

Indians in Qatar advised to stay alert

DUBAI, JUNE 8 /--/ India has asked its nationals in Qatar to stay alert and modify their travel plans after several Gulf nations cut off diplomatic ties with Doha accusing it of supporting terrorism. On Monday Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt announced that they were cutting diplomatic relations with Qatar with closure of travel links.

The Gulf nations accused Qatar of supporting terrorism. Air connectivity provided by several airlines between these countries has been disrupted, as a result of cancellation of a number of flights. Indian travellers are, therefore, requested to contact their travel providers for advice on modifications to their travel arrangements and also remain alert in the region in developments, according to a statement by the Indian embassy in Doha.

The Indian embassy said that it is monitoring the situation closely and is in touch with the Qatari authorities to ensure the safety and security of Indian nationals in Qatar. The Qatari authorities have conveyed that they will take all necessary steps to ensure that normal life, including supplies of food items, is not affected. "There is nothing happening in the region that suggests any threat to the physical safety and security of residents in Qatar," the statement added. (PTI)



People wait in line hours ahead of time for the start of former FBI Director James Comey's testimony before a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 US presidential election in Capitol Hill in Washington, U.S. —REUTERS

Iran says Tehran attackers had been to IS bastions Mosul, Raqa

TEHRAN, JUNE 8 /--/ Iran said today that the five Iranians who killed 17 people in twin attacks in Tehran were Islamic State group members who had been to its strongholds in Iraq and Syria. The attacks yesterday at Tehran's parliament complex and the shrine of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wounded more than 50 people and were the first claimed by IS in Iran. "The five known terrorists... after joining the Daesh (IS) group, were sent to the country and participated in the crimes carried out by this terrorist group in Mosul and Raqa," the ministry said in a statement. It suggested there were only five attackers rather than the six originally reported. The ministry released their photographs and first

names, and said they were part of a network that entered Iran in July-August 2016 under the leadership of "high-ranking Daesh commander" Abu Aisha intending to carry out "terrorist operations in religious cities". Abu Aisha was killed and the network forced to flee the country, the statement said. It was not clear when the five men returned to Iran ahead of Wednesday's attacks. Iran denounced Donald Trump's reaction to the attacks as "repugnant" after the US president said the nation was reaping what it sowed. Trump said the US would "grieve and pray" for the victims, but added: "We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote." That was condemned by Iranian

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who tweeted: "Repugnant WH (White House) statement... as Iranians counter terror backed by US clients." The attackers were armed with rifles and pistols and at least two blew themselves up with suicide vests, Iranian media reported. Police said a further five people were arrested around Khomeini's shrine on suspicion of involvement. In the midst of the unfolding attacks, the intelligence ministry said a third team had been stopped before the attacks started, but no further details have since been given. "The network of this terrorist group has been identified and some of its members have been arrested," Intelligence

Minister Mahmoud Alavi said. "We still cannot judge that Saudi Arabia has had a role in this terrorist incident," he added. Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards have pointed the finger at regional rival Saudi Arabia —a close US ally—which Iran accuses of funding extremism and groups including IS. IS has threatened to step up recruitment within Iran, releasing its first Persian-language video in March in which it threatened to "conquer Iran and restore it to the Sunni Muslim nation as it was before." The Sunni jihadists of IS consider Shiite Iran to be apostates, and Tehran is deeply involved in fighting the group in both Syria and Iraq. Trump's comments brought criticism from Iranians on social media,

who recalled their government's offers of support and the candlelight vigils held in Iran after the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States. "Iranians lit candles for you on 9/11." You kick them while they're down. Classy," tweeted Ali Ghezalbash, an Iranian business analyst. The US president has long accused Iran of backing terrorism and has threatened to tear up a 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and major powers. Trump's statement is "counter-productive and further narrows the opportunity for engagement between the US and Iran on countering a common enemy," said Ellie Geranmayeh, senior fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations. (AFP)

Trump feels 'totally vindicated' by Comey's statement

WASHINGTON, JUNE 8 /--/ US President Donald Trump feels "completely and totally vindicated" by the testimony of fired FBI director James Comey who alleged that he was asked by him to drop the probe against former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, according to his private lawyer. Comey's seven-page written testimony, released on Monday, opened statements during his Congressional hearing on Monday was released a day ahead by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. In the testimony, Comey alleged that Trump asked him for a pledge of loyalty and told him to drop an inquiry into Flynn. Comey also said that he informed Trump that he was not under FBI investigation. "The President feels completely and totally vindicated," Marc Kasowitz, an attorney representing Trump in the special counsel probe into Russia's interference in the 2016 election, said in a statement.

