

Anti-Coronavirus Measures Affect Friday Turnout At Makkah's Grand Mosque

Agencies

MAKKAH: An eerie emptiness enveloped the sacred Kaaba in Makkah's Grand Mosque, where attendance at Friday prayers was hit by measures to protect against coronavirus.

The imam said during his sermon he hoped for an end to the epidemic and backed a decision by the Saudi government to halt Umrah. "God, I seek refuge in you from the calamity and the epidemic," said Sheikh Abdullah Awad al Juhani, without mentioning coronavirus by name.

the 38-year-old engineer said.

The white tiles surrounding this focal point, at the heart of the Grand Mosque, were untrodden on Friday.

Authorities had emptied the Grand Mosque for sterilisation on Thursday, after announcing a halt to the Umrah.

Friday "prayers took place inside the mosque and on the upper floors, but not in the Tawaf area", a mosque official said.

Nearly half of the mosque's area was closed, he added.

The area around the Kaaba will remain closed for duration of



"The measures by the kingdom to suspend Umrah to limit the spread of this epidemic are in line with texts of the Sharia," he told worshippers.

While thousands of people attended the sermon, Friday prayers usually attract hundreds of thousands of worshippers.

"I had a very strange and difficult feeling as I was headed to the mosque," an Egyptian worshipper, who has lived in Makkah for six years but did not want to give his name, said. "I felt deprived of the Kaaba," he said.

"The fact that it is empty (around the Kaaba) is very scary,"

the Umrah suspension as a "precautionary measure", but prayers inside the mosque will continue, the state-run Saudi Press Agency (SPA) reported.

Additionally, both the Grand Mosque and the Masjid-i-Nabawi, in Madina, will be closed an hour after Isha prayers to allow cleaning and sterilisation, it added.

The mosques will reopen an hour before Fajr prayers.

The moves come after authorities last week suspended Umrah visas and barred citizens from the Gulf Cooperation Council from entering Makkah and Madina.

China Rejects Pentagon Claim It Fired Laser At US Navy Spy Aircraft

Agencies

Beijing: China's Ministry of Defense has denied a claim by the US military that a Chinese naval ship had fired a laser at a US Navy spy plane circling overhead last month.

Refuting the American claim for the first time since February 17 when the incident allegedly happened, the ministry's spokesman Ren Guoqiang insisted in a statement posted Friday on its official Wechat that the US version of events "did not accord with reality," adding that a Chinese squadron was engaged in routine naval drills in international waters when approached by the US warplane.

Ren further accused the US Navy's P-8A Poseidon surveillance aircraft of carrying out "long-period circling reconnaissance at low-altitude despite repeated warnings from the Chinese side."

"The American aircraft's behavior was unfriendly in intention and unprofessional by operation, which severely threatened the safety of the vessels, aircraft and crew of both sides," he added.

The reaction by Beijing came weeks after the US military alleged that Chinese forces have used la-

sers to harass and potentially damage American and other nations' military aircraft and personnel.

The claim last month by the US Pacific Fleet further stated that



the alleged laser beam was detected by sensors on the aircraft, but was not visible to the naked eye.

The US Navy, according to local press reports, waited more than a week before accusing the Chinese ship of firing a laser at the American spy plane flying over the Philippine Sea, west of Guam - an act the US slammed as "unsafe and unprofessional" and described as a violation of international codes and agreements.

The US military regularly dispatches warships and warplanes to the East and South China Seas, which are adjacent to the Philippine Sea, as part of the patrols it describes as "freedom of navigation" without seeking authorization from Beijing.



Former Saudi Crown Prince Arrested 'Over Planned Coup'

Agencies

Dubai: Saudi Arabia has reportedly arrested three members of the royal family for allegedly plotting to oust King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, media reports said on Saturday.

The 34-year-old crown prince ordered the arrest of Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, King Salman's younger brother, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, the king's nephew and a former crown prince, on Friday, The New York Times, citing a relative and a person close to the royal family, reported.

Saudi authorities also detained Nayef's brother, Prince Nawaf bin Nayef, the report further said, adding that no reason for the arrests had so far been given.

However, another report by The Wall Street Journal, citing people familiar with the matter, said that MbS accused his uncle and the former crown prince of "treason", alleging that the pair had been attempting to stage a coup d'état.

According to The Wall Street Journal, in the early hours of Friday, guards from the royal court, wearing masks and dressed in black, raided the homes of the two senior royals, took them in custody and searched their homes.

The two top royals, once-for-

midable rivals to the throne, are now under threat of lifetime imprisonment or execution, the Wall Street Journal report further said. All the detained have been charged with treason, the report said.

The men are among the kingdom's most influential figures. Bin Nayef, was once powerful figure who had been the crown prince until King Salman took away the title and put bin Salman first in line for the throne. For the last few years, bin Nayef's movements have been monitored and restricted.

A royal cousin, Prince Nawaf bin Nayef, is also alleged to have been detained. The reports have yet to be officially confirmed although palace affairs in Saudi Arabia are often shrouded in secrecy.

