

Netanyahu Announces Plans For 3,000 New Settler Homes Near East Jerusalem

Agencies

Jerusalem: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday he was reviving a plan for the construction of 3,000 new settler homes near East Jerusalem, a project effectively frozen after international opposition.

Netanyahu's announcement, during an election campaign in which he has sought to shore up support from pro-settlement voters, was condemned by the Palestinians as another blow to their hopes for an independent state.

He has pledged to annex Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and the area's Jordan Valley as part of an Israeli-Pal-

stinian town of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank.

Construction of 2,610 housing units for Jews in Givat Hamatos was approved by a Jerusalem planning committee in 2014. The Israeli government effectively put the project on hold after the United States and the European Union criticised the plan.

Visiting an area overlooking the Israeli settlement of Har Homa on the outskirts of Jerusalem on Thursday, Netanyahu said in a video he posted on social media: "Today I approved the construction in Givat Hamatos" of 3,000 homes for Jews, of which 1,000 would be marketed soon.

He said some 1,000 housing units would be built for Arabs in



Iranians Vote For New Parliament Amid Tensions With US

Agencies

Tehran: Polls opened across Iran Friday in the country's eleventh parliamentary election, seen as a test for the popularity of President Hassan Rouhani's reformist-moderate camp, which has dominated Parliament since 2016.

Elections for Iran's 290-member Parliament are set amid escalating political tensions, economic struggles and concerns about escalating tensions with the US. The spectre of the coronavirus infection that has killed two people also adds another layer of uncertainty to the electoral process.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei cast his vote in the capital, Tehran, minutes after the polls opened on Friday at 8am local time (04:30 GMT). Voters on Friday will also choose replacements for seven deceased members of the Assembly of Experts, a body responsible for appointing the Supreme Leader.

Nearly 58 million people are eligible to vote for the candidates

that represent more than 250 registered parties. All voters must be more than 18 years of age. Almost three million are first-time voters.

A total of 55,000 polling stations have been set up at mosques throughout the country. More than 7,000 candidates, including 666 women, are competing.

Long queues could be seen at the main polling station set up at Masjid al-Nabi, the main mosque in the middle-class Narmak neighbourhood where former President

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad lives.

A spokesman for the Guardian Council, Abbas Ali Kadhodaei, said in a statement that 200,000 supervisors from the council were overseeing the polls throughout the country.

Polls were expected to close at 6pm (14:30 GMT). During the previous parliamentary elections in 2016, voting was extended due to a high turnout.

Also known as the Majlis, Iran's Parliament is responsible for passing legislation in the country, approving the annual budget and ratifying international agreements and treaties.

All legislation passed by the Majlis is then approved by the Guardian Council and the President.

The Parliament has a limited say in foreign affairs, although it played a crucial role in some of the country's pivotal moments, including in 2015 when it approved the nuclear deal with world powers.

The Majlis plays a bigger role in economic and other domestic politics.

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'US preparing to sign deal with Taliban on Feb 29'



Agencies

WASHINGTON: The United States is preparing to sign a deal with the Taliban on February 29, building on an agreement on reducing violence across Afghanistan, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Friday.

"Upon a successful imple-

mentation of this understanding, signing of the US-Taliban agreement is expected to move forward," he said in a statement released after visiting Saudi Arabia.

A week-long "reduction in violence" between the Taliban, the US and Afghan security forces will commence shortly, Afghanistan's National Security

Council spokesman Javed Faisal told AFP on Friday.

The partial truce will mark a historic step in more than 18 years of gruelling conflict in Afghanistan and would pave the way for a deal that could, ultimately, see the war end.

Pompeo said that intra-Afghan negotiations would begin shortly after the February 29 signing, expected to take place in the Qatari capital Doha.

They will "build on this fundamental step to deliver a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire and the future political roadmap for Afghanistan," he said.

The US top diplomat said that challenges remain, but that progress made so far "provides hope and represents a real opportunity. The United States calls on all Afghans to seize this moment".

