

SAUDI KING ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL FOR CHECKS



RIYADH: A handout picture released by the SPA on September 29 2013 shows Saudi's King Abdullah at the Al-Salam royal palace.—AFP

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia's ailing King Abdullah, 91, was admitted to hospital yesterday for "medical checks," the royal court said. The king, whose age and frequent hospitalization have raised concerns about the future leadership of the key oil producer, was admitted to the King Abdulaziz Medical City in Riyadh, a court statement carried by the official SPA news agency said. Abdullah's half-brother Salman, 77, is next in line to the throne. He was named crown prince in June 2012 following the death of Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz.

Salman has been representing the king at most public events, including the latest Gulf summit in

Qatar this month, due to the monarch's ailing health. The king's latest hospitalization comes as Saudi Arabia holds a high-profile position in the US-led fight against the Islamic State group, which has seized swathes of neighboring Iraq and Syria.

Saudi warplanes have joined in coalition air strikes against the jihadists in Syria, although the ultra-conservative Muslim kingdom has faced calls to do more to halt the flow of funds and fighters to IS from among its own citizens. The king's absence from the public gaze for some time last year prompted rumors on social media networks that his health was deteriorating.

He underwent two operations in October 2011 and November 2012 to correct "ligament slackening" in the upper back. Since the death in 1952 of King Abdul Aziz al-Saud, the founder of modern Saudi Arabia, the throne has systematically passed from one of his sons to another, brothers and half-brothers. But many of Abdul Aziz's sons have died or are aged. Abdullah's former Crown Princes Sultan and Nayef died in 2011 and 2012 respectively. In March 2014, King Abdullah named his half-brother Prince Moqren as a second crown prince, in an unprecedented move that clearly aimed at smoothing succession hurdles. Moqren is the youngest of Abdul Aziz's sons.—AFP

AT LEAST 33 KILLED IN SUICIDE BOMBING IN CENTRAL YEMEN

SANAA: A suicide bomber killed at least 33 people in central Yemen yesterday when he blew himself up at a cultural centre where students were celebrating Prophet Mohammad's (PBUH) birthday, medical sources and a resident said.

They said at least 33 bodies, including women and children, had been transferred to two hospitals in the city of Ibb. The governor of Ibb province, controlled by the Shiite Muslim Houthi group that dominates Yemen, was reported to be among a number of people wounded in the attack, local residents said.

In a text message, the state Saba news agency cited the head of Ibb's police as saying three people had died and 30 had been wounded. Residents reported there was a second explosion outside one of the two hospitals, al-Thawra. No details were immediately available or if there were casualties.

No one claimed responsibility for the suicide bombing, but it resembles previous attacks carried out by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), which operates in Yemen. AQAP regards Shiites, the sect of Islam to which the Houthis belong, as heretics.—Reuters

IRAN URGES BAHRAIN TO FREE JAILED OPPOSITION CHIEF

TEHRAN: Iran urged Bahrain yesterday to free Shiite opposition leader Sheikh Ali Salman who stands accused of seeking regime change by force in the Sunni-ruled Gulf state. "We are extremely worried about his situation," foreign ministry spokeswoman Marzieh Afkham told reporters.

"We want him to be released," she said of Salman, head of the Shiite movement Al-Wefaq, which boycotted a parliamentary election in November having dismissed it as a farce. "We believe that the security measures Bahrain's government has adopted to solve its internal issues are wrong," Afkham added. Shiite Iran has been accused of interfering in Bahrain's affairs ever since its Sunni ruling family crushed month-long protests led by Al-Wefaq in 2011 seeking an elected government in the Shiite-majority kingdom.

Salman's detention, which came on Sunday two days after he was re-elected

as party leader, sparked fresh clashes between his supporters and police in Shiite villages outside the capital Manama.

The prosecution said Monday that the 49-year-old cleric had been charged with "promoting regime change by force, threats and illegal means and of insulting the interior ministry publicly."

Salman is also accused of inciting people to break the law and of "hatred towards a segment of the people". On Tuesday, officials said he would remain in custody for seven days.

Strategically located just across the Gulf from Iran, Bahrain is home to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, and Britain announced plans earlier this month to build a naval base of its own there. But authorities have repeatedly rejected Al-Wefaq's demand for an elected prime minister to replace the current government, which is dominated by the royal family.—AFP

SAUDI BEHEADS 83 PEOPLE IN 2014, THE MOST IN YEARS

RIYADH: Saudi authorities beheaded a Pakistani man yesterday convicted of smuggling "large quantities" of heroin, the kingdom's state news agency reported, bringing the number of publicly announced executions to its highest level in at least five years. An Associated Press tally of announcements from the official Saudi Press Agency shows 83 people have been beheaded in Saudi Arabia in 2014, including Wednesday's execution. Most were executed for drug smuggling. Amnesty International says Saudi Arabia has one of the highest execution rates in the world. The group lists 79 executions in Saudi Arabia in 2013 and 2012, and 82 in 2011 and 2010. The

London based rights group says at least 69 people were executed in 2009. The countries that carried out the most executions on record last year were Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the US, according to Amnesty International. Last year's figures do not include the thousands of people put to death in China, where such information is a state secret.