"He is eager to move forward with his agenda," he said. Comey, who was fired by Trump last month, dropped the bombshell by his statement which many experts say could be seen as obstruction to justice. According to Comey, Trump also made a long series of comments about the problem with leaks of classified information. Comey recounted a January 27 private dinner in the White House Green Room with the president. "I need loyalty, I expect loyalty," Comey quoted Trump as saying. Comey continued: "I didn't move, speak, or change my facial expression in any way during the awkward silence that followed. I simply looked at each other in silence." Comey states that Trump asked him on several occasions to publicly state that he was not under investigation.

But Comey also confirmed in his statement that he told Trump he was not under investigation, as Trump asserted in his letter to Comey explaining his firing. Comey said that he considered Trump's request on Flynn "very concerning, given the FBI's role as an independent investigative agency" but decided to keep it "very closely held." "The FBI leadership team agreed with me that it was important not to infect the investigative team with the President's request, which we did not intend to abide," Comey wrote. "We also concluded that, given that it was a one-on-one conversation, there was nothing available to corroborate my account. (PTI)

Sikhs refused theme park entry in UK because of kirpan

LONDON, JUNE 8 /--/ A Sikh children's group was denied entry into a UK theme park after an elder accompanying them refused to remove the kirpan, an article of faith for the Sikhs, prompting accusations of religious discrimination. Staffordshire-based Drayton Manor Theme Park, popular with Coventry and Warwickshire families, denied entry to the children's birthday party after the adult refused to remove the small Sikh ceremonial dagger. A friend of the man described herself as "disgusted" and "saddened" at the reaction of staff and accused the Staffordshire attraction of religious discrimination. The party, who had spent hundreds of pounds on tickets for a six-year-old's birthday, encountered problems over the kirpan worn by the primary school teacher who is from a respected family in Coventry, the Birmingham Mail reported.



The group was left disappointed last Friday after being told that the kirpan would not be allowed in the park for health and safety reasons. The families' case has been picked up by the Sikh Press Association, which is seeking discussions with Drayton Manor to resolve the issue. "In this day and age where the kirpan can be taken into Parliament, it is disappointing to see an amusement park ban this article of faith from their grounds," the association's spokesman said. "After recent events which have made public news, people across the UK have seen what the Sikh community stands for. We were shocked to be treated in the way we were by Drayton Manor and it is something the Sikh

community as a whole was surprised at," he said. A spokeswoman for the attraction said, the Drayton Manor Park is a family run business which operates within a multi-cultural society enriched with different creeds and beliefs and its staff welcome and embrace this. Kirpans have not been allowed to be worn in the park for a number of years as they pose a health and safety risk to members of the public." "To this end, Drayton Manor Park offers an alternative to the Sikh Community which has been acceptable—a necklace worn next to their skin in exchange for the kirpan, which is handed over for safe keeping for the duration of their visit," she said. "It is regrettable that a group of Sikh visitors who came to the park on Friday 2nd June declined to take up the offer of the alternative to their kirpans and they were therefore denied access to the park," she added. (PTI)

Trump condemns terror attack in Iran

WASHINGTON, JUNE 8 /--/ US President Donald Trump today condemned the terror attack in Iran which killed 13 people and injured several others and said the country is "falling victim" to the "evil" it promotes. "We grieve and pray for the innocent victims of the terrorist attacks in Iran, and for the Iranian people, who are going through such challenging times," Trump said in a statement. "We underscore that states that sponsor terrorism risk falling victim to the evil they promote," he said. In a separate statement, State Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert, condemned the terror attacks in Tehran. "We express our condolences to the victims and their families, and send our thoughts and prayers to the people of Iran. The depravity of terrorism has no place in a peaceful, civilised world," she said. (PTI)

