Syria war takes role in Ramadan television dramas

DAMASCUS, MAY 30 /--/ The sound of the blast in Syria`s capital Damascus brought worried residents running, but rather than carnage they found a crew filming one of the country`s famed television drama series. Moments before, director Rasha Sharbatgi had been wielding her loudhailer, calling for silence before counting down to the controlled explosion. Onlookers arriving at the set near Arnus Square in central Damascus found a burning car and people lying on the ground.

One swore in anger when he discovered the blast that had startled him was a scene being shot for Sharbatgi`s latest series "Shoq", named for its main character. She is one of many Syrian artists who have decided to draw inspiration from their country`s bloody six-year conflict. Her series is among the offerings on television during this year`s fasting season of Ramadan, a peak viewing period for many in the region who settle down to watch after eating their sunset meal. Syria, along with Egypt, is known as a hub for television and film production in the Middle East, and the country`s war is having a major impact on its output.

"Lately the content of series has varied between love stories, comedy and historical dramas," Sharbatgi told AFP. "There has been little in the way of real-life drama because everyone is trying to escape from depicting the current reality and fresh wounds." "I personally fled into work on love and relationships over the past three years, but I couldn`t escape all the time," she added. "I promised that this year I would do something that focuses on the crisis in a direct manner.""Shoq" focuses on the issue of the kidnapped and missing, a painful and sometimes overlooked part of the Syrian conflict, which has killed more than 320,000 people since it began with anti-government protests in March 2011. It does not shy away from depicting the conflict, featuring scenes of fighting, death and destruction.

"It was very difficult to make," Sharbatgi conceded. "But not more difficult than living the reality." In addition to providing subject matter, Syria`s conflict has constrained directors. Once-popular filming locations are now too dangerous to use, and some actors are abroad and unable to return "for economic, security or political reasons", Sharbatgi said. The decline in the value of the Syrian pound and general economic malaise has also affected production values. Director Samir Hussein decided to film his series "Fouda" or "Chaos" in the Al-Qasaa area near Damascus`s Jobar district, which remains divided between rebel and government control and is a key front line in the capital. The series looks at the chaos that has afflicted Syrian society during the war, and the "love and other human stories that have faced challenges because of the conflict", Hussein said.

A house in Al-Qasaa has become the headquarters for Hussein`s crew, with one room turned into a changing room for actors and another used to film scenes. The windows are kept open to prevent the glass shattering if a shell falls nearby. "Things were different before the war," Hussein said, standing by a window looking out over Jobar. "Places that we used to be able to film in are no longer available."Some directors have opted to incorporate landscapes scarred by war directly into their work, including Ahmed Ibrahim Ahmed, who filmed his latest movie "Ma Ward" or "Rosewater" in Daraya. The town was badly damaged over years of conflict before being captured by the army in August 2016, and fighting was ongoing when Ahmed was filming in the summer of 2016. "International companies spend thousands of dollars to create scenes of destruction or depict a landscape in war, but here we don`t spend anything -- our country has become a real-life set," Ahmed said."In the movie, we used sounds from the artillery and gunfire and included them in our scenes."

Others are less enthusiastic about drawing inspiration from the country`s war, however. The fourth season of the "Tawq al-Banat" or "Girls` Necklaces" series was filmed in the village of Yaafur some 20 kilometres (12 miles) west of Damascus. Yaafur has become a popular place to shoot historical dramas, particularly after another set location on the road to Damascus airport became unusable because of fighting. This season is set in the 1940s and 1950s and takes advantage of the village`s small alleyways, which resemble those of Damascus in decades past.

