplomatic tensions. Australia said in August it would join a US-led naval coalition to escort commercial ships in the Gulf, after a spate of attacks blamed on Iran but that Tehran denied. However, that announcement is believed to have come after the arrests.

News of the release of the King and Firkin comes just weeks after an Iranian woman arrested in Australia and sentenced in the United States was returned home. Negar Ghodskani was sentenced last month in Minneapolis to 27 months in prison for violating sanctions against Tehran, but was released following time served in custody in Australia and the United States.

After her extradition to the US, she confessed to participation in a conspiracy to illegally export technology to Iran in breach of sanctions, according to the US Justice Department. She was pregnant when she was arrested in 2017 in Australia where she was a legal resident. She gave birth while in Australian custody and her son was sent to Iran to live with his father.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in April floated a potential prisoner swap with a British-Iranian mother being held in Tehran. He suggested exchanging Ghodskani for Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, in jail in Tehran for alleged sedition. Zaghari-Ratcliffe has also been separated from her daughter while in custody— AFP

of corruption," said Iraqi analyst Sarmad Al-Bayati.

Political and religious rifts run deep in Iraq, and protests are typically called for by party or sect - making the last five days exceptional, said Fanar Haddad an expert at Singapore University's Middle East Institute. "This is the first time we hear people saying they want the downfall of the regime," Haddad said.

Sadr, a former militia leader turned nationalist politician, demanded on Friday that the government resign to clear the way for a fresh election supervised by the United Nations. His bloc is the largest in parliament, and his intervention sets the scene for a possible showdown with the speaker, who has made his own bid to make political capital out of the protests. Calling yesterday's parliamentary session, Halbusi pledged he would "take off his suit jacket and be the first among the protesters", if he did not see the government improve living conditions.

Abdel Mahdi appealed on Friday for more time to implement his reform agenda in a country plagued by corruption and unemployment after decades of conflict. "There are no magic solutions." — AFP

## PayPal abandons Facebook's Libra...

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Facebook's upstart cryptocurrency and questions over how it would be regulated. "It requires a certain boldness and fortitude to take on an endeavor as ambitious as Libra - a generational opportunity to get things right and improve financial inclusion," association head of policy Dante Disparte said in response to an AFP inquiry. "The journey will be long and challenging. We're better off knowing about this lack of commitment now, rather than later."

Facebook unveiled plans in June for Libra - which will roll out in 2020 - to be backed by a basket of currency assets to avoid the wild swings of bitcoin and other virtual units. The non-profit Libra Association, based in Geneva, will oversee the blockchain-based coin. Facebook envisions Libra as a new global cryptocurrency, pledging to deliver a stable virtual money that lives on smartphones and could bring over a billion "unbanked" people into the financial system.

"The type of change that will reconfigure the financial system to be tilted towards people, not the institutions serving them, will be hard," Disparte said. "Commitment to that mission is more important to us than anything else." Mastercard, Visa and other financial partners enlisted to oversee Libra are reportedly having second thoughts as regulators unleash ire on the project and dig for information from members of the association. Other Libra backers include ride-hailing apps Lyft and Uber.

## Pompeo slams 'harassment' as...

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a CIA analyst - had filed a formal complaint to the intelligence community inspector general about Trump's alleged pressuring of Zelensky.

Trump and his supporters have aggressively attacked that still-anonymous whistleblower - Trump denounced the person as "close to a spy" and a Democrat operating with second-hand information. In a tweet early yesterday, Trump said that "the so-called Whistleblower's account of my perfect phone call is 'way off,' not even close... This is a fraud against the American people!"

But if a second whistleblower emerges, and if that person in fact has more direct information about the events in question, as the New York Times reported late Friday, the allegations would become more difficult to shrug off. The Times said the second official was among those interviewed by inspector general Michael Atkinson about the allegations lodged by the original whistleblower. The newspaper, citing two people briefed on the matter, said the second official was still pondering whether to lodge a formal complaint.

