

International

Despite suspension, Syria's FM greets Arab League chief at UN

US says Assad again used chemical weapons, vows action

UNITED NATIONS: The head of the Arab League exchanged a warm handshake Friday at the United Nations with the foreign minister of Syria, which has been suspended from the body since 2011. The exchange between Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the secretary general of the Arab League, and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem appeared to be brief and impromptu during the annual UN General Assembly. In a video posted on Twitter by a journalist for Abu Dhabi newspaper The National, Aboul Gheit walks in a hallway at the UN headquarters and sees Muallem, who turns around. "Good evening. Great. How are you?" Aboul Gheit says, before shaking Muallem's hand and kissing him on both cheeks.

The Arab League chief, who is Egyptian, then exchanges greetings with Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Mekdad and its ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar Jaafari. "Really, it's always a pleasure to see you," Aboul Gheit says to the Syrian officials before giving a friendly tap on the shoulder. Syria was suspended from the Arab League in 2011 with the outbreak of unrest ruthlessly crushed by President Bashar Al-Assad. The war has killed more than 370,000 people and displaced millions, but both Arab and Western officials have gradually come to accept that Assad will succeed in maintaining power.

Chemical weapons

In another development, the United States vowed a response as it said it had confirmed another chemical weapons attack by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces, although there were no fatalities. The Assad regime used chlorine on May 19 in Latakia province during its ferocious offensive to take back the last major rebel stronghold in nearby Idlib. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said. "The United States will not allow these attacks to go unchallenged nor will we tolerate those who choose to conceal these atrocities," Pompeo told reporters in New York, where he was taking part in the UN General Assembly.

"The United States will continue to pressure the insidious Assad regime to end the violence directed at Syrian civilians and participate in the UN-led political process," he said. He later took part in a meeting on Syria with his counterparts from France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt, who said in a joint statement: "The use of any chemical weapons in Syria shall not be tolerated."

Four people were injured in the attack and, while there were no deaths, it marked the first known chemical attack in a year and raised fears of further use, said Jim Jeffrey, the US special representative for Syria. "We fear that the regime, which has very weak infantry forces, will try to use chemical weapons once again to make up for its inability to seize ground by combat power," Jeffrey told reporters. No independent verification was available of the attack from northwestern Syria, where rights observers say that more than 1,000 people have been killed and 400,000 displaced since the government began its bombardment in April. The United States and France had both earlier aired suspicions of a chemical attack but had held off on making a formal determination, saying more research was needed.

Pattern of chemical use

International investigators say Assad has repeatedly used chemical weapons against civilian targets in his brutal quest to win the civil war, in which more than 370,000 people have died. Former president Barack Obama had called chemical weapons use a red line but ultimately declined military retaliation. Drawing a contrast, President Donald Trump ordered strikes with 59 cruise missiles in response to a sarin gas attack in April 2017 in the rebel-held Idlib town of Khan Sheikhun.

The reprisal evidently did not deter Assad, who enjoys strong support from Russia, which has vetoed UN Security Council bids to rein in Assad and deployed its military to Syria. Jeffrey believed Russian officers were aware of the chemical attack, saying: "It's very hard for me to believe that professionals as good as that, the way they



ALEPPO: A picture taken during a guided tour with the Russian army shows a damaged street in the old Aleppo market. —AFP

are spread out, would not know of something like this."

Weighing response

The United States announced one countermeasure on Thursday, slapping sanctions on a Russian network of three individuals and five vessels for supplying fuel to Russian forces in Syria. Pompeo said that the United States was donating an additional \$4.5 million to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,

the Hague-based body that monitors the international treaty banning such arms.

But Pompeo appeared to downplay the prospect of military action, noting that the attack involved chlorine, which affects the respiratory system. The Khan Sheikhun attacks, which the United Nations said killed 83 people, entailed sarin, an ultra-potent gas that devastates the nervous system. "So it's a bit of a different situation," Pompeo said. —Agencies

Tanker seizures: What we know

TEHRAN: A British-flagged tanker headed into Dubai port in the United Arab Emirates yesterday after being detained for over two months by Iran, authorities and a tracking website said. Its seizure was one of several that have ratcheted up tensions this year between Iran and its arch-foe, the United States, and allies of Washington. Here's what we know about the vessels involved:

Grace 1/Adrian Darya

Gibraltar security forces aided by British Royal Marines intercepted an Iranian tanker—the Grace 1—off the coast of the UK overseas territory on July 4. The supertanker was detained on suspicion of shipping its 2.1 million barrels of oil to Syria in breach of European Union sanctions. The Indian captain of the Panama-flagged vessel later said a military helicopter had landed on its deck before the Marines boarded.

