



Berlin's landmark the Brandenburg Gate is reflected in a puddle yesterday. — AFP

British PM on defensive again over groping claim

MANCHESTER: Britain's Boris Johnson is known for his colorful love life but the accusation he grabbed a young woman's thigh when he was a magazine editor risks a scandal as he seeks to unite his party over Brexit. The prime minister, who is attending his Conservative party's conference in Manchester, north-west England, is accused of giving a female journalist's leg "a squeeze" while at a private lunch 20 years ago.

Johnson never comments on his personal life but his spokesman issued a clear denial - an acknowledgement that the claim is more serious than gossip about his affairs. It follows accusations that Johnson gave special access to a US businesswoman with whom he is alleged to have had a relationship when he was mayor of London. He denies any impropriety, but it is yet another headache after his defeats in parliament and the courts over his pledge to leave the EU on Oct 31, come what may.

In an article published in The Sunday Times, journalist Charlotte Edwards described a boozy lunch in the

offices of The Spectator magazine around two decades ago, when Johnson was editor. She was sitting next to him and wrote that "under the table I feel Johnson's hand on my thigh. He gives it a squeeze". "His hand is high up my leg and he has enough inner flesh beneath his fingers to make me sit suddenly upright."

She said a woman she spoke with after the dinner, who was sitting on Johnson's other side, said the same thing happened to her. Johnson was married at the time to his second wife. They are now divorced and he currently lives with his girlfriend Carrie Symonds. Downing Street said Edwards' claim was "untrue", and the prime minister himself denied it in a television interview, while refusing to comment further.

But health minister Matt Hancock said he knew Edwards well, and "I entirely trust what she has to say". Former Conservative minister Justine Greening, who is now an independent MP, said the claim was "deeply concerning". It went "to the heart of this question about character and integrity of people in public life and what standards the electorate have a right to expect," she told BBC radio.

The allegation comes two years after defense minister Michael Fallon quit following revelations he tried to kiss a journalist. Opposition Labour lawmaker Dawn Butler added: "What is it about powerful men feeling entitled to harass women? Boris Johnson has serious questions to answer." — AFP

Iran now 'capable' to destroy Israel...

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between Tehran and its other main regional rival, Riyadh. The United States, which withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal between Iran and world powers in 2018, has imposed a campaign of "maximum pressure" - with vocal support from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The comments by the commander of Iran's ideological army were given prominent coverage by the Tasnim and Fars news agencies, close to ultra-conservative political factions. The official IRNA agency also carried his remarks, but placed more emphasis on his assertion that Iran was growing stronger and would finally beat its foes despite "hostility" towards it. In contrast, foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi in a tweet wished "Happy (Jewish) New Year to our Jewish compatriots and to all true followers of great prophet Moses (PBUH)". Mousavi's greeting was written in Persian, English and Hebrew.

Iran only has a few thousand Jews left compared to between 80,000 and 100,000 before its 1979 revolution. The country has been consistently hostile towards Israel since its revolution, and Tehran openly supports anti-Israeli armed groups including Palestinian Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Israel considers Iran its arch-foe and has carried out hundreds of strikes in neighboring Syria against what it says are military targets of Iran and its Lebanese military ally Hezbollah. It has vowed to keep Iran from entrenching itself militarily in the war-torn neighboring Arab state.

In June 2018, supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reaffirmed Tehran's long-held position that Israel is "a malignant cancerous tumour that must be removed and eradicated". But he has also said that Tehran has never called for the Jews to be "thrown into the sea", unlike Arab leaders such as the late president Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt. Iranian generals routinely express the desire to destroy Israel or claim to be able to wipe out Tel Aviv. However, official discourse in recent years has generally taken care to clarify that the Jewish state will cease to exist because of its own "arrogance", not because of an attack by Iran.

Meanwhile, Iraq's premier has said for the first time

that his government had "indications" Israel was behind some attacks on paramilitary bases this summer, but stopped short of making an explicit accusation. The Hashed Al-Shaabi force has blamed the series of explosions at its bases and arms depots on Israel and the US, but the central government had so far said it was still investigating.

In a first, Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi told Al-Jazeera television in an interview aired yesterday that those investigations were nearing a conclusion. "Some of the investigations carried out by Iraqi authorities provided important indications that Israel was behind some of these attacks," he said, in excerpts of the interview seen by AFP. Abdel Mahdi said he had even "heard from the Americans" that Israel was involved but that his government still lacked "tangible evidence".

