

International

Optimism amid salvage efforts as megaship still stuck in Suez

Blockade crippling international trade and causing losses worth millions of dollars

SUEZ, Egypt: Hope rose yesterday salvage efforts would free a mammoth container ship blocking the Suez Canal for six days, crippling international trade and causing losses worth millions of dollars. The MarineTraffic and VesselFinder applications said two tugboats were on their way to the vital waterway to help the salvage operation, while experts pinned hope on a high tide to dislodge the vessel. The Italian-flagged Carlo Magno and the Dutch-flagged Alp Guard were in the Red Sea en route to the Suez Canal, the ship-tracking websites said. The MV Ever Given, which is longer than four football fields, has been wedged diagonally across the span of the canal since Tuesday, blocking the waterway in both directions. The crisis has forced companies to reconsider re-routing vessels around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, a longer and more expensive way to travel between Asia and Europe.

Billions of dollars of cargo are now stalled at either end of the Suez Canal and each passing day results in millions of dollars in losses for Egypt and commercial enterprises around the world. Several notes of optimism were struck on Saturday, including from Suez Canal Authority chief Osama Rabie, who told a news conference that the megaship could be afloat by night.

"We could finish today or tomorrow (Sunday), depending on the ship's responsiveness" to high tides, he said, adding that 14 tugboats were deployed around the stricken vessel. Rabie later told an Egyptian news channel the ship "moved 30 degrees

from left and right" for the first time late Saturday.

"It is a good sign," he said.

Hopes have been pinned on the spring high tide expected to start in the night. "If they don't manage to dislodge it during that high tide, the next high tide is not there for another couple of weeks, and that becomes problematic," Plamen Natzkoff, an expert at VesselsValue, has said.

Despite some predictions that the megaship could be refloated soon, Lloyd's List, a shipping data and news company, said Sunday there was a "surge" in the number of vessels opting to go around Africa. "Most major container lines are now diverting ships round Cape of Good Hope and warning of supply chain disruption ahead. Some are starting to reject bookings," it said on Twitter.

'Human error'

Richard Meade, an editor at Lloyd's List, added: "Sources close to the salvage operation told me this morning that optimism within the team of experts on site was rising and they were hoping that the vessel could be moved within the next 24-48 hours. But the lines have clearly made their call already." The 400-metre (1,300-foot) long, 200,000-tonne MV Ever Given, veered off course in the Suez Canal on Tuesday, with officials blaming 40-knot gusts and a sandstorm for the accident.

But Rabie on Saturday said "technical or human errors" could be behind the grounding of the



This satellite imagery released by Maxar Technologies shows tug boats and dredgers on Saturday attempting to free the Taiwan-operated MV Ever Given lodged sideways and impeding all traffic across Egypt's Suez Canal. — AFP

Taiwan-run, Panama-flagged container ship near the southern end of the canal. Almost as long as New York's Empire State Building is high, the ship is diagonally blocking the 193-kilometre (120-mile) long canal, and more than 320 ships are stalled at either end, Rabie said. Egypt is losing some \$12-14 million in revenue from the canal for each day it is closed, Rabie added, while Lloyd's List has said the blockage is holding up an estimated \$9.6 billion worth of cargo each day between Asia and Europe.

In a sign of the knock-on effects, Syrian authorities said Saturday they had been forced to ration already scarce fuel supplies, as the Suez suspension "has impacted oil imports to Syria and slowed arrival of a ship carrying fuel and oil products". And Romania's animal health agency said Saturday that 11 ships carrying livestock out of the country were affected by the blockage. NGO Animals International warned of a potential "tragedy" affecting some 130,000 animals. — AFP

Opening arguments set to begin in Floyd murder trial

MINNEAPOLIS: Opening arguments begin today in the trial of the white police officer accused of killing George Floyd, a Black man whose death was captured on video and touched off protests against racial injustice across the United States and around the world. Derek Chauvin, a 19-year veteran of the Minneapolis Police Department, faces murder and manslaughter charges for his role in the May 25, 2020 death of the 46-year-old Floyd.