Iran called its seizure an act of "piracy" and warned that the action would not go unanswered. A Gibraltar court ordered its release on August 15 despite an 11th-hour US legal bid to keep it in detention. A few days later, it set sail for the eastern Mediterranean flying the Iranian flag and with a new name—the Adrian Darya. Iran never officially stated the ship's destination, repeatedly denying it was bound for Syria as it zig-zagged eastwards.

The then US national security adviser John Bolton alleged, in a September 6 tweet accompanied by a satellite photo, that the Adrian Darya had arrived at the

Syrian port of Tartus. On September 8, state media in Iran cited foreign ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi as saying the tanker had berthed on Mediterranean shores and unloaded its cargo, without saying exactly where. London and Washington accused Iran of having delivered the oil to Syria. But TankerTrackers said on Twitter that the ship was still "fully laden with oil off the coast of Tartous, Syria".

MT Riah

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said its forces detained a "foreign tanker" in Gulf waters on July 14 for allegedly smuggling contraband fuel. The tanker was seized south of the Iranian island of Larak in the strategic Strait of Hormuz, the Guards said. "With a capacity of two million litres and 12 foreign crew on board, the vessel was en route to deliver contraband fuel received from Iranian boats to foreign ships," it said. TankerTrackers reported at the time that the Panamanian-flagged MT Riah, used in the strait for fuelling other vessels, had crossed into Iranian waters, and at that point its automatic identification system stopped sending signals.

Stena Impero

Revolutionary Guards surrounded the British-flagged Stena Impero with attack boats before rappelling onto the deck of the oil tanker in the Strait of Hormuz on July 19. The 183-metre ship was impounded at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas for breaking "international maritime rules"—by allegedly failing to respond to distress calls and turning off its transponder after hitting a fishing boat.

The seizure of the Swedish-owned



DUBAI: The British-flagged oil tanker Stena Impero is docked in Dubai after sailing from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas where it was held for over two months yesterday. —AFP

vessel came hours after a court in Gibraltar said it was extending the detention of the Grace 1. Iran said the seizure was a legal measure and that further investigations were required, denying accusations from Britain that it was a tit-for-tat move. The Stena Bulk company that owns the vessel said seven of its 23 crew members were released on September 4.

Iranian government spokesman Ali Rabiee on September 23 said "the legal process has finished" and the vessel was free to leave. On Friday, the ship's owner and Hormozgan province's maritime organization said the vessel had set sail and reached international waters. The vessel arrived off Dubai shortly after midnight local time and halted in the busy waterway overnight according to

MarineTraffic.com, a ship tracking website. It began heading to its anchorage in the emirate on Saturday morning, the website said.

Unknown vessels

Iran seized another ship on July 31 with seven foreign crew aboard, claiming it was smuggling around 700,000 litres of fuel. The Guards said the ship was transferred to Bushehr province and handed over to authorities, noting the vessel was en route to deliver fuel to Gulf Arab states. The vessel's identity and the nationality of its crew were not revealed at the time of its seizure. On September 7, Iran said its coast guard seized a tugboat allegedly carrying contraband fuel and arrested 12 Filipino crew members. —AFP

ing independence in the Northwest and Southwest regions has claimed more than 2,500 lives. UN agencies say that more than 530,000 have been forced to flee their homes.

'We're really safe'

The Excel College had to move into a building that is only accessible via pebble-strewn paths winding between residential housing, while school routines are rung out by a bell wired to the roof. The teacher alone with his two students occupied one of nine classrooms. "The place is cramped, but we're really safe," Tseke said, though such statements are not enough to reassure parents and their children. The inscription rate has dropped from 1,350 in 2016-2017 to less than 400 today and fewer than half of those remaining have turned up since the academic year began on September 2, according to school data.

The French-speaking section has been closed, since many parents decided to send their children to towns in francophone territory, which makes up eight of the 10 regions in Cameroon. Jeannette Benga, a prominent figure in local civil society who has lived in Buea for 25 years, is among the parents who resist threats from the separatists and keep their children in town. "My daughter was kidnapped coming out of school in 2017," then released three days later, Benga said, giving no further details. In spite of the incident she's still sending her four children to school in the town.

