

International

Palestinian PM 'not informed' of new UAE's aid flight via Israel

Plane from UAE lands in Israel with supplies for Palestinians

RAMALLAH: Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said on Tuesday he was unaware that a plane from the United Arab Emirates was to fly to Israel carrying medical aid for the Palestinians. His remarks, after the flight was announced by Abu Dhabi's Etihad Airways, cast doubt over whether the Palestinians - at odds with Israel over occupied land they seek for a state - would accept the supplies. The Palestinian Authority is sensitive about attempts to direct aid or assistance to areas under its limited self-rule in the

occupied West Bank without its knowledge and coordination. The Palestinians, who have no airports and typically receive aid via Jordan, Egypt or Israel, rejected a similar shipment of medical supplies to combat the coronavirus on May 19, saying it had not been coordinated with them.

"If any country, whether Arab or European or international country wants to help us, we welcome that. We don't say no - as long as it is not conditional and as long as it is fully coordinated with us," Shtayyeh told reporters in the West Bank city of

Ramallah. The aid was coordinated through the United Nations, which was handling the logistics, the UAE foreign ministry said. "The UAE's only concern is to support the Palestinian people through this challenging period, in line with its historic support," it said. State-owned Etihad also operated the May 19 flight, the first known flight by a UAE airline to Israel.

Etihad said on Tuesday it would operate a second flight to Israel carrying medical aid on a cargo-only service from Abu Dhabi. Israel's foreign ministry said the Etihad flight landed at Tel Aviv on

Tuesday evening. Aid would be transferred to Gaza and the West Bank by the UN and a unit of Israel's defense ministry, it said. Israel has no diplomatic relations with the Gulf Arab countries and there are no commercial flights between them. But shared concerns over Iran's regional influence have led to a discreet thaw in ties. The Palestinians have warned against Arab normalisation with Israel, which has pledged to annex the West Bank's Jewish settlements and the Jordan Valley. Israel captured the West Bank in a 1967 war. —Reuters

Philippine's Ressa scared but strong ahead of verdict

MANILA: High-profile Philippine journalist Maria Ressa says the libel charge that could see her jailed next week is a government ploy to intimidate all critical voices, but she refuses to be silenced and still holds out hope of winning. In an exclusive video interview with AFP ahead of Monday's verdict that could see her sentenced for up to 12 years, Ressa admitted being scared but also continued to speak defiantly.

"I've been the cautionary tale: be quiet or you're next... that's part of the reason why I have been targeted," said Ressa, 56, the co-founder of news site Rappler and a former CNN journalist. "It's a chilling effect... not just to me and to Rappler, but to journalists and to anyone who asks critical questions." Monday's verdict will decide a case that stems from a businessman's complaint in 2017 over a Rappler story five years earlier about his alleged ties to a then-judge on the nation's top court. Government investigators initially dismissed the businessman's allegation. But state prosecutors later revived the case using a controversial cyber crime statute aimed at online offences ranging from stalking to child pornography.

Authorities say they have not targeted Ressa for her work and are simply enforcing the law. But press and media watchdogs say the case against Ressa is in retaliation for Rappler's independent reporting on President Rodrigo Duterte and his administration. The website's journalists have cast a harsh light on Duterte's anti-drugs crackdown, which has killed thousands and drawn international censure despite being backed by many Filipinos. Another one of the most prominent critics of Duterte's narco war, Senator Leila de Lima, has been in jail for three years over drug allegations that she says are trumped up. Ressa's libel case is among a string of criminal charges that have hit her and Rappler since last year, many of which stem from allegations over how the site raised investment money.

'Embracing my fear'

The multiple moves against Rappler have drawn international concern and made Ressa a cause celebre globally for people standing up against authoritarian governments. Time magazine named Ressa a Person of the Year in 2018. Rights watchdogs say the Duterte government has in recent weeks stepped up its campaign to silence dissent in other ways, with the nation's top broadcaster - ABS-CBN - shutdown. Lawmakers also this month passed the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which allows warrantless arrests, weeks of detention without charge and other measures that critics fear could be used to crack down on peaceful government opponents. Ressa said Duterte had cemented himself as the most powerful Filipino leader since dictator Ferdinand Marcos, whose two decades in power ended in a famous "people power" uprising in 1986. "We could even say more powerful than Marcos because he (Duterte) was able to declare martial law without even declaring martial law," Ressa said, referring to the Anti-Terrorism Act.