The kingdom follows a strict interpretation of Islamic law and applies the death penalty on a number of crimes, such as murder and rape, as well as apostasy and witchcraft. Saudi Arabia has come under particular criticism from rights groups for executions carried out for non-fatal crimes.—AP

SYRIA KURDS CONTROL 70% OF BESIEGED KOBANI

BEIRUT: Kurdish forces have regained control of around 70 percent of the Syrian town of Kobani near the Turkish border after pushing back Islamic State fighters that have spent months besieging it, a group monitoring the war said yesterday.

Backed by US-led air strikes, Kurdish forces made significant advances overnight on Tuesday after violent clashes with Islamic State in the south of the town, the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. Known as Ayn Al-Arab in Arabic, the town has become a symbol in the fight between the ultra hardline Islamic State group and its enemies in Iraq and Syria. Hundreds of Islamic State fighters launched a sustained attack on the town more than three months ago.

US-led forces have bombed Islamic State positions around the predominantly Kurdish town almost every day this month. The Observatory, which gathers

its information from sources in Syria, said Kurdish fighters now control southern and central parts of the town as well as most of the west in an area stretching up to the border.

Rami Abdulrahman, who runs the Observatory, said Kobani was the only clear example of US-led forces cooperating with fighters on the ground in Syria to push back Islamic State. "There are air strikes every day, they have destroyed many Islamic State bases in Kobani. If there had been no air strikes then I think Kobani would have been controlled by Islamic State by now," he said. He added Kurdish forces were close to controlling all of the town, thanks to the overnight gains in strategic positions.

The United States says it wants to train and equip "moderate" rebel groups to fight Islamic State on the ground elsewhere in Syria but rebels say there is much uncertainty surrounding the plans.—Reuters



BAGHDAD: A US soldier walks through a fence at the Taji base complex which hosts Iraqi and US troops and is located thirty kilometres north of the capital Baghdad.—AFP

FOR US SOLDIERS, IRAQ MISSION BRINGS UNEXPECTED RETURN

TAJI BASE, Iraq: As Sergeant Michael Lair went from base to base in 2011, moving American gear to Kuwait ahead of the US withdrawal from Iraq, it seemed unlikely he would be returning.

The United States' nearly nine-year war in the country was winding down, and the devastating violence that killed tens of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of American troops was at its lowest level in years. But three years later, Lair is on his third Iraq deployment, this time as part of a mission to ready Iraqi soldiers for combat against the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group, which has overrun large parts of the country.

"I didn't think we were coming back," Lair says, standing on a muddy road lined with sections of concrete blast wall in the massive Taji base complex north of Baghdad, an M4 assault rifle held across his chest. "We would go up through Iraq to all the FOBs (forward operating bases). We would load up all the equipment and take it to the port in Kuwait... by road," he says of the runup to the withdrawal.

"It was kind of a big stepping stone," he says. "We're taking our stuff with us-it's a pretty good sign."

But when he deployed to Kuwait in June this year as IS drove south toward Baghdad, sweeping Iraqi forces aside, it became clear another mission was likely. "I was just telling myself, hey, get ready to go, 'cause I guarantee that we're not just gonna sit by and watch it happen," he says.

'A habit'

Lair also served in Afghanistan, and arriving back in Iraq was ultimately a return to the life he has known for years. "It was comfortable, as weird as I guess that sounds," he says. "This is my fourth deployment, so this is what I'm used to. I don't know anything different."

"This has become a habit," Lair is one of about 180 US military personnel now living at Taji, a number that is set to rise, says Captain Tyler Hitter.

The base is one of five sites where the US and its allies aim to train 5,000 military personnel every six to eight weeks in "the bare minimum basics that are needed for counter-attacking," says Major General Dana Pittard. The US spent billions training and equipping Iraqi forces, but that relationship was scaled back after the 2011 withdrawal.

American soldiers say Iraq's troops did not carry out the subsequent training needed to maintain their skills and that, combined with flawed leadership, helped lead to the IS debacle. Much of Taji has been in use by the Iraqi army since US troops departed, but it is still full of signs of the past American presence, from basketball goals to an empty can of Copenhagen dip tobacco—a favorite of US soldiers still sitting in an empty hanger.

Murals accompanied by unit nicknames cover a wall near rows of empty white housing

units, and the 1st Cavalry Division's unit patch is painted on a water tower overlooking the base.

'Like starting over'

Staff Sergeant Marlon Daley, another soldier at Taji, who has been sent to Iraq three times, including during the initial 2003 invasion, did not expect to return after leaving in 2011. He describes the IS takeover of Iraq's second city Mosul, an area where he was twice deployed, as "pretty shocking".

But "I wanted to come here," he says. "Most soldiers, that's what they want to do, is deploy and make a difference." Command Sergeant Major Robert Keith is now on his fifth mission to Iraq—a series that has spanned from 2003 to 2011, and now 2014.

"I didn't think I was gonna come back. Everything was shutting down, everybody was pushing back down into Kuwait," Keith says of 2011. Over the years, "I've seen a lot of progress and... a lot of changes," and having that rolled back by IS is "frustrating," he adds. It's like "trying to reinvent the wheel, when you establish so much and we come back, it's like starting over again," he says.

But he is glad to be back nonetheless. "I enjoy coming to Iraq, the people are awesome here, the hospitality," Keith says. "People call me crazy when I say that."—AFP



SANAA: People walk under decorations erected ahead of the celebrations of the birth of Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), known in Arabic as "Al-Mawlid Al-Nabawi" in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, yesterday.—AFP