



New archaeological find unearthed in Elkab desert in Edfu

2



Salah joins Egypt training session

4



Italy vows migrant ship cannot dock as Paris-Rome row escalates

5



Indonesia's got Ramadan talent

6

The Egyptian Gazette

ذی اچبشيان جازييت

Established 1880

www.egyptiangazette.net.eg

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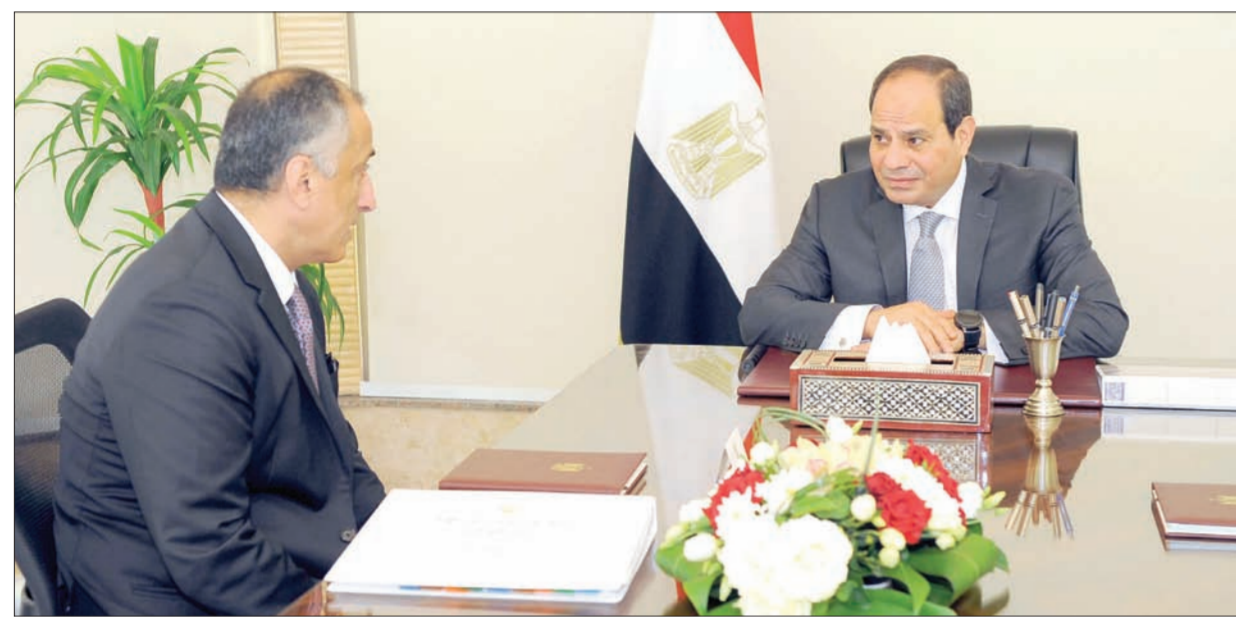
Issue No: 44,707

Thursday, June 14, 2018

Price: LE4

In Figures

AT least 15 people died when two boats sank in rough waters, Indonesian authorities said, and rescue workers scrambled to search for dozens believed missing. Ferry accidents are common in Indonesia, a vast archipelago, especially during the Islamic holiday of Eid when millions make the annual journey by land, sea and air to their hometowns after the holy fasting month of Ramadan.



PRESIDENT Abdel Fattah El Sisi during his meeting yesterday with Central Bank of Egypt Governor Tarek Amer.

Economic reforms augur well

Ashraf Sadek

PRESIDENT Abdel Fattah El Sisi yesterday stressed the importance of continuing the government's efforts to give a boost to the economy and preserve monetary stability.

President Sisi also called on the government to provide the credit facilities deemed necessary for meeting the needs of various sectors; particularly with regard to social protection nets and programmes, since such support helps alleviate the economic burden borne by the neediest segments and limited-income citizens.

President Sisi's issued his directives at a meeting he called yesterday with

Central Bank of Egypt (CBE) Governor Tarek Amer to review the latest developments pertaining to the economic reforms, which the government launched two years ago, Presidency Spokesman Ambassador Bassam Radi said.