Ressa, who served as CNN's bureau chief in Manila and Jakarta during a nearly 35-year career, said waiting for Monday's verdict was proving an emotional challenge. "I am going to embrace my fear. I have to be ready and that starts in my head. That starts with my ability to be okay with the worst-case scenario," she said from her Manila home. "I don't want to be surprised." The independence of the judicial system in the Philippines, which has long had a reputation for corruption, has been further eroded during Duterte's four years in power, according to rights groups. But Ressa said individual people who make up the court system and their desire "to be guided by the spirit of the law" still give her reason for optimism. Regardless of the pressure from the highest levels of power to convict, it is up to the judge to make the final decision. "I'm hoping. All I can do is hope," Ressa said. —AFP

Australia rejects China's racism warning

SYDNEY: Australian officials and leading universities yesterday rejected China's claims students should be "cautious" in choosing to study Down Under because of concerns over racist incidents during the coronavirus pandemic. China's ministry of education warned students on Tuesday there had been "multiple discriminatory incidents against Asians in Australia" during the pandemic, ramping up diplomatic tensions between the two countries. The advisory was the latest in an escalating dispute between Beijing and Canberra that was deepened by Australia's call for an independent inquiry into the origin and handling of the coronavirus in central China last year.

Beijing reacted furiously to the demand, targeting Canberra on several fronts, including tourism, trade and now Chinese students, the largest overseas group in Australian universities. Australian Education Minister Dan Tehan hit back yesterday, saying the country was a multicultural society that welcomed international visitors. "Our success at flattening the curve means we are one of the safest countries in the

world for international students to be based in right now," he said in a statement. "We reject China's assertion that Australia is an unsafe destination for international students." Racism toward Asians has reportedly increased during the pandemic, with the New South Wales anti-discrimination commission saying instances included people being bullied for wearing a face mask, spat at and harassed in public, and racist language written across cars and private property. Vicki Thomson, chief executive of Australia's prestigious Group of Eight universities, told AFP they would "be very concerned" if Beijing's warning deterred students from coming to Australia. "We've had no evidence provided to us that there are issues of racial discrimination occurring on our campuses, and I think it's worth noting that we don't have a lot of students on our campuses at the moment," she said. Thomson lamented that the sector had been "caught in the middle" of geopolitical tensions. Australian universities are already facing massive losses as an indefinite coronavirus border closure locks out the foreign students who pump billions of dollars a year into the sector. Beijing's travel advice was largely symbolic but could interfere with a proposal to create a "secure corridor" for overseas students to return to Australia.

Education is Australia's fourth-largest export - behind iron ore, coal



SYDNEY: Demonstrators attend a Black Lives Matter protest to express solidarity with US protesters in Sydney and demand an end to frequent Aboriginal deaths in custody in Australia. —AFP

and natural gas - with more than 500,000 international students enrolled last year, bringing about Aus\$37 billion into the economy. China's statement came a day after a foreign ministry spokeswoman warned of "a lot of discrimination" against Chinese people in Australia - and days after Beijing told citizens not to travel there at all. As China has pursued a more combative foreign policy and sought to assert itself on the world stage, tensions with many

democracies have risen. In response to Australia backing the call for an independent virus inquiry, China's ambassador in Canberra threatened a widespread consumer boycott of Australian products - a warning followed up by a ban on four major Australian beef exporters. That was followed in May by an 80-percent tariff on Australian barley over dumping allegations, a move grain growers say will cost at least Aus\$500 million (US\$350 million) a year. —AFP

Freed Taliban prisoners eye return to battlefield

KABUL: Afghan authorities are opening prison doors for thousands of Taliban inmates in a high-risk gambit to ensure the insurgent group begin peace talks with Kabul. Security concerns are mounting as many of the newly liberated fighters say they are ready to resume their holy war. "If the Americans do not pull out, we will continue our jihad, because they have killed many Afghans in their operations," said Mohamed Daud, who was freed from Bagram jail north of Kabul last month.