"Here there are no sounds of shelling and no danger of explosions," said lead actor Rachid Assaf, dressed in traditional Syrian clothes. Assaf was happy to be part of a series that gives people a chance to forget the conflict. "People are fed up with stories about war," he said. "They want to enjoy themselves during Ramadan, not be reminded of tragedies and relive their pain." (AFP)

Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first Minister and leader of the Scottish National Party, delivers her party's election manifesto in Perth, Scotland, Britain —REUTERS

Two Saudi cops hurt in bombing in restive Shi'ite town: Report

DUBAI, MAY 30 /--/ Two policemen were wounded when a bomb exploded in Awamiya in eastern Saudi Arabia, where many of the country`s Shi`ite Muslim minority live, state news agency SPA reported on Tuesday. Monday`s attack was the second in two weeks targeting security forces deployed to guard workers busy razing the old part of the town, known as al-Musawara, which authorities say has been used by armed fugitives to escape arrest. SPA quoted an interior ministry spokesman as saying that an improvised explosive device went off on Monday morning outside the old quarter of Awamiya, wounding two police officers. They were both taken to a hospital and authorities had begun an investigation, the agency said. The ministry said on May 16 a soldier was killed and five others were wounded when armed men fired a rocket-propelled grenade at their patrol in Awamiya after authorities began razing the old town. It happened days after a local child and a Pakistani worker were killed.

Authorities say a modern district comprising shopping centres, office buildings and green spaces will be built in place of the dilapidated town, which dates back more than 200 years. Awamiya has been a focal point of protests by the Shi`ite minority against what they say is discrimination by the Sunni-ruled kingdom. Saudi Arabia denies discrimination against Shi`ites and accuses Iran of fomenting unrest, a charge Tehran denies. Tensions have increased since Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shi'ite cleric convicted of inciting violence, was executed a year ago. United Nations cultural experts slammed Riyadh last week over the razing of the town`s old quarter, saying the work erased cultural heritage and violated human rights.

Daughter of S Korea's 'Rasputin' set to return home

SEOUL, MAY 30 /--/ The daughter of the woman at the centre of a corruption scandal that led to the ousting of South Korea's president will return home tomorrow from Denmark, officials said. Chung Yoo-Ra, 20, will be "immediately put into custody" when she arrives at Incheon airport after being extradited from Denmark, a justice ministry spokesman said. The ministry sent five officials to Denmark yesterday to accompany her home, he said. Chung is the only child of Choi Soon-Sil, the close confidante of former President Park Geun-Hye. Choi - nicknamed "Rasputin" for her close influence over the then-president - is one of the figures in the influence- peddling scandal that sparked huge street protests demanding Park's ousting. Chung dropped her appeal against extradition from Denmark, a Danish court announced last week, as Seoul wants to detain her for questioning.

The daughter is the alleged beneficiary of millions of dollars which South Korea's largest conglomerate Samsung paid to finance her equestrian training and

luxurious lifestyle in Europe. During a trial session on Monday, Choi reacted angrily to news that her daughter's extradition was imminent, news reports said. "You don't blackmail my daughter!" Choi screamed at prosecutors. "Are you going to pound on the table while threatening her as you did to me?" she was quoted as saying by the JoongAng daily. Park and Choi are already on trial for allegedly accepting or seeking millions of dollars in bribes from conglomerates including Samsung. (AFP)

UK journalist faces Thai jail for carrying protective gear

BANGKOK, MAY 30 /--/ A British journalist faces jail time after he was arrested at Thailand's main airport with a gas mask and plates for a bullet-proof vest, which police said today breached a law that classifies the protective gear as war weapons. Anthony Cheng, who works for Chinese state broadcaster CCTV, was detained at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport Monday night on his way to report in the war-torn Iraqi city of Mosul where troops are battling the Islamic State group. Gas masks and ballistic vests, which are frequently used by reporters around the world, are classified as war weapons in Thailand and require a licence.licence. Violating the legislation is punishable by up to five years in jail.

"A British national was arrested and charged with illegal possession of war weapons last night at the airport," airport policeman Somchart Maneerat told AFP Tuesday. His German coworker was also detained, the officer said. Media groups have repeatedly criticised the Thai law and say journalists should not be punished for carrying body armour and protective gear in and out of dangerous zones.criticised the Thai law and say journalists should not be punished for carrying body armour and protective gear in and out of dangerous zones. Late yesterday Cheng posted a photo on Facebook of the airport detention cell where he was held overnight. The plates and gas mask were "for use in Mosul where ISIS are well documented to be using gas," he wrote.Mosul where ISIS are well documented to be using gas," he wrote. "I was unaware either of those things were classified as 'war weapons'".

