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Op-Ed

UK and Canada co-host world's first ministerial conference on media freedom

By Michael Davenport, British Ambassador to Kuwait & Louis-Pierre Emond, Canadian Ambassador to Kuwait

British Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland will next month co-host in London the world's first ministerial conference on media freedom. Our aim is to shine a light on abuses and raise the cost for those who would harm journalists for doing their jobs.

The London Conference will bring together foreign ministers with journalists, media professionals and leaders of international and civil society organisations. We look forward to broad international participation, including from Kuwait.

The United Kingdom and Canada are committed to promoting media freedom across the globe. It is an essential component of economic prosperity, social development and resilient democracy. It is a right to which all governments have committed, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees "freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres reflected in February this year that the media has become significantly less free in recent years, including through unprecedented threats to journalists and media outlets, and attempts to control the media.

Media freedom is indeed under attack across the world. Reporters Without Borders assess that 2018 was the most dangerous year on record to be a journalist - at least 99 journalists were killed, another 348 imprisoned and 60 held hostage. The latest World Press Freedom Index describes how the number of countries regarded as safe, where journalists can work in complete security, continues to decline. Nine in ten cases of killed journalists remain unresolved.

Journalists face particular threats in war zones and at the hands of extremists. Unfortunately, however, journalists face dangers beyond conflict and extremism.

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By B Izzak

KUWAIT: Finance Minister Nayef Al-Hajraf yesterday strongly defended Kuwait's policy in managing its foreign investments estimated at around \$600 billion, but acknowledged some investment funds performed badly. Speaking during a grilling by MPs Riyadh Al-Adasani and Bader Al-Mulla, the minister also defended the government's budget policy, saying that subsidies to public services have been maintained in this year's budget, which means there will be no further increases in charges or fuel prices.

The grilling ended after several hours of intense debate without lawmakers presenting a no-confidence motion. They only submitted a recommendation calling on the National Assembly's financial and economic affairs committee to investi-

gate all issues in the grilling and report back to the Assembly within three months. He said over 95 percent of Kuwait's investments are invested in stable countries and instruments, and that out of 420 funds in which Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA) is dealing with, there have only been a few bad performers. He said the Future Generations Fund grew by 152 percent, and the authority has risk management centers in Kuwait, the US and Ireland.

The minister however acknowledged a massive loss of close to €600 million in Kuwait's investment in French nuclear company Areva, saying what KIA had done was the best available option to stop further losses. He also said public funds may have lost more than KD 500 million in the investment in the so-called port fund.

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KUWAIT: Finance Minister Nayef Al-Hajraf speaks during his grilling at the National Assembly yesterday. — Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Iran frees Lebanese convicted of spying

BEIRUT: Iran yesterday freed a Lebanese man detained in 2015 on charges of spying for the United States, a gesture that comes amid soaring tensions between Tehran and Washington. A US resident in his 50s, Nizar Zakka was arrested in Sept 2015 during a visit to Iran, where he was convicted the following July. He is the head of The Arab ICT Organization, a non-profit that advocates the growth and development of information and communications technology in the Middle East.

Before his arrest, he had been taking part in a conference in Tehran at the invitation of Shahindokht Molaverdi, then vice-president for women and family affairs, according to his family. He was stopped on his way to the airport, his family and lawyer have said. At the time, Iranian state television said he was accused of "deep ties to the military and intelligence services of the United States". It broadcast photographs of a man in military uniform it said was of Zakka at a US base.

Yesterday, Zakka arrived in Lebanon, after his release by Iranian authorities. He was escorted back to his native country by Lebanon's General Security chief Abbas Ibrahim, who was in Tehran one day earlier, according to the security service. In a speech at Lebanon's presidential palace, Zakka declined to elaborate on the circumstances behind his arrest but dis-



BEIRUT: Lebanese President Michel Aoun (right) meets Nizar Zakka after he was freed by Iran at the presidential palace in Baabda yesterday. — AFP

missed the case against him. "There was no espionage," he said after meeting President Michel Aoun, accusing Tehran of "kidnapping him" on false charges and staging a "show trial".

For his part, the general security chief denied speculation Iran's Lebanese ally Hezbollah played a primary role in brokering Zakka's release. "The issue was resolved at the request of the president," Ibrahim told reporters. "Hezbollah definitely played a role but the basis (for the release) was a request from the president." His comments came in response to a report by Iran's Fars news agency on Monday that Zakka's release followed "the request and mediation" of Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah. — AFP

Indian toddler dies after 110 hours down well

NEW DELHI: A two-year-old Indian boy stuck in a narrow well for more than four days was pulled out dead yesterday, triggering protests over delays in reaching the toddler. The case of Fatehveer Singh captured national attention after he fell into the 33-m deep well in the Punjab state district of Sangrur while playing on Thursday. The disused well was just 23 cm wide, complicating desperate efforts by dozens of rescue workers and volunteers as locals and television cameras looked on.

"The child is not alive anymore. He was pulled out at 5 in the morning by the NDRF (National Disaster Response Force) personnel," Vijay Inder Singla, a state

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BHAGWANPURA, India: Family members and close relatives carry the coffin of two-year-old boy Fatehveer Singh to the cremation ground to pay their last respects yesterday. — AFP

News in brief

Catholic Church fined

KUWAIT: The manpower authority's official spokesperson Aseel Al-Mazyad said the Catholic Church in Kuwait was fined KD 100 for not respecting the condition of employing Kuwaitis as a certain percentage of its staff, despite the fact that Christian Kuwaitis are very few in number. Mazyad said the authority executes the Cabinet's decisions in this regard, namely resolution number 1104/2008 pertaining the ratio of the national workforce in non-governmental bodies including worship places. She also noted resolution number 962/2010 excluded some bodies from the previous resolution, including worship places. Mazyad said other churches are excluded from this condition. — A Saleh

Man dies of heat stroke

KUWAIT: Kuwait saw the first death in the country due to high temperatures, as an Egyptian suffered from heat stroke in Surra. Temperatures have exceeded 50 degrees Celsius in the past two days. A security source said interior ministry operations received a call about a man who had fallen near a walking lane. Police and paramedics went to the scene and found the man had already died. The coroner said the death was due to heat stroke. — Al-Rai

Fans of Israeli team demand player named Mohamed adopt alias

JERUSALEM: Far-right supporters of Israel's Beitar Jerusalem football club yesterday demanded that new player Ali Mohamed find an alias for his surname due to its Muslim associations. "Like other players in the past, Ali Mohamed will have to find himself a nickname if he

is going to play at Teddy," the hardcore "La Familia" group posted on its Facebook page, which has 36,000 followers. Beitar, based at Jerusalem's Teddy Stadium, has historically been considered anti-Muslim and anti-Arab. But despite his name, the 23-year-old striker from Niger is actually Christian, Israeli media reported.

The first division club, which has its roots in the nationalist right, is the only Israeli side never to have fielded an Arab player, although Arabs account for 17.5 percent of the country's population. In 2013, the club's signing of two Muslim players from Chechnya sparked tension. Reaction from fans led to the team having to employ bodyguards for them and the club's offices were

torched. In 2017 club manager Eli Cohen resigned under pressure after pledging never to sign a Muslim player.

Last year Beitar's new owner said such events were in the past and religion would no longer be a criterion for signings. That stance was reiterated on the official club Facebook page on Monday evening. "We are proud to have signed Ali Mohamed, the best foreign player in the league," it stated. "We have read the reactions and threats following the transfer of Ali Mohamed and we will not let a minority tarnish the reputation of the club," it said. Beitar Jerusalem has been working to change its image in recent years and in 2017 received an award for its fight against racism. — AFP