During the meeting, Governor Amer briefed the president on the present economic and monetary scenes, which indicated a positive outlook for the Egyptian economy.

Governor Amer said that the reforms, which included adopting economic restructuring policies and liberalising the exchange rates, had resulted in an unprecedented rise in the country's foreign reserves,

Ambassador Radi said. President Sisi stressed the need to pursue the efforts aimed at expanding social protection networks, Ambassador Radi said. President Sisi also stressed the need to continue with plans to develop the systems applied by the banking sector and affiliated bodies so as to improve the services provided to citizens, Spokesman Radi added.

Governor Amer said that there were more than 17 million people benefitting from the services that were being offered by the banks and post offices across the nation. He said that the CBE would launch a set of plans for increasing the number of bank users nationwide.

Sadr joins forces with Iran-backed coalition

BAGHDAD (News Wires) – Iraqi Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose coalition won the largest number of seats in last month's parliamentary elections, has announced an alliance with an Iran-backed coalition ahead of marathon negotiations to form a new government.

The move, announced by al-Sadr and Hadi al-Amiri of the Fatah coalition in the revered southern Shi'ite city of Najaf, came as a surprise as al-Sadr

has been touting himself as a nationalist leader who opposes Iranian influence in Iraq.

The new alliance controls 101 seats, still far from the 165 required for a majority.

At a news conference Tuesday, the two leaders said their alliance is aimed at expediting the formation of a new government and called on others to join them.

"We had a very positive meeting in

order to end the suffering of the country and the people," al-Sadr said. "Our new alliance is a nationalist one and within the national framework."

In the years following the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, al-Sadr led militias who fought US troops. At that time, they were backed by Iran, but in recent years the cleric has presented himself as a nationalist leader opposed to Iranian influence.

HRW: Israeli lethal force in Gaza may be war crime

TEL AVIV (News Wires) – Human Rights Watch (HRW) said yesterday that Israel's use of lethal force against Palestinian demonstrators in the Gaza Strip in recent weeks may constitute war crimes.

The statement was issued yesterday ahead of an emergency UN General Assembly meeting to vote on a resolution condemning Israel's "excessive use of force." A similar Security Council resolution was vetoed earlier this month by the United States for being "fundamentally imbalanced" and "grossly one-sided," US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley said.

Palestinians have held near-weekly protests since March 30, calling for a "right of return" to ancestral homes now in Israel.

At least 120 Palestinians have been killed and more than 3,800 wounded by Israeli fire in protests along the border. The overwhelming majority of the dead and wounded have been unarmed, according to Gaza health officials.

Israeli military has said its soldiers adhere to the rules of engagement to defend Israeli civilians and security infrastructure from attacks cloaked by the protests.

HRW contended in its statement that the mostly unarmed protesters didn't pose an imminent threat to Israeli troops or civilians, and, therefore, the use of live fire suggests a violation of international law.

The organisation said eyewitnesses recounted Palestinians were shot from a great distance from the fence, and others who "had not thrown stones or otherwise tried to harm Israeli soldiers" were shot from a closer range.

Israel has been accused of committing war crimes in its three wars in the Gaza Strip in the last decade. Last month, the Palestinians urged the International Criminal Court in The Hague to launch an investigation into Israeli policies and actions in the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza Strip, accusing Israel of systemic crimes.

Egypt safer than US and UK, Gallup poll says

EGYPT has been ranked the safest country in Africa and higher than both the United Kingdom and United States, according to a new global poll released yesterday.

The annual Gallup Global Law and Order asked if people felt safe walking at night and whether they had been victims of crime.

The survey placed Egypt 16th out of 135 countries, while the UK was 21st and the US 35th.

Singapore was ranked the safest, with Venezuela seen as the least. Egypt got 88 out of 100 in the survey, placing it on the same level as

countries like Denmark, Slovenia and China. This was an improvement on 2016, when it got 82.

Gallup says it interviewed 148,000 adults in 142 countries and areas for its survey.

Its questions revolved around confidence in local police, safety at night, cases of theft and whether participants or a family member had been mugged or assaulted within the past 12 months.

In Afghanistan (46 per cent), Uganda (49 per cent) and South Sudan (50 per cent) residents were more likely than lowest ranked Venezuelans to say they

had been the victims of theft in the past year. South Sudan was ranked the least safe country in Africa.