Mohammed bin Salman is considered the de facto ruler of the kingdom after he was named crown prince by his father in 2016. He has been lauded at home for easing social restrictions in the deeply conservative kingdom and opening up the economy. But he has also faced severe flak over the devastating war in Yemen and the gruesome murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the kingdom's consulate in Turkey.

Bin Salman has also fuelled resentment among some branches of the ruling family by tightening his

grip on power. In 2017, he ordered the arrests of dozens of Saudi royal figures, ministers and businessmen.

The Wall Street Journal quoting sources reported that there are royals who are now questioning bin Salman's ability to lead. They said those royals seeking to change the line of succession view Prince Ahmed, King Salman's only surviving full brother, as a possible choice. They claim he would have support of family members, the security apparatus, and some Western powers.

Saudi insiders and Western diplomats told Wall Street Journal that the family is unlikely to oppose the crown prince while the 84-year-old king remains alive, recognising that the king is unlikely to turn against his favourite son.

Prince Ahmed has largely kept a low profile since returning to Riyadh in October 2018 after several months abroad. During the trip, he appeared to criticise the Saudi leadership while responding to protesters outside a London residence chanting for the downfall of the Al Saud dynasty. He was one of only three people on the Allegiance Council, made up of the ruling Al Saud family's senior members, who opposed Mohammed bin Salman becoming crown prince in 2017, sources have earlier said.

Taliban could 'possibly' seize power after US leaves, warns Trump

Agencies

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump on Friday said the Taliban could "possibly" overrun the Afghan government after the United States withdraws from the country, leaving the US-backed authorities to fend for themselves.

"Countries have to take care of themselves," Trump told reporters at the White House. "You can only hold someone's hand for so long." Asked if the Taliban could eventually seize power, Trump said it's "not supposed to happen that way but it possibly will." "We can't be there for the next 20 years. We've been there for 20 years and we've



been protecting the country but we can't be there for the next - eventually they're going to have to protect themselves," he said.

Trump said the Afghan government's ability to defend itself from the guerrillas after US forces pull out was unknown.

"I don't know. I can't answer that question," he said. "We'll have to see what happens." When President Donald Trump goes to the

polls in November, he clearly wants to tell the American people he has ended the "forever wars" that have become the longest foreign conflicts for the US military. Whether that will truly be the case, however, is a rather different matter.

At the heart of that strategy is this month's tentative peace deal between the United States and Taliban, signed after years of often strained and sometimes secret diplomacy. Under that deal, the US is scheduled to withdraw almost all its 12,000 forces from Afghanistan over the next 14 months - a date that, perhaps through no coincidence, extends well into the next presidential term.

Coronavirus: 100,000 Plus People Infected Worldwide; 3,400 Dead

Agencies

London/Los Angeles: Twenty-one people aboard a cruise ship that was barred from docking in San Francisco have tested positive for coronavirus, US officials said on Friday, adding to the more than 100,000 cases of the fast-spreading illness across the world.

Vice President Mike Pence, recently appointed as the US government's point man on the outbreak, said the cruise ship Grand Princess will be brought to an unspecified non-commercial port where all 2,400 some passengers and 1,100 crew members will now be tested.

"Those that need to be quarantined, will be quarantined. Those that require additional medical attention will receive it," Pence told reporters at the White House.

The outbreak has killed more than 3,400 people and spread across more than 90 nations, with seven countries reporting their first cases on Friday.

The economic damage has also intensified, with business districts starting to empty and stock markets continuing to tumble.

President Donald Trump on

people were being asked to stay home from work, schools were closed, large gatherings and sports and music events were cancelled, stores were cleared of staples like toiletries and water, and face masks became a common sight.

Iran's national plan

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said every country should make containing the epidemic its top priority, pointing to Iran's national action plan to combat one of the worst outbreaks after a slow start.

Iran's death toll from the virus jumped to 124, as more than 1,000 new cases were diagnosed over 24 hours.

The Vatican reported its first case, a patient in its health services, worsening the prospects of the virus having already spread further in the Italian capital, since most employees in the walled city-state live in Rome, and those who live in the Vatican frequently go in and out to the city that surrounds it.

197 deaths in Italy

Italy is the worst-hit European country, with a death toll as of Fri-



Friday signed a bill to provide \$8.3 billion to bolster the capacity to test for coronavirus and fund other measures in the United States. Cases have now been reported in more than half of the 50 US states. Fifteen people have died in the country.

In many affected countries,

day of 197. South Korea on Saturday reported 174 additional cases from late Friday, taking the national tally to 6,767. Mainland China, where the outbreak started, reported 99 new confirmed cases but about a quarter of them came from outside the country, data showed.

Nigeria Police Free 13 From 'Baby Factory'

Agencies

Abuja: Nigerian police have rescued 13 people, including a child and six pregnant women, from an illegal clinic in southwestern Ogun state, a spokesman said Friday.

The women, aged between 20 and 25, told police the owner hired men to impregnate them and then sell the newborns for profit in what has been dubbed a "baby factory".

The "factories" are usually small illegal facilities parading as private medical clinics that house pregnant women and offer their babies for sale.