Congressional investigators led by House Intelligence Committee chairman Adam Schiff have promised a quick and expeditious inquiry, but said Friday that the White House was not cooperating. "The White House has refused to engage with - or even respond to - multiple requests for documents," said a letter signed by the Democratic chairmen of the House oversight, intelligence and foreign affairs committees. "His actions have left us with no choice but to issue this subpoena."

In their letter to acting White House Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney, the committees demanded that he turn over the requested files by Oct 18. The subpoena fol-

The head of the association said last week that the project's leaders aimed to "reassure" regulators worried about the virtual money. In leaked comments from a meeting of Facebook employees in July, Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg said he remained optimistic about Libra despite harsh comments from public officials in several countries. "The public things, I think, tend to be a little more dramatic," he said. "But a bigger part of it is private engagement with regulators around the world, and those, I think, often, are more substantive and less dramatic... That's where a lot of the discussions and details get hashed out on things."

In an interview published Friday in French newspaper Les Echos, Apple chief executive Tim Cook said he was uncomfortable with the idea of a company taking over roles typically reserved for governments. Without specifically naming Facebook, Cook said issuing currency, like national defense, is best left to states. Facebook and some two dozen partners released a prototype of Libra as an open source code for developers interested in weaving it into apps, services or businesses.

Martin Chorzempa, a research fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, questioned whether Libra would be able to fulfill its vision. In particular, Libra will need to comply with regulations that require collecting personal information about customers in order to expose crimes such as money laundering or fraud. "It is not clear to me that Libra is anywhere near being able to perform those know-your-customer requirements that would allow them to legally serve these communities," Chorzempa said. "Libra would have to work with governments to make sure they are compliant or get those rules changed, and that is a difficult process." — AFP

lowed a demand earlier Friday for documents from Vice President Mike Pence. Pompeo - who recently acknowledged having listened in on the key Trump-Zelensky phone call - failed to meet a Friday subpoena deadline to turn over Ukraine-related documents, CNN reported, citing a House Foreign Affairs committee aide.

Meanwhile, a series of text messages between US diplomats dealing with Ukraine, made public by the congressional investigators, supported Democratic accusations that Trump had illegally sought foreign help for his reelection effort. Trump pushed back hard, saying there was no quid pro quo and, in an effort to recast the entire saga, insisting it was his responsibility to investigate "corruption". "I don't care about Biden's campaign but I care about corruption," he told reporters.

Biden, the former US vice president, responded by calling Trump "the most corrupt president we've had in modern history". "I am not going to stand for it," Biden said at a campaign event in Los Angeles. "He has indicted himself by his own statements." Biden added, one day after Trump openly called for both Beijing and Kiev to investigate the Democrat for corruption.

Trump has alleged that Biden's son Hunter earned "millions" from sitting on the board of directors of a Ukraine tycoon's gas company. But no evidence has surfaced showing wrongdoing by either Biden. The diplomats' text messages showed that some had doubts about Trump's pressure on Zelensky, including allegedly freezing a \$400 million military aid package.

The release last week of the complaint and a summary of Trump's July 25 call with Zelensky, in which he asked for a "favor" and referred to investigating Biden, ignited the Democrats' impeachment inquiry. As Democrats raised their attacks on Trump, many Republicans remained quietly supportive of the president. Breaking with the pack, Senator Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential nominee in 2012, blasted Trump's comments that Beijing and Kiev should investigate Biden, calling the remarks "wrong and appalling". — AFP

## Protesters flood Iraq streets...

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and have scoffed at the recent overtures by politicians. "These men don't represent us. We don't want parties anymore. We don't want anyone to speak in our name," said one protester late Friday. Abu Salah, a 70-year-old resident of Baghdad with wispy white hair and a matching beard, said the streets would be full until Iraqis saw real change. "If living conditions don't improve, the protests will come back even worse," he told AFP.

The protests have presented the biggest challenge yet to the Iraqi premier, who came to power a year ago as a consensus candidate promising reforms but whose response to the demonstrations has been seen as tepid. "Abdel Mahdi should have come forward with decisive changes, like the sacking of leading politicians accused