Chauvin, 44, who was fired from the police force along with three other officers, could be sentenced to up to 40 years in prison if convicted of the most serious charge—second-degree murder.

Opening arguments are to begin at 9 am Central time (1400 GMT) in a heavily guarded Minneapolis courtroom for a trial expected to last about a month. Fifteen jurors have been selected for the high-profile case. Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill is expected to drop one juror on Monday and proceed with 12 and two alternates. The panel seated after two weeks of jury selection is racially mixed: six white women, three Black men, three white men, two mixed race women and one Black woman. Police officers are rarely convicted in the United States when charges are brought against them and the trial is being closely watched around the world.

A conviction on any of the charges—second-degree murder, third-degree murder or manslaughter—will require the jury to return a unanimous verdict. Floyd's cause of death is expected to be the central issue in the trial and a key piece of evidence is likely to be the viral video that triggered a summer of anti-racism protests. Chauvin was seen on the bystander video kneeling on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes while arresting him for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

While lying with his face in the street, the handcuffed Floyd complains that he cannot breathe and calls out for his mother. Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, is expected to argue that the officer was following police procedure and claim that Floyd's death was due to an overdose of the drug fentanyl and underlying health conditions.

'Just verdict'

The public has been banned from attending the trial because of the Covid-19 pandemic but it is being livestreamed. The identities of the jurors will not be revealed until after the trial but some details are known. They range in age from their 20s to their 60s and include a chemist, a social worker, an accountant and a nurse. Two are immigrants to the United States.

One is a grandmother, one is recently married and one is a single mother of two teenage boys. The jury selection process was complicated by the intensive pre-trial publicity surrounding the case and all but one of the jurors said they had seen at least some of the arrest video. Several potential jurors were excused after telling the judge they could not be fair or impartial or presume Chauvin to be innocent as the law requires them to do.

Others expressed concern for their safety. Nelson, Chauvin's attorney, asked to have the trial delayed and moved out of Minneapolis because of the March 12 announcement that the city had reached a \$27 million "wrongful death" settlement with the Floyd family. — AFP

Russian newspaper fights on despite threats and attacks

MOSCOW: Captured on a CCTV camera late at night, a man on a bicycle with a food delivery backpack approaches the offices of Novaya Gazeta, Russia's leading independent newspaper. In the grainy footage recorded in central Moscow earlier this month, the man sprays an unknown substance at the newspaper's front door, then slowly walks away, careful not to look up at the camera.

Sitting in the offices a few days later, editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov tells AFP he has no doubt the "chemical attack" was the latest attempt to silence one of the few media outlets in Russia willing to challenge the official line. "This is the use of military-grade non-lethal poisonous substances to warn the paper's staff or as revenge on them," says Muratov, a grey-bearded 59-year-old who since 1995 has served several times as Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief.

Several employees felt unwell after the attack and it took days of cleaning to get rid of the horrible stench, with the strip of pavement that was sprayed having to be removed. It was hardly the first attack on Novaya Gazeta, and far from the worst. Since the early 2000s, six Novaya Gazeta journalists have been killed in connection with their

Jewish community dwindles in Iraq to fewer than five

BAGHDAD: The death of Dhafer Eliyahu hit Iraq hard, not only because the doctor treated the neediest for free, but because with his passing, only four Jews now remain in the country. At the Habibiya Jewish cemetery in the capital Baghdad, wedged between the Martyr Monument erected by ex-dictator Saddam Hussein and the restive Shiite stronghold of Sadr City, an aged Muslim man still tends to the graves, but visitors are rare.

The day of Eliyahu's burial, "it was me who prayed over his grave", the doctor's sister said. "There were friends" of other faiths who prayed too, each in their own way, she added, refusing to give her name.

To hear Jewish prayer out in the open is rare now in Baghdad, where there is but one synagogue that only opens occasionally and no rabbis. But Jewish roots in Iraq go back some 2,600 years.

