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## In Figures

US President Donald Trump yesterday rejected the official death toll from last year's Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, saying it had been inflated to almost 3,000 as part of a ploy to make him look bad. The true human cost of Maria, and the chaotic federal response to the storm, triggered a year-long controversy, which Trump revived this week even as another powerful hurricane, Florence, bore down on the East Coast.

## 5th tranche of IMF loan by end of 2018 Gov't keen on resolving tax disputes

Ashraf Sadek

**PRESIDENT** Abdel Fattah El Sisi has directed the government to upkeep its efforts for resolving tax disputes in order to boost the confidence of financiers and investors in the Egyptian economy and preserve the state's rights and revenues, Presidency Spokesman Ambassador Bassam Radi said yesterday.

The presidential directives came during a meeting between President Sisi and Finance Minister Mohamed Maet, Ambassador Radi said.

During the meeting, which was attended by Prime Minister Moustafa Madbouli, Minister Maet reported to President Sisi on the latest developments of a plan to reform the Tax Authority as well as the overall present status of the Egyptian economy, Ambassador Radi said.

Minister Maet told President



**PRESIDENT** Abdel Fattah El Sisi presiding over yesterday's meeting with Prime Minister Dr Moustafa Madbouli, and Finance Minister Mohamed Maet to discuss the overall present status of the Egyptian economy.

Sisi that the reform plan, which aimed at enhancing the performance of the Tax Authority, was moving ahead, he added.

President Sisi stressed that reforming the Tax Authority

should be carried out in accordance with 'a strategic and competent plan', Ambassador Radi said.

The reform plan, Minister Maet said, involved adopting a

new mechanised tax payment system and introducing a new organisational structure to the authority, he said.

The minister also informed the president about his ministry's

efforts for resolving tax disputes between the government and capital owners, Ambassador Radi said.

The minister indicated in his presentation that the ministry was working on introducing a new culture of communication and understanding between the government and tax payers.

Ambassador Radi said that President Sisi and Minister Maet reviewed a set of measures, which aimed at increasing the state revenues and reducing budget deficit as part of an ongoing three-year economic reform programme.

The programme has earned praise from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the international business community.

President Sisi directed Minister Maet to take swift actions for resettling governmental debts to help increase economic growth rates

and create more job opportunities for the nation's young people, Ambassador Radi said.

The Sisi-Maet meeting also dealt with the latest developments pertaining to the IMF-supported economic reform programme as well as the state budget and its projected targets during the Fiscal Year 2018/2019, Ambassador Radi added.

In this regard, Minister Maet said that the reform programme was moving according to schedule and the IMF would approve by the end of this year the fifth tranche of a \$12-billion loan package aimed at bringing Egypt's economy to its full potential.

The IMF has approved the loan to support the government's home-grown comprehensive economic reform plan. The loan is being provided under the Extended Fund Facility and also includes measures to protect the poor.



**MED DRILLS:** Egyptian and Pakistani naval forces conducted yesterday drills in the Mediterranean Sea. "The drills meant to exchange expertise in order to promote maritime security and stability in the region," the Armed Forces said in a statement yesterday. The giant Pakistani military ship SAIF PNS along with the Egyptian naval ships conducted exercises including inspection of ships and exchange of helicopter takeoff and landing, it added.

## Cairo for closer ties with Asmara

**ASMARA** – President Isaias Afwerki yesterday received a message from President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, confirming the keenness of the Cairo government on promoting a strategic partnership between the two countries.

Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri, who is on an official visit to Asmara, relayed the oral message to President Afwerki during their talks in the Eritrean capital, the official Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported yesterday.

The message also expressed Egypt's interest in upgrading co-operation with Eritrea in all fields, MENA added.

During the talks, President Afwerki expressed his country's gratitude to Egypt for having



**FOREIGN** Minister Sameh Shoukri (L) shaking hands with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki during their talks in Asmara yesterday.

stood by it and for extending assistance. He also paid tribute to Egypt's role at both the African

and international levels and expressed appreciation for Egypt's continuing support of

Eritrea in a manner that reflected Egypt's historical weight in the African Continent.