Boat Carrying 91 Migrants Goes Missing In Mediterranean

Agencies

Tripoli: A rubber dinghy packed with 91 migrants and refugees that set out from Libya with hopes of reaching Europe appears to have gone missing in the Mediterranean, the UN migration agency said on Thursday.

The inflatable boat carrying mostly African migrants departed from al-Qarbouli, 50km (30 miles) east of the capital, Tripoli, on February 8, said Osman Haroun, whose cousin was on board.

He has not heard from the 27-year-old Mohamed Idris, or his 10 other friends also on the boat, since.

"It's the first time I've heard of this happening," Haroun told The Associated Press by phone from the western coastal district of Zawiya, where he has lived with his family since fleeing the conflict-ridden Darfur region of Sudan in 2016.

"Those who set out you usually hear from within a few hours ... no one has even seen the boat's remains."

News of the missing boat comes amid criticism of a lack of European Union rescue missions in the Mediterranean Sea.

Member countries agreed earlier this week to end an anti-migrant smuggler operation involving only surveillance aircraft and instead deploy military ships to concentrate on upholding a widely flouted UN arms embargo that is considered key to winding down Libya's relentless war.

Alarm Phone, a crisis hotline for migrants in need of rescue at sea, drew attention on Thursday to what it called "an invisible shipwreck," urging Libyan, Maltese and Italian authorities to share information about the day's rescue missions.

It said a black rubber boat with 91 people on board, reportedly hailing from Sudan, Niger, Iran and Mali, called the hotline in distress at 3:30am on February 9.

The passengers managed to share their GPS coordinates minutes later, which put them in international waters north of Libya.

Alarm Phone passed the SOS to Italian and Maltese authorities and to the Libyan coast guard, an EU-trained force criticised by human rights groups, which patrols Mediterranean waters and intercepts migrants to keep them from reaching European shores.

Pompeo meets US troops on Saudi visit following talks with MBS



Agencies

Washington: On his second day in Saudi Arabia, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited American troops after discussing security concerns over Iran with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Pompeo met with US military commanders at a Saudi airbase where about 2,500 US troops are stationed in response to perceived threats from the Islamic Republic.

The base includes a squadron of US Air Force F-15E fighter jets that fly daily missions over Iraq and Syria and two American Patriot missile batteries prepared to knock down any Iranian attack against the kingdom.

"Pompeo's visit to Prince Sultan air base and a nearby US Patriot battery highlights the longstanding US-Saudi security relationship and reaffirms America's determination to stand with Saudi Arabia in the face of Iranian malign behaviour," the State Department said in

a statement. Pompeo said the American military presence is a form of deterrence "to deliver us to a place where I, as secretary of state, can get the diplomatic outcome that the president is seeking".

The US began building up its military presence in the kingdom last summer as President Donald Trump and his oil-rich ally Riyadh accused Iran of attacking tankers in the Gulf and Saudi oil installations, incidents that roiled global energy markets last year.

Tehran denies involvement in the attacks and Riyadh has since appeared eager to engage in cautious diplomacy to ease friction.

Tensions in the region further heightened up following the US assassination of Iran's top military commander Qassem Soleimani as he was visiting Iraq on January 3.

The move triggered Iranian retaliation with missile strikes targeting Iraqi military bases housing US troops.

Coronavirus Reaches Chinese Jails, Sparks New Fears Of Cluster Cases

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Hindustan Times

Beijing: The novel coronavirus outbreak has reached Chinese prisons triggering fresh concerns of similar closed-area cluster cases breaking out in the other crowded prisons in China including in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

According to information made available by the government, nearly 450 prisoners and policemen have been infected in Chinese prisons including in the worst-hit Hubei province.

National Health Commission (NHC) officials reported 220 cases of covid-19 cases in Hubei. The commission explained that the country-wide network on reporting of the infectious disease hadn't been accounting for infections in the country's prisons so far.

The NHC didn't share details about the prisons in Hubei where the infections were reported.