According to biblical tradition, they arrived in 586 BC as prisoners of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II after he destroyed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. In Iraq, they wrote the Babylonian Talmud on the very land where the patriarch Abraham was born and where the Garden of Eden is considered by some to have been located, in the heart of the Mesopotamian marshlands.

More than 2,500 years later, in Ottoman-ruled Baghdad, Jews were the second largest community in the city, making up 40 percent of its inhabitants. Some were very prominent members of society like Sassoon Eskell, Iraq's first ever finance minister in 1920, who made a big impression on British adventurer and writer Gertrude Bell.

'Not well received'

At the start of the last century, the day of rest and prayer was Saturday, as per the Jewish tradition, not Islam's Friday, as it is today. Today, "one prays at home", said a Baghdad resident knowledgeable of the city's Jewish community, who also chose to remain anonymous.

And when people with a Jewish name deal with the administration "they will not be well received", he added. According to Edwin Shuker, a Jew born in Iraq in 1955 and exiled in Britain since he was 16,

work—their black-and-white portraits now hang together in the newspaper's office.

"It's no secret that when they killed Anna Politkovskaya I wanted to close this newspaper... This newspaper is dangerous for people's lives," Muratov says. Politkovskaya, who spent years reporting for Novaya Gazeta on rights abuses and the Kremlin's war in the North Caucasus region of Chechnya, was shot dead outside her apartment in 2006 at the age of 48. "The newspaper's journalists were categorically against this, they believed we would violate the memory of Anna Politkovskaya if we closed down... They convinced me," Muratov says. Muratov was among a group of journalists who founded Novaya Gazeta in 1993, inspired by the newfound freedoms that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Unwanted 'gifts'

One of their key early supporters was former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who donated part of his 1990 Nobel Peace Prize money to buy the new publication its first computers—one of them still on display in their office. The heady optimism of those early days is long gone. In the years since President Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, critical voices have been increasingly pushed to the sidelines in Russia. But Novaya Gazeta soldiers on, publishing three times per week with reports on rights abuses and corruption despite repeated attacks. In 2018, its office received an unusual delivery of a funeral wreath and a severed ram's head with a note addressed to Denis Korotkov, who cov-



MOSCOW: Russian investigative newspaper Novaya Gazeta's editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov attends an interview with AFP in Moscow. — AFP

ers the Wagner mercenary group. His investigations have shed light on Wagner's operations abroad and on its alleged ties to a Kremlin-linked businessman, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Korotkov tells AFP that despite these "gifts" and false articles written about him over the years, he does not plan to stop his work or leave the country.

"It is quite difficult to do journalism about Russia from outside Russia," he says, wearing his signature round sunglasses and smoking a pipe. If every reporter who wanted to write the truth left Russia, he says, "we would then have a lot of single-use journalists in Russia." — AFP

Without Trump, disinformation dips — for now

WASHINGTON: Twitter said it permanently suspended Donald Trump's account after the January 6 Capitol riot because there was a risk of further incitement of violence, following months of tweets disputing Joe Biden's presidential election victory. False and misleading claims about American politics have since plummeted, a trend Twitter and Facebook—which also blocked Trump but may reverse course—are keen to take credit for.

With Trump muted, a comparatively media-shy Biden in the White House, and no election cycle underway, Americans remain interested in economic recovery and a Covid-19 vaccine rollout but are not as consumed by politics as they were in 2020. It is that shift in the news cycle, rather than any fundamental change in how people spread inaccurate information, that is responsible for a lower volume of political falsehoods, experts say.

"The single most important thing was de-platforming Donald Trump," according to Professor Russell Muirhead, co-author of "A Lot of People Are Saying," a book title that plays on one of Trump's most popular sayings, used when promoting unproven theories. "It has removed a daily blizzard of misinformation from the ecosystem," Muirhead said. "Not being bombarded is helping people's misinformation immune systems to reset themselves and recover." — AFP



In this file photo former US President Donald Trump points at the end of a rally to support Republican Senate candidates at Valdosta Regional Airport in Valdosta, Georgia. — AFP