Shoukri and Afwerki exchanged views on the situation in Africa, the spokesman for the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Ahmed Abu Zeid, said.

Abu Zeid added that President Afwerki and Minister Shoukri reviewed the progress of efforts to increase joint security activities in the Horn of Africa region and the Red Sea and the key role that Eritrea could play in this regard.

The Shoukri-Afwerki talks also dealt with the latest developments pertaining to South Sudan, Somalia and Yemen; and the continuing negotiations on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, he said.

## Coalition seizes road linking Hodeidah to Sana'a

**ADEN** – Yemeni forces backed by a Saudi-led coalition seized the main road linking the port city of Hodeidah to the capital Sana'a, blocking a supply route for the Houthi group that controls both cities, military sources and residents said yesterday.

The Western-backed alliance in Yemen resumed its offensive after the collapse of peace talks on Saturday which the United Nations had hoped would avert an assault on the Red Sea city, the country's main port and a lifeline for millions of Yemenis, and start a process to end the three-year war.

"The situation has deteriorated dramatically in the past few days. Families are absolutely terrified by the bombardment, shelling and airstrikes," UN humanitarian coordina-

tor Lise Grande said in a statement yesterday.

The coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has said taking control of Hodeidah would force the Iranian-aligned Houthi movement to the negotiating table by cutting off its main supply line.

"The main entrance in Hodeidah leading to Sana'a has been closed after forces backed by the UAE took control of the road," a pro-coalition military source told Reuters.

Residents said the main eastern gate had been damaged in airstrikes by coalition warplanes and that fighting was continuing on secondary streets off the main road.

There is another more circuitous route between Hodeidah on the

western coast of Yemen to the capital in the north.

The United Nations fears an attack on Hodeidah, the entry point for the bulk of Yemen's commercial imports and aid supplies, could lead to a famine in the impoverished country where an estimated 8.4 million people are facing starvation.

Grande said people in Hodeidah are struggling to survive.

"More than 25 per cent of children are malnourished; 900,000 people in the governorate are desperate for food and 90,000 pregnant women are at enormous risk."

The coalition accuses the Houthis of smuggling weapons and has imposed stringent measures on imports through Hodeidah.

Any interruption of supplies from

the port would have an impact on the wider population in the nation of 28 million, including more than 11 million children facing the threat of food shortages, disease and displacement.

An estimated 1.8 million children are malnourished, according to Meritxell Relano, UNICEF representative in Yemen.

The alliance intervened in Yemen's war, widely seen as a proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, in 2015 to restore the internationally-recognised government of Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

It launched an offensive on Hodeidah in June in an effort to bring the Houthis to their knees, but halted it after almost no gains to give UN-sponsored peace talks a chance.

## UN shares locations of Idlib hospitals, schools

**GENEVA** (Reuters) – UN officials have notified Russia, Turkey and the United States of the GPS coordinates of 235 schools, hospitals and other civilian sites in the Syrian province of Idlib, in the hope the move will help protect them from being attacked.

"We share these coordinates so there is no doubt that a hospital is a hospital," Panos Moutzisz, UN regional humanitarian coordinator for the Syria crisis, told a briefing.

"We would like to see civilians not targeted, hospitals not bombed, people not displaced."

An estimated 2.9 million people live in Idlib, the last major stronghold

of opposition to President Bashar al-Assad. Syrian government and Russian warplanes began airstrikes last week in a possible prelude to a full-scale offensive.

Four hospitals in Hama and Idlib have been hit by airstrikes in the past week, constituting "serious attacks" that violate international law, Moutzisz said. "A hospital is a hospital and has to be respected by all on the ground."

Moutzisz called on all warring sides to ensure that civilians in Idlib were able to move freely in any direction to flee fighting or bombing, and for aid workers to have access to them.