Diarrhoea, dengue starting to spiral out of control in Lanka: UN

UNITED NATIONS, JUNE 8 /--/ UN agencies have warned that diarrhoea and dengue are starting to "spiral out of control" in Sri Lanka after the worst flood in over a decade hit the country, killing 224 people. Heavy flooding, landslides and flash floods caused by Tropical Cyclone Mora in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and torrential monsoon rains have affected some 684,000 people in south and central Sri Lanka. The flooding, which is believed to be the worst in over a decade, has left at least 224 people dead and 79 missing. "So far we have delivered water and sanitation supplies, we are working on health education supplies,

strengthening health systems and rehabilitating basic health services and working on disease control for both diarrhoea and dengue which is starting to spiral out of control," said UNICEF country director Susan Sutton. He said flood waters have not receded in the southern district of Matara, raising fears of dengue and other disease transmission. He noted that so far this year there have already been more than 53,000 cases of dengue, a mosquito-borne tropical disease, which causes severe flu-like symptoms. It is a leading cause of death among children and adults in Sri

Lanka. Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Centre (DMC) estimates that over 2,500 houses were destroyed and nearly 15,900 damaged. These numbers could rise when data from damage assessments is compiled in the coming weeks. The United Nations Organisation for Migration (IOM) plans to provide 3,700 shelter repair kits, 5,000 non-food relief item kits and 250 temporary shelters, with funding sought from the UN Central Emergency Response Fund. The UN migration agency in a statement. The intervention will help an estimated 74,750 people. Nearly 22,000 people are still sheltering in over

200 overcrowded sites, including schools, temples and churches, the agency said. In flood-affected areas, people are expected to return to their homes as the water levels recede. But in landslide-affected areas, people are expected to return to evacuation centres or with relatives and friends are unlikely to be able to return to their homes in the coming days. "There will likely be a need to track displacement, return, and site closure. People will need shelter and other non-food relief items (when they leave the sites) and we will need to ensure that aid is distributed at the location most useful and appropriate for each

affected family," said IOM Sri Lanka Chief of Mission Giuseppe Crocetti. Last week, the UN Humanitarian Country Team launched an emergency response plan seeking USD 22.7 million to address the critical life-saving and protection needs of 374,000 people in seven districts, targeting four priority sectors, including shelter, food, health and water and sanitation. IOM will co-lead the emergency shelter and non-food item sector, which is appealing for USD 8.5 million. Meanwhile, the UN Children's Fund is calling for USD 3.5 million to keep vulnerable children safe. (PTI)

Russia denies reports of hacking Qatar's state news agency

MOSCOW, JUNE 8 /--/ Russian officials today angrily rejected allegations that Russian hackers breached Qatar's state news agency and planted a fake news story that led to split between Qatar and the other Arab nations. Dmitry Peskov, spokesman for President Vladimir Putin, today dismissed yesterday's CNN report containing the claim as "yet another fake, another lie." Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen cut diplomatic ties with the tiny Gulf state, accusing Qatar of harbouring extremists and backing Saudi Arabia's regional rival, Iran. Qatar has denied the allegations. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov also dismissed CNN's report yesterday, saying it "further undermined its reputation as an independent and objective media outlet." CNN said some other media sit and wait for any kind of scandal ... to automatically and without any evidence blame it on Russia or Russian hackers," he said at a news conference following his talks with Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Maria Gaitanaru. Tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia —a Middle East heavyweight—bubbled to the surface two weeks ago when Qatar said its state-run news agency and its Twitter account were hacked to publish a fake story claiming the Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, had called Iran "a regional and Islamic power that cannot be ignored."