Attempts over the years to amend the legislation have fallen on deaf ears, despite Thailand's own history of deadly street protests and a festering Muslim insurgency in the far south. "Journalists who feel they need to carry this stuff need to inform or contact the concerned authorities prior to travelling," junta spokesman Major General Werachon Sukhonhapatipak told AFP. In August 2015 a Hong Kong photographer was charged with violating the law for carrying a bullet-proof vest and helmet while covering a deadly bombing in Bangkok. A Thai court later dropped the case. During Thailand's regular bouts of often violent street protests, both demonstrators and journalists have donned ballistic vests and helmets, largely without falling foul of police. Two foreign reporters were killed by gunfire while covering the worst round of political unrest in 2010. (PTI)

Women accused of Kim murder appear in court

KUALA LUMPUR, MAY 30 /--/ An Indonesian and a Vietnamese woman accused of assassinating the half-brother of North Korea`s leader with a deadly nerve agent, appeared in a Malaysian court Tuesday, wearing bullet-proof vests and under heavy security. Both women, aged in their twenties, could face the death penalty, though they have denied murdering Kim Jong-Nam, saying they were duped into believing they were taking part in a reality TV show. Seoul accuses North Korea of being behind the February killing, a charge Pyongyang denies. Indonesian Siti Aisyah, 25, and Vietnamese Doan Thi Huong, 28, appeared for Tuesday`s pre-trial hearing, during which their defence lawyers slammed the prosecution for failing to furnish them with relevant documents. "The concept of a fair trial demands that all material documents should be supplied to the defence at the earliest opportunity," Gooi Soon Seng, chief lawyer for Siti Aisyah said. Deputy public prosecutor Muhammad Iskandar Ahmad assured the defence they will be given the documents before the trial. The High Court is expected within a month to fix a date when the accused will enter a plea. Prosecutors and defence lawyers will then have 60 more days to prepare for the case, after which the trial dates can be determined. The Magistrate Court`s judge also approved a prosecution request that the case be moved to the High Court for the trial. Malaysian police accuse the women of wiping the banned nerve agent VX on Kim`s face as he was about to board a flight from Kuala Lumpur to Macau, where he was living in exile. Police are still trying to trace four North Koreans suspected of having taken part in the murder plot, who are believed to have returned to Pyongyang immediately after the killing. The murder sparked a diplomatic row between Malaysia and North Korea. (AFP)

Toll from thunderstorm in Moscow climbs to 14

MOSCOW, MAY 30 /--/ Russian officials say the death toll from a powerful thunderstorm in Moscow and its suburbs has reached 14. The Investigative Committee said in a statement today 11 people were killed in Moscow and three in the suburbs as high winds and rain ripped through the Russian capital yesterday, felling trees, tearing off roofs and damaging over 1,500 cars. Winds reached up to 30 meters per second (67 miles per hour).

More than 150 people have been taken to hospitals. Train services around the region were disrupted and dozens of flights from Moscow's airports delayed. The storm knocked down several pine trees at the residence of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev yesterday afternoon, temporary blocking the entrance to the compound. (Agencies)

Indonesian Islamist leader Rizieq Shihab named suspect in porn case

JAKARTA, MAY 30 /--/ An Indonesian Islamist leader who helped organise mass protests against Jakarta's Christian governor has been named a suspect in a pornography case, police said today, as authorities seek to rein in hardliners. Rizieq Shihab, the leader of the notorious radical group the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), was yesterday named a suspect for allegedly exchanging pornographic messages with a woman.

Shihab, who is also being investigated by police over a separate defamation case, is currently out of the country after travelling to Saudi Arabia on pilgrimage and has failed to return despite repeated summons from the police for questioning. Analysts said it was the latest evidence the government of President Joko Widodo was seeking to clamp down on radicals in the world's most populous Muslim-majority country as fears mount they are growing increasingly influential.