In some cases, young women have been held against their will and raped before their babies are sold on the black market.

"The operation was carried out on February 28 after an inmate of the home located around Mowe escaped and tipped off the police," police spokesman Abimbola Oyeemi told AFP.

"We also arrested the owner

of the home and two men who are suspected of being hired to impregnate the women," he said.

Oyeyemi said the women told the police that the home's owner usually hired men to sleep with them to make babies.

"They told us that the babies would then be taken from them and sold to patrons," he said.

"The suspects are in custody and they will be charged to court at the end of our investigation," he said.

Police raids on illegal maternity units have been relatively common in Nigeria, especially in the south.

Security services say other cases have seen women with unplanned pregnancies pressured into giving birth in the facilities.

Baby boys are typically sold for 500,000 naira (\$1,400, 1,250 euros) while girls fetch 300,000 naira, police have said in previous cases.

Last week, 24 babies and four pregnant mothers were rescued in the southern city of Port Harcourt.

NEWSMAKERS

I Had Affair with Lewinsky to Manage My Anxieties: Bill Clinton

Washington: Former US President Bill Clinton claims that his affair with Monica Lewinsky was one of the 'things I did to manage my anxieties'.

Clinton said he had an affair with Monica Lewinsky to help him deal with the stress of being president as he opened up in a documentary released Friday about the scandal that led to his impeachment.

In the four-part Hulu series, Clinton says his sexual relationship with the then White House intern was a means "to manage my anxieties", and that he felt "terrible" the affair came to define Lewinsky's life.

"It was awful what I did," said the 73-year-old. "We all bring our baggage to life and sometimes we do things we shouldn't do." Monica Lewinsky was 22 years old at the time of the affair.

"You feel like you're staggering around - you've been in a 15-round prize-fight that was extended to 30 rounds, and here's something that'll



take your mind off it for a while. Everybody has life's pressures and disappointments and terrors, fears or whatever, things I did to manage my anxieties for years."

Clinton's sexual relationship with Lewinsky and subsequent denial about it under oath led to his impeachment in December 1998. He was acquitted by the Senate in February 1999 but the scandal came to define

his presidency. Bill had also denied it to Hillary - and she believed him.

He said in the interview: "I went and sat on the bed and talked to her. I told her exactly what happened, when it happened. I said I feel terrible about it. We've been through quite a bit in the last few years. I said I have no defence, it's inexcusable what I did."

Trump says it is okay for those with coronavirus symptoms to go to work

WASHINGTON — Elizabeth Warren dropped out of the presidential race Thursday after failing to unite the Democratic Party's left and right flanks behind her progressive policy agenda, the latest shakeup in a fast-moving battle for the 2020 nomination.

Warren said she was not ready to endorse either of the two remaining major candidates, former Vice President Joe Biden or Sen. Bernie Sanders, of Vermont.

"Let's take a deep breath and take a little time with that," she said outside her home in Cambridge, Mass. "We don't have to decide at this minute."

She is the fifth Democrat to bow out in the past week, and her departure leaves the field, which started with six women running for president, with two white male front-runners.

Asked if she believed gender was a factor in her repeated losses, Warren called it a "trap question for every woman" in politics. "If you say, 'Yeah, there was sexism in this race,' everyone says, 'Whiner!'" she said. "And if you say, 'No, there was no sexism,' about a bazillion women think,

"What planet do you live on?"

Reflecting on why she thought her campaign did not end up garnering more support - she failed to win any of the first 18 states to hold primaries or caucuses, including her home state - Warren said she found no political opening between the established candidates of the party's left and center.

"I was told at the beginning of this whole undertaking that there are two lanes - a progressive lane that Bernie Sanders is the incumbent for and a moderate lane that Joe Biden is the incumbent for, and there's no room for anyone else in this," Warren said. "I thought that wasn't right but evidently I was wrong."

Warren spoke to Biden and Sanders in separate phone calls Wednesday. She will face heavy pressure from Sanders' backers to support him against Biden, who saw his campaign surge into the lead Tuesday after rapid consolidation of support from moderates and African Americans, the Democratic establishment and others who worry that Sanders is too far left to beat President Donald Trump.

Iranian lawmaker dies of coronavirus

Tehran: An Iranian lawmaker died of the novel coronavirus on Saturday, state news agency IRNA reported, one of several officials to succumb to the illness in the epidemic-hit country.

Fatemeh Rahbar, 55, was a conservative MP and had recently been elected to the parliament from the capital Tehran, the agency said. She is the second lawmaker killed by the virus in Iran and one of seven politicians and government officials who have died in the outbreak since the country reported its first cases in mid-February.

Iran has been scrambling to contain the rapid spread of the virus, which so far has infected 4,747 people and killed at least 124.

Rahbar was among the top candidates in Tehran for the conservatives, who overwhelmingly won February's general election marked by the lowest turnout in the Islamic republic's history.

Iran has closed schools and universities, suspended major cultural and sporting events and reduced working hours across the country to slow the contagion, which has spread to all of its 31 provinces. (AFP)