The blasts at five Hashed bases have been a threat to Baghdad's precarious balancing act between its two main allies, Washington and Tehran. Top Hashed officials said the US was broadly "responsible" but specifically blamed Israeli drones for an August 25 strike that killed a Hashed fighter near Iraq's western border with Syria. The Pentagon has denied responsibility and said it is cooperating with Iraq's investigations, while Israel has neither confirmed nor denied involvement.

The Iraqi government had thus far said it was studying evidence of foreign involvement, and even last week Abdel Mahdi told reporters there was no conclusive proof. But MP Ahmad al-Assadi said Friday that he and fellow parliamentarians were briefed on Israeli involvement by Faleh Al-Fayyadh, the premier's national security advisor and head of the Hashed. "He told us that the investigative committees proved that at least three of the incidents were external attacks, including two by Israel," he told AFP.

Assadi, who is also a leading Hashed official, said he did not know why the government had not made those results public. The Hashed was established in 2014 from mostly-Shiite armed groups and volunteers to fight the Islamic State group, and is now formally part of Iraq's armed forces. The US and Israel fear some units are an extension of their arch-foe Iran and have been equipped with precision-guided missiles. Israel has admitted to carrying out hundreds of strikes on pro-Iran paramilitary units in neighboring Syria, which added fuel to suspicions it was behind those in Iraq. Last month, Iraq's foreign ministry threatened to submit a complaint to the United Nations once the investigations were complete. — Agencies

blamed the murder on rogue operatives. The public prosecutor said then-deputy intelligence chief Ahmed Al-Asiri ordered the repatriation of Khashoggi, a royal insider who became an outspoken critic, but the lead negotiator ordered him killed after discussions for his return failed.

Asked how the killing could have happened without him knowing about it, MBS said: "Some think that I should know what 3 million people working for the Saudi government do daily? It's impossible that the 3 million would send their daily reports to the leader or the second highest person in the Saudi government."

Eleven Saudi suspects have been put on trial in secretive proceedings. Asiri and Saud Al-Qahtani, a senior adviser, were fired over involvement in the operation. Asiri is standing trial, but Qahtani is not. Asked how those two members of his inner circle could have been involved without him knowing, MBS said: "Today the investigations are being carried out. And once charges are proven against someone, regardless of their rank, it will be taken to court, no exception made."

Asked about prominent women activists who have been detained on charges related to human rights work and tarred by local media as traitors, including Loujain Al-Hathloul, MBS said: laws "must be respected, until they are reformed." He said it was up to the public prosecutor to release Hathloul but that he would personally follow up on accusations she had been tortured in prison.

Asked about criticism of Riyadh in the US Congress over the Khashoggi killing, the activists' arrests and the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen, which has taken a huge civilian toll, MBS said: "The (US-Saudi) relationship is much larger than that." Trump has resisted congressional efforts to block US arms sales to Saudi Arabia. MBS also repeated a Saudi call for Iran to halt its support for Houthli forces in Yemen and said he was open to "all initiatives for a political solution" to end the war there. — Reuters

Late monsoon fury kills 113 in...

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"The rains have stopped but there is waterlogging in many areas," Bihar's Additional Secretary in the Disaster Relief Department Amod Kumar Sharan said.

"Patna alone has recorded some 226 millimetres (8.9 inches) of rainfall since Friday," Bihar disaster response official M Ramachandru told AFP. Photos showed patients lying on hospital beds in dirty rainwater at the

Indian workers in Kuwait, Gulf...

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Josephine Valaramathi of the National Domestic Workers Movement said the charity was now dealing with at least two cases a month of agents demanding money from families of women working in the Gulf in exchange for their return home. The agents usually keep the women's passports, effectively holding them hostage in a foreign land, she said. "This demand is pushing families into deep debts and till they arrange for the money, the worker is abused and ill-treated in the agent's custody."

It is a story Sadiq Basha, a taxi driver from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, is familiar with. He spent weeks trying to get his wife back from Kuwait, where she had gone to work as a maid, after the agent she went through demanded a ransom for her release. Frustrated by the lack of government help, he went to the Supreme Court together with relatives of two other victims, seeking to force the government to step in and secure his wife's freedom.