The country-wide death toll from the outbreak has reached 2,239 by Thursday midnight with 120 deaths reported overnight. The number of infections stands at 75,500.

The national health commission (NHC) has reported 889 new cases of covid-19 nationwide up from 394 cases reported 24 hours earlier.

In the first cases of its kind to be reported since the deadly epidemic broke out in December, at least 207 prisoners and police personnel are infected with covid-19 in the city of Jining in eastern China's Shandong province.

Jie Weijun, a high-ranking politician in the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) who was a top justice department official in Shandong province was sacked after the cases were reported.

In another prison in eastern China's Zhejiang province, at least 27 cases have been reported.

Shandong officials told local media that nearly 2,077 people at the Rencheng prison - prisoners, policemen and officials - in Jining were tested for covid-19 in February.

At least 207 cases of covid-19 were confirmed; 200 prisoners and seven police officers.

The first confirmed case at the prison, a police officer, was diagnosed on February 13. Soon, after two more officers were diagnosed.

NEWSMAKERS

Iraq's anti-terror PMU appoints Abu Fadak al-Mohammedawi as al-Muhandis successor

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) has appointed Abu Fadak al-Mohammedawi as the new deputy commander of Hashd al-Shaabi following the martyrdom of his predecessor Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who was killed in a US drone attack last month.

According to PMU official Abu Ali al-Bassari, the Popular Mobilization Units chose Abu Fadak based on a decision made at a recent meeting of its board.

"Following the appointment, the chief-commander of the Iraqi armed forces will sign Abu Fadak's decree in the next couple of days," he added.

Al-Mohammedawi earlier served as the secretary-general of Kata'ib Hezbollah. Since joining the founding core of Kata'ib Hezbollah in 1997, he has been a prominent figure, even though his real name is not known to the public.

"Abu Fadak is strong and a



true leader with honorable positions and good relations with all," an Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq commander said earlier.

Known as the "uncle", Abu Fadak is praised for his military prowess and confidence. He was reportedly close to al-Muhandis.

Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, along with late anti-terror Com-

mander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani and a number of their comrades, was assassinated in a US drone attack near the Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

The People's Mobilization Units (PMU) of Iraq, better

known by the Arabic name Hashd al-Sha'abi, is a government-sponsored umbrella organization composed of around 40 factions of volunteer counter-terrorism forces, including mostly Shia Muslims besides Sunni Muslims, Christians and Kurds.

The PMU's formation goes back to the summer of 2014, shortly after Daesh, the world's most notorious Takfiri terror group, showed its face and managed to occupy swathes of territory in Iraq. The lightning gains made by the foreign-backed terrorists caught the national army of Iraq off guard, pushing government forces to the verge of collapse and leaving the Arab state in disarray.

On June 15 that year, Iraq's prominent Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani intervened to help rebuild the national army, issuing a fatwa that called on all Iraqi people to join forces with the army in the face of the Daesh threat.

The Dalai Lama: Facts about Tibet's spiritual leader



into exile in the northern hill town of Dharamshala, where he still lives.

Since his flight from Tibet, China has accused the leader of being a dangerous separatist, and said any attempt to meet him is a "major offence". In 2012, Beijing cancelled a planned visit by then-British Prime Minister David Cameron after he hosted the Dalai Lama in London.

The Dalai Lama wakes at 3am

and meditates for several hours, according to a sample of his diary on his official website. After a breakfast of porridge and tsampa, a traditional barley flour, he spends the morning reading Buddhist texts, before holding audiences in the afternoon. He retires by 7pm.

His interests include cosmology, neurobiology, quantum physics and psychology, he told Reuters in an interview last year.

He has been granted dozens of honorary doctorates and awards for his leadership of the Tibetan community, including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

The fourteenth Dalai Lama has said the decision whether to retain the role after his death will be made by the Tibetan people, not the Chinese government, which claims the right to choose his successor. "If the majority of (Tibetan people) really want to keep this institution, then this institution will remain," he told Reuters.