The East African nation is followed by Gabon, Liberia and South Africa, one of the continent's most popular tourist destinations.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, just 60 per cent of people polled told Gallup they were confident in the local police force, rising to 68 per cent across North Africa and the Middle East. Rwanda scored highest on the continent when it came to safety at night, with 88 per cent of people saying they would be happy to walk about after dark.

Saudi-led coalition launches assault on Yemen main port

ADEN – A Saudi-led alliance of Arab states launched an attack on Yemen's main port city of Hodeidah yesterday, the largest battle of the war, aiming to bring the ruling Houthi group to its knees at the risk of worsening the world's biggest humanitarian crisis.

Arab warplanes and warships pounded Houthi fortifications to support ground operations by foreign and Yemeni troops massed south of the port of Hodeidah in operation "Golden Victory".

Ground battles raged near Hodeidah airport and al-Durayhmi, a rural area 10km south of the city, media controlled by the Arab states and their Yemeni allies reported.

The assault marks the first time the Arab states have tried to capture such a heavily-defended major city since joining the war three years ago against the Iran-aligned Houthis, who control the capital Sana'a and most of the populated areas.

The port is the main route for food to reach most Yemenis, 8.4 million of whom are already on the verge of famine. The Houthis deployed military vehicles and troops in the city



A FILE photo of a pro-government Yemeni soldier firing a machine gun near the town of Al Jah southeast of Hodeidah.

centre and near the port, as warplanes struck the coast to the south, a resident speaking on condition of anonymity told Reuters. People fled by routes to the north and west.

CARE International, one of the few aid agencies still there, said 30 airstrikes hit the city within half an hour. "Some civilians are entrapped, oth-

ers forced from their homes. We thought it could not get any worse, but unfortunately we were wrong," said CARE's acting country director, Jolien Veldwijk.

Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV quoted witnesses describing "concentrated and intense" bombing near the port itself.

North American trio to host 2026 World Cup

MOSCOW (News Wires) – The North American bid of the United States, Canada and Mexico will host the 2026 World Cup finals after winning the FIFA vote ahead of Morocco yesterday in Moscow.

The joint bid had been the front-runner for the 48-team tournament

from the moment a North American coalition was first mooted two years ago, and there have been spells when it has looked like the only credible candidate.

But Morocco, bidding for a fifth time, had closed the gap on 'United 2026' to the point that nobody in

Moscow wanted to make a public prediction ahead of the vote at the FIFA Congress, where 207 member associations, minus the four bidding nations, cast ballots.

210 members were present with 203 members entitled to vote. The US, Mexico and Canada received 134 votes (67 per cent) with the Morocco bid earning 65 votes.

"It's a bit emotional for us today," US Soccer President Carlos Cordeiro told FIFA Congress.

"Thank you so, so much for this incredible honour. Thank you for entrusting us with the privilege of hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2026".

FIFA offered a glowing technical assessment of the United bid – but subjective factors could have influenced votes. After controversy surrounded the awarding of the 2018 World Cup to Russia and the 2022 finals in Qatar, the vote was the first to be decided by the FIFA Congress.

Chief among those is US President Donald Trump, whose 'America First' approach might score well with his electoral base but may have made the United bid's task harder than it could ever have imagined.



DELEGATES of Canada, Mexico and the United States celebrating with FIFA President Gianni Infantino (R) after winning right to host 2026 World Cup.

Lebanon escalates refugee row with UN agency

BEIRUT – Lebanon's caretaker Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil escalated his row with the UN refugee agency UNHCR yesterday, accusing it at a news conference of working to stop refugees from returning to Syria.

UNHCR has denied the accusation, saying it supports the return of refugees when it is safe for them to go back to Syria and helps those who choose to return with their documentation.

"Their policy is to forbid the return," Bassil said. "The Lebanese policy is to encourage the return. Forbid, encourage. Stop, facilitate. That's it," he added during the news conference in the town of Aarsal, where he spoke alongside Syrian refugees.

"UNHCR does not forbid refugees from returning," Rula Amin, UNHCR's MENA region spokesperson said in emailed comments to Reuters.

"UNHCR's policy is clear on this matter: We respect people's free choices to return."