"She kept calling and crying," Basha said. "She begged me to save her each time, saying she could not bear the abuse, she was not being given enough food and her health was failing. I felt so helpless." Eventually Basha managed to raise the cash to save his wife - but only after racking up debts with moneylenders that he does not know how he will repay. "I just wanted it all to end and when I got the money, I just paid up," Basha told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a series of phone interviews. "Going to court was the last resort not just for me but for everyone who was in a similar situation."

Rahul Dutt, director at the overseas employment and protectorate of emigrants office in India's foreign ministry, said authorities had been able to quickly resolve cases where people had migrated legally for work. "But when people go through illegal agents, the problems

state-run Nalanda Medical College and Hospital in Patna. It has also been raining heavily in southern India and in the western state of Gujarat.

With the Indian Meteorological Department yesterday predicting excess rainfall across 15 states, this year's monsoon will end as the wettest since 1917, the mass-circulation Times of India said. "There are no signs of withdrawal for at least four-five days," senior IMD officer Mrutyunjay Mohapatra told the daily. The monsoon, which is vital for farmers across the South Asian region, killed some 650 people in India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan in July this year. In its bulletin yesterday, IMD added the intensity of rainfall over Bihar was very likely to reduce. Showers in Uttar Pradesh are also expected to abate this week. — Agencies

get multiplied many times," added Dutt. He declined to comment on the Supreme Court petition as it was an ongoing case, but said it was difficult to trace people who went through illegal channels to Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman and the United Arab Emirates. "It is like looking for a needle in a haystack to find them and bring them back," he said.

India's foreign ministry received more than 9,500 complaints between January and June this year from migrant workers in the Gulf. Most concerned unpaid salaries, no days off or medical cover and a refusal to provide exit or re-entry visas so they could visit their homes in India. Arrokiajyer Heller, researcher at the Centre for Development Studies, said workers often tried to contact Indian embassies, but the government "has not made it easy for them to access justice".

Ravunther, whose show "Pravasalokam" ("Migrants' World") airs in the southern state of Kerala where many Indian migrants working in the Gulf are from, said the ransom cases started when India's foreign ministry brought in its e-migrate system. This is a platform for registered agents, employers and workers with orientation programs and an in-built grievance mechanism and was aimed at increasing transparency.

But take-up has been low, in part because the system requires employers in the Gulf to pay a security deposit to the local Indian embassy. "The steep cost meant many went back to illegal agents so they could get maids for cheap," said Ravunther. "And in these situations, agents exploit the women, forcing them to work, while pressurizing the family to pay for her release."

The show airs seven times a week across three local channels and receives up to 20 calls a week to a hotline number, with any urgent cases referred to the government. Family members are invited to a studio to discuss their relatives' plight, while harrowing footage from the Gulf shows women pleading tearfully for help to come home. "Everyone knows that these people are just trapped, taken and treated like slaves," said Nagamuthu Swaminathan, the lawyer acting for the petitioners in the Supreme Court case. "Yet families don't know how to resolve the problem, how to seek justice." — Reuters

MBS prefers political solution...

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"Oil supplies will be disrupted and oil prices will jump to unimaginably high numbers that we haven't seen in our lifetimes."

In an interview conducted last Tuesday in Saudi Arabia, he said he agreed with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that the attacks, which knocked out more than 5 percent of global oil supply, were an act of war by Iran. But he said he preferred a peaceful resolution because regional war would collapse the global economy. The United States, European powers and Saudi Arabia have blamed the attacks on Iran, which denies involvement. Instead, Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthli group claimed responsibility.

MBS also said President Donald Trump should meet Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to craft a new deal on Tehran's nuclear program and regional activities. Efforts to bring the two together last week at the United Nations failed. Tensions between Washington and Tehran escalated after the US withdrew last year from a 2015 nuclear deal and reinstated sanctions against Tehran.

Days before the anniversary of Khashoggi's murder, MBS said: "Absolutely not," when asked if he had ordered it. But he said he took full responsibility "since it was committed by individuals working for the Saudi government". "This was a mistake. And I must take all actions to avoid such a thing in the future." The CIA and some Western governments believe MBS ordered the killing, but Saudi officials have repeatedly said he had no role. Asked about the CIA assessment, MBS asked for "such information" to be revealed.

After initial denials, the official Saudi narrative