Shihab was a key figure in organising a series of mass rallies last year against Jakarta governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, an ally of Widodo, over allegations he insulted the Koran while campaigning for re-election. The controversy led to Purnama's downfall -- he lost the election and was jailed for blasphemy for two years this month over the claims -- and stoked concerns about rising religious intolerance in a country traditionally regarded as a bastion of tolerant Islam.The FPI was long viewed as a marginal organisation whose extreme views did not reflect those of most Indonesians, and was known for raiding bars during Ramadan, but gained national prominence due to the protests. Jakarta police spokesman Argo Yuwono confirmed Shihab had been named a suspect for allegedly breaking Indonesia's tough anti-pornography laws by exchanging graphic messages and nude pictures with the woman. Naming someone a suspect is a step in the Indonesian legal system which means authorities believe they have enough

evidence to consider filing charges, and such cases normally go to court.

Shihab, who has been jailed twice before, could face up to five years in prison if found guilty. "We will issue an arrest warrant and check his house and work with immigration to determine his whereabouts," Argo said. Shihab's lawyer Sugito Amto Prawiro denied the cleric had broken the anti-porn laws and said he was the "victim of a cruel act". The woman who received the messages has also been named a suspect in the case. (PTI)

Panama's Ex-dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega dies at 83

PANAMA CITY, MAY 30 /--/ Panama's former dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega has passed away at the age of 83 here, according to officials. Noriega, who ruled the country between 1983 and 1989 before being overthrown by an American invasion, was in the intensive care unit (ICU) since March 7 after undergoing an operation removing a benign brain tumour. He died on Monday night, Efe news reported. His health condition worsened after the former strongman had to undergo a second surgical operation due to cerebral bleeding he suffered a few hours after the March 7 surgery. Since then he has been in the ICU of Santo Tomas Hospital, the largest medical facility in the country.

Noriega was extradited to Panama on December 11, 2011, after serving more than 20 years in jail in the US and France for drug trafficking and money laundering. He was serving more than 60 years in El Renacer prison near Panama City until January 28, when he was granted temporary house arrest so that he could complete the pre- and post-operative care outside prison. In 2010, a new criminal charge was laid against him for alleged involvement in the disappearance in 1970 and death of leftist leader Heliodoro Portugal, but the trial was suspended in 2016 due to Noriega's health problems.

'Jihadist drug' seized for first time in France

PARIS, MAY 30 /--/ French customs officials said today that they had intercepted 135 kilogrammes (300 pounds) of Captagon, dubbed the "jihadists' drug", at Paris's Charles de Gaulle airport this year, a first for France. Captagon, a type of amphetamine, is one of the most commonly used drugs among fighters in the Syrian war. "It is the first time that this drug has been seized in France," the customs agency said in a statement. Customs officials at Charles de Gaulle discovered 350,000 Captagon pills weighing 70 kilogrammes on January 4 hidden among industrial moulds exported from Lebanon and apparently heading for the Czech Republic. An investigation was launched by German and Czech authorities "and it revealed that the real intended destination was Saudi Arabia, by passing through Turkey", the agency said. Another 67 kilogrammes of the drug were found at the airport in February, hidden in steel moulds. Captagon is classified by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime as an "amphetamine-type stimulant" and usually blends amphetamines, caffeine and other substances. (AFP)

S Korea's new leader orders probe on US missile launchers

SEOUL, MAY 30 /--/ South Korea's new liberal president is demanding an investigation because he says he wasn't told about the arrival of several additional launchers for a contentious US missile defense system meant to cope with North Korea's nuclear threats. Before taking office on May 10, Moon Jae-in vowed to review the THAAD system's deployment, which has infuriated both Pyongyang and Beijing, which considers the system's powerful radar a security threat. Moon's office said Tuesday that it found that four additional THAAD launchers have arrived in South Korea since the original two launchers were installed in April. (Agencies)