"It's a permanent worry to see them leave for school," she acknowledged. "We live in perpetual insecurity." "We're in a hurry to see an end to this crisis," she added, with a hopeful eye to the "Great National Dialogue" due to be held in the capital Yaounde for five days from September 30. The forum was announced by President Paul Biya, who has ruled for 37 years and is intransigent about the secessionist demands, but



BUEA: This file photo taken at the morgue in Buea, the capital of Cameroon's majority English-speaking southwest region, shows blood streaming from overflowing fridges containing ten bodies, victims of the conflict between separatists and government. —AFP

some separatist forces and opposition parties plan to boycott the talks while they have leaders and members in jail.

Education 'that suits us'

In the past three years, more than 4,400 schools have closed in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon, according to the UN Children's Fund. The closures directly affect the education of more than 700,000 youngsters. More than 300 students, pupils and teachers have been kidnapped since 2018. State schools in Buea have tried to maintain a semblance of business as usual since the start of September, but private schools are feeling the pinch. —AFP

Schools at stake in Cameroon's separatist crisis

BUEA: A solitary teacher has just two pupils in his class in west Cameroon, where thousands of schools have closed down altogether because of kidnappings and threats by radical separatists. Since a crisis erupted in the two English-speaking regions of Cameroon late in 2016, schools have been a prime target for breakaway groups angered by the teaching of French, used in most of the central African country. On November 9, 2016, "hordes of people staged an assault on the classrooms in Excel College, wielding machetes and telling everybody to leave the premises or risk a bloodbath," a teacher in the private school recalled.

Known as "Mr Tseke", the teacher said the raid on the premises in Buea, capital of the Southwest region, led senior staff to arrange to move the whole school to a site in Clerks quarter, an administrative district with high security. "Not far from us, you'll find a gendarmerie contingent (paramilitary police), behind us you've got the police and down to the left, you have the 21st BIM (Motorized Infantry Brigade, an army unit with formidable firepower)," Tseke noted.

Home to most civil servants and police and army top brass, the Clerks district is a haven of peace in Buea. Separatist attacks are frequent elsewhere in the town, which sprawls over the eastern flank of Mount Cameroon. In two years, the conflict by English-speaking separatists demand-

Ethiopians complain of persecution on the eve of major holiday

ADDIS ABABA: Orthodox Christian leaders in Ethiopia on Friday denounced what they described as a surge in violence that has seen dozens of churches burned to the ground. As they celebrated one of the year's most significant holidays — Meskel, or "the finding of the cross" — church officials urged Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to protect them and hold perpetrators of religious violence to account.

"The Orthodox Christians are not happy with the government," Aklil Damtew, the church's project coordinator said. "The people expect the government to say something about the church. Why is the government remaining silent?" Rising tensions between the Orthodox leadership and Abiy's administration risk introducing a new element of instability in a country already grappling with ethnic violence ahead of elections next year.

Meskel marks the finding by Saint Helena of the "true cross" on which Jesus was crucified. It began Friday afternoon with Demera, a ceremony that drew tens of thousands of people to central Addis Ababa, the capital, for hours of dancing, chanting, drumming and prayer. On Thursday night, federal police issued a statement warning that "some forces" were "preparing to disrupt the Meskel celebrations." But the Demera ceremony unfolded without incident. After an hours-long parade featuring motorized floats bearing giant crosses, the crowd lit wax candles and looked on as a giant bonfire burned in the city's most prominent square, known as Meskel Square.

'Unprecedented'

The holiday is coming after two consecutive Sundays of peaceful protests in the country's Amhara region against church burnings. At least 25 churches have burned down throughout the country over the past two years, Aklil said, adding that the figure was unprecedented. The church's tally of attacks is difficult to verify. Orthodox Patriarch Abune Mathias used his Meskel message on Friday to condemn the burnings. "Those who are burning our churches must stop such acts," he told the crowd at Meskel Square, drawing cheers. "We can't accept at all those who would burn churches or attack our followers. Nothing good can come from this."

Church officials say the burnings reflect anti-Orthodox sentiment, but the motives for the attacks are likely more complex. Some of the burnings, for example, took place in July after a bid by ethnic Sidama leaders to form a new southern regional state kicked off days of unrest. Terje Ostebo, an expert on religion in Ethiopia at the University of Florida, said conflicts that appear to be rooted in religion are often also shaped by disputes over land use, ethnicity and other issues.

"These things are always entangled and I've had so many cases where I'm trying to figure out a local conflict that was presented as ethnic or religious, but it turns out they were both," he said. Nevertheless, Endale Gosaye, a 35-year-old marketing professional who attended the Demera ceremony, said he agreed with church leaders who believe Orthodox Christians are under threat in Ethiopia. "It's disgusting people who are doing that," he said of the burnings. "We want them to have a good heart because people are starting to follow them." —AFP