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Rocket blasts off with first Arab to International Space Station

Stars in its eyes, UAE celebrates its first astronaut in space

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan: A Soyuz rocket blasted off yesterday from the Baikonur space center in Kazakhstan carrying an Emirati who is set to make history as the first Arab on the International Space Station. The Russian rocket carrying the three-member crew - including Hazzaa Al-Mansoori of the United Arab Emirates - took off as scheduled at 1357 GMT. Mansoori, 35, is accompanied by Russia's Oleg Skripochka and NASA astronaut Jessica Meir. They are expected to dock at the station just under six hours after launch.

"Everything continues to go smoothly for this ride," a commentator said on NASA television seven minutes after the launch. Russia's Roscosmos space agency said on Twitter that the spacecraft had successfully reached orbit. Mansoori received support from around the world before what he described as his "dream" mission. He was seen showing his fist in the air before the launch.

In Dubai, a crowd gathered at the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre to watch the launch, erupting in cheers and dubbing Mansoori a national hero. Some carried UAE flags. Dubai's iconic Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest skyscraper, lit up the moment of blast-off.

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(Left) International Space Station (ISS) crewmember, UAE astronaut Hazzaa Al-Mansoori, waves as he boards the Soyuz MS-15 spacecraft at the Russian-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday. (Right) People wave Emirati flags as they watch screens showing the spacecraft lifting off at Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre in Dubai yesterday. — AFP

Iqama renewal to go online

KUWAIT: The interior ministry is planning to launch online residency renewals next month, starting with expats holding article 18 residency permits, whose number is over three million. The move allows the renewal of an expat's residency and that of his wife, children and maids online without the need to go to residency departments. Sources said with the support of the economic committee at the Council of Ministers, the electric link between the interior ministry, manpower authority, civil information and health ministry is complete. The new system will provide expats several online services, most notably residency renewal, while another service will be introduced later to issue visit visas for parents, spouses and children online. — Al-Qabas

Trump asked Ukraine to probe Biden

WASHINGTON: A White House transcript released yesterday confirmed that President Donald Trump asked his Ukrainian counterpart to probe political rival Joe Biden - a day after Democrats seized on the explosive allegation to launch an impeachment process. The official memorandum of a July 25 phone call with President Volodymyr Zelensky shows Trump saying US Attorney General Bill Barr and the president's personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani would be in touch about probing Biden and his son's activities related to Ukraine.

"There's a lot of talk about Biden's

son, that Biden stopped the prosecution and a lot of people want to find out about that so whatever you can do with the attorney general would be great," Trump said. Democrats, who opened formal impeachment proceedings against the president on Tuesday, are investigating whether he pressured a foreign government to look into a political opponent, and if he used a delayed \$400 million aid package as leverage.

As Barack Obama's vice president, Biden and other Western leaders pressured Ukraine to get rid of the country's top prosecutor, Viktor Shokin, because he was seen as not tough enough on corruption. "Biden went around bragging that he stopped the prosecution so if you can look into it... It sounds horrible to me," Trump told Zelensky in the call.

The transcript, which is a summary rather than a word-for-word record, did

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WASHINGTON: Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer holds a transcript of the phone call between US President Donald Trump and Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky, during a press conference at the US Capitol yesterday. — AFP

Mourides build biggest mosque in West Africa



DAKAR: Members of the Mouride Brotherhood clean the road in front of the Great Mosque of the Mourides yesterday before its inauguration. — AFP

DAKAR: Senegal's influential Mouride Brotherhood will inaugurate tomorrow a 30,000-capacity mosque in the capital Dakar, touted as the largest in West Africa and rivaling its opulent peers in Arab nations. Work on the Massalik Jinaan ("The Paths to Paradise") mosque began a decade ago on a swampy six-hectare site in the poor area of Bopp, on land donated by the government of this 90-percent Muslim nation. The name is derived from the title of a poem by Sheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacke, the 19th-century founder of the Brotherhood, who is revered by followers as a Sufi saint.

Headquartered in the city of Touba,

where Bamba is entombed, the movement is a pillar of Senegal's reputation for religious tolerance. The Mouride philosophy - the name derives from the Arabic word for "one who desires to learn" - preaches service to humanity in addition to upholding the principles of Islam. The movement also wields considerable economic and political clout, in Senegal and in neighboring Gambia. With a Carrara marble exterior and boasting five minarets - the tallest 78 m high - the mosque has a capacity of 15,000 worshippers inside, and another 15,000 on an outside esplanade.

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Iran rules out talks; US ramps up sanctions

UNITED NATIONS: Iran's president yesterday closed the door on meeting Donald Trump despite last-minute European efforts to ease tensions as the United States again ramped up punishing sanctions. French President Emmanuel Macron had shuttled between his US and Iranian counterparts over two days at the United Nations, trying to arrange a historic encounter that he hoped could reduce the risk of all-out war in the Middle East.

But Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, addressing the UN General Assembly, said he would refuse talks so long as the United States maintains its economic pressure. "I would like to announce that our response to any negotiation under sanctions is negative," Rouhani said. He

dismissed the idea of a photo-op with Trump, who is fond of drama and held three made-for-television meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. "Memento photos are the final stage of negotiations, not the first one," he said.

He doubted the sincerity of the Trump administration to negotiate, pointing to officials' boasts of applying "the harshest sanctions in history" against Iran. "How can someone believe them when the silent killing of a great nation, and pressure on the lives of 83 million Iranians, especially women and children, are welcomed by American government officials? The Iranian nation will never, ever forget and forgive these crimes and these criminals," he said.

Trump had already ruled out easing economic pressure and, hours before Rouhani's speech, his administration said it was stepping up sanctions. On Trump's last scheduled day at the annual UN summit of world leaders, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States would punish Chinese companies

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NEW YORK: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani addresses the United Nations General Assembly at UN headquarters yesterday. — AFP

Toilet row: Modi ignores protests to collect award

NEW YORK: Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday brushed aside an outcry from human rights activists to receive an award from the Gates Foundation in New York for his efforts to end open defecation. The decision to honor the Indian leader provoked several withering op-eds and the ire of three Nobel prize winners, citing rising

attacks against minorities under Modi's tenure, while British-Asian actor Jameela Jamil and Riz Ahmed who had been due to attend dropped out.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation said it respected the critics' views but defended its decision, saying sanitation is a neglected issue and India's program can serve as a model for other countries. "I dedicate this award to all those Indians who transformed the 'Clean India Mission' into a people's movement and started giving cleanliness the highest priority in their daily lives," Modi said after collecting the award from billionaire philanthropist and Microsoft founder Bill Gates.

India's government says it has built more than 100 million toilets under a \$20 billion initiative begun in 2014 to address the issue of open defecation, particularly in rural areas, a major public health issue in the country. Under Modi's plan, tribal households get \$200 each for building latrines.

But ahead of the ceremony, Nobel Peace Prize winners Mairead Maguire, Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman and Shirin Ebadi said that under Modi's leadership, "India has descended into dangerous and deadly chaos that has consistently undermined human rights, democracy. This is particularly troubling to us as the stated mission of your

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