"We do not want foreign forces in our country anymore," he told AFP, dressed in a traditional shalwar kameez, before taking a taxi back to his village with a cash handout from authorities worth \$65. US forces arrested Daud, 28, in the northwest province of Faryab nine years ago. Afghan authorities accelerated the planned release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, including Daud, as a "goodwill gesture" after the insurgents called a three-day ceasefire to mark the Eid holiday. Those released include members training to be suicide bombers, suicide

vest makers, kidnappers and even foreign fighters, a security official said. The move is part of a larger prisoner swap agreed as a precursor to peace talks starting.

Before their release, inmates were required to sign a pledge that they would not pick up arms again. It is increasingly clear such commitments mean little. A Taliban commander in Pakistan told AFP there should be "no ambiguity" that the released men will eventually be deployed to Afghanistan's front lines. "It's an ongoing jihad, and will continue until and unless we reach some sort of agreement with the Kabul government," he said. Several other freed insurgents say they remain angry at US troops, but under a US-Taliban deal signed in February the insurgents committed to stop attacking American and foreign forces as they withdraw from the country by next year. The immediate enemy is instead the struggling Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), with whom no such pledge has been made.

'Additional leaders, fighters'

A key concession Washington extracted from the Taliban during negotiations was the requirement to begin peace talks with Kabul. In return, the Afghan government must release



BAGRAM: In this file photo, Taliban prisoners wait to be released from the Bagram prison, next to the US military base in Bagram. —AFP

5,000 insurgent inmates while the Taliban pledged to free 1,000 security force prisoners. Since the swap started, Afghan authorities have freed 3,000 Taliban inmates while the insurgents have released more than 750 government prisoners, officials said. It could represent a boost of up to 10 percent for the Taliban's fighting force, with estimates on the number of insurgents

ranging between 50,000 and 100,000. Afghan security officials said the US did not consult them as Washington and the Taliban finalized the prisoner swap. More than the fighters, "those that worry us are the brains", a senior security official said, adding that one of the freed Taliban inmates had already joined the insurgents' military squad while another had committed a murder. —AFP

Pakistan battles locusts; turns them into feed

LAHORE: Chickens in Pakistan have been feasting on captured locusts under an initiative to combat swarms of the insects that are threatening food supplies in the impoverished country. Prime Minister Imran Khan has endorsed plans to expand a pilot project in the breadbasket province of Punjab, where villagers earned cash to gather locusts that were then dried out, shredded and added into poultry feed. Farmers are struggling as the worst locust plague in 25 years wipes out entire harvests in Pakistan's agricultural heartlands, leaving people scrambling for income.

Muhammad Khurshid from Pakistan's food ministry and biotechnologist Johar Ali set up the program, drawing on efforts in war-ravaged Yemen, where authorities have encouraged people to eat the protein-rich locusts amid famine. The pair chose Punjab's Okara district, where farmers had not used any pesticides that would make locusts unsuitable

for consumption. "We first had to learn, and then teach the locals how to catch the locusts. Nets are useless against them," Khurshid told AFP. At night the creatures cluster on trees and plants, making them easy to scoop up as they lie motionless in the cooler temperatures until the sun begins to rise.

For a reward of 20 rupees (12 cents) per kilogram of locusts, locals worked all night to collect them. One farmer who lost all her crops to the insects said she and her son earned 1,600 rupees (\$10) during a single locust-gathering outing, helping to offset the financial damage. Organizers struggled at first to convince farmers to join the hunt, but by the third night word had spread and hundreds joined in - turning up with their own bags to stuff full. With 20 tons of captured locusts, authorities ran out of money to pay the collectors and the program was paused. The ministry, which recently announced the results of February's pilot, is now preparing to expand the project to other locations.

Multiplying in monsoon

The harvested locusts went to Hi-Tech Feeds - Pakistan's largest animal-feed producer - which substituted 10 percent of the soybean in its chicken food with the insects. "There was no



PUNJAB: Dead locusts are seen on the ground at a farm in Pipli Pahar in Pakistan's central Punjab province. —AFP

issue with the feed, the locusts have a good potential for use in poultry feed," general manager Muhammad Athar said, after trying the modified product on 500 broiler hens. While the project is not a solution to the devastation caused to crops, it can provide hard-hit farmers with a fresh revenue stream and relieve

pressure on authorities struggling to distribute locust-beating pesticides. Locust swarms have gnawed their way through crops across East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and parts of India this year, and experts fear their numbers will explode as monsoon rains arrive this month. —AFP