State-linked media in the region ignored Qatar's denial and continued to report the comments. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt blocked access to Al Jazeera and launched an aggressive media campaign accusing Qatar of supporting terrorism groups like al-Qaida and the Islamic State, destabilising the region and stabbing its allies in the back. Putin had a telephone conversation with the Emir of Qatar yesterday, urging dialogue. Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, said the allegations of Russian hacking weren't discussed. Lavrov emphasised that "it's important to settle any differences at a negotiating table to ease concerns that emerged and pool efforts in the fight against the main regional threat, terrorism." Andrei Krutskikh, the Russian president's special envoy for cybersecurity, told the Reuters news agency that Tuesday's CNN report contains "zero evidence" that the Russian government was behind the news story Vladimir Dzhavarov, deputy chairman of the foreign affairs committee at the upper chamber of parliament, today dismissed the accusations as "an attempt to push the US against Russia as key players in the Middle East." "The world has gone crazy," Dzhavarov said. "Whatever happens, there is a Russian trace there, the trace of Russian hackers. (Agencies)

Polling opens in UK general election amid tight security

LONDON, JUNE 8 /--/ Millions of people across Britain voted today in one of the most contested general elections between Prime Minister Theresa May and Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn being held under tight security after two deadly terror attacks by Islamists killed 30 people. Voting was under way at more than 40,000 polling stations across the country. A total of 650 MPs will be elected. About 46.8 million people, including an estimated 1.5 million Indian-origin voters are registered to vote. A majority in the House of Commons, one party must win 326 seats. Polls close at 10 pm UK time (2.30 am IST). May, 60, called the election three years earlier than scheduled ahead of what are expected to be tough negotiations with the European Union over Britain's exit from the 28-member bloc.

Britain last voted in a general election in 2015, when then Prime Minister David Cameron won a majority with 361 MPs for the Conservative party. Since then the referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union (EU) in June 2016 has meant a very different political landscape. Brexit led to Cameron's resignation last year and May's selection by the Tories as their leader. The ongoing voting is the fourth major UK poll in three years, following the 2016 Scottish independence referendum, the 2015 general election, and the 2016 Brexit vote. Police have increased security at polling stations, including patrols by armed officers in some areas, following the recent terror attacks. A spokesperson for the UK's National Counter Terrorism Policing headquarters has said security around polling stations is "constantly reviewed and updated by local police forces."

There were two major terror attacks during the election campaign: a suicide bombing in Manchester on May 22 that claimed 22 lives and an attack by three terrorists who drove into pedestrians and then went on a stabbing spree in London Bridge, killing eight people, before being shot dead. "The Islamic State terror group has claimed responsibility for the attacks and warned of more attacks. Political parties had called a halt to campaigning both times but Prime Minister May had said that terrorism must not be allowed to derail the democratic process. May had decided to overturn the UK's Fixed Term Parliament Act, which would have seen an election being held after a fixed five-year term in 2020 and called a snap general election back in April with the aim of winning a strong mandate for Brexit negotiations.

The first results in today's poll are expected to pour in before midnight local time with the final results declared by tomorrow afternoon. The shape the new government is likely to take is expected to emerge after midnight, with a steady trickle of results until about 2 am when declarations should start to come in from across the UK. The main wave of results is expected to start at about 3 am with the overall picture likely to be clear by about 5 am on Friday. The leader of the winning party traditionally waits for the leader of the losing party to concede defeat before claiming victory. Many of the votes have already been cast through postal voting, which accounts for 16.5 per cent of the electorate at the 2015 general election. Overall turnout in 2015 was 66.4 per cent, up from 2010. Counting will begin immediately after the polls close, with each vote counted and checked by hand.

The weeks which play a major role in determining the turnout, is forecast for some rain in south-west England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales on Thursday, with south-east England remaining cloudy and dry. The odds seem to be in favour of May holding on to her job as the British Prime Minister who called for snap polls 32 days ago. It remains to be seen if the Conservative party leader's decision to call a snap general election follows the forecast patterns of the latest opinion polls and betting odds or the Jeremy Corbyn-led Labour party is able to make a dent into her slim majority in the House of Commons. Corbyn has focussed on his party's promise to spend more on health and education. "Never before has there been a clearer choice between the parties... a choice quite simply between ruling and being," he said. According to poll forecast, May's ruling Conservatives are believed to have a narrow edge over the Corbyn-led Opposition Labour Party. (PTI)