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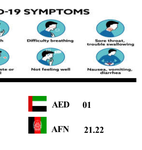

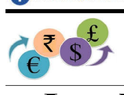

USD	01	GBP	01	INR	1000	PKR	1000	EUR	01	IRR	1000	AED	01
AFN	78.24	AFN	109.35	AFN	1076	AFN	501	AFN	95.51	AFN	0.37	AFN	21.22

Israeli far-right leader Bennett joins anti-Netanyahu coalition

Israeli far-right politician Naftali Bennett, a kingmaker whose Yamina party has six key seats in parliament, has said he would join a governing coalition that could end the rule of the country's longest-serving leader, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

"It's my intention to do my utmost in order to form a national unity government along with my friend Yair Lapid, so that, God willing, together we can save the country from a tailspin and return Israel to its course," Bennett said on Sunday after meeting with his own party, Yamina.

Centrist Lapid has been tasked with forming a new cabinet by 11:59pm (20:59 GMT) Wednesday.

Bennett's announcement is a key step towards ending Netanyahu's 12-year rule.

He said he had made the decision to prevent the country from sliding into a fifth consecutive election in just more than two years.

Minutes after Bennett's announcement, Netanyahu lashed out, calling the plan "a danger for the security of Israel".

He accused Bennett of betraying the Israeli right-wing and urged nationalist politicians who have joined the coalition talks not to establish what he called a "leftist government".

Bennett, a Netanyahu aide-turned-rival, said there was no feasible way for the right-wing to form a governing majority in parliament.

"A government like this will succeed only if we work together as a group," he said, adding that everyone "will need to postpone fulfilling all their dreams. We will focus on what can be done, instead of fighting all day on what's impossible".

Each of the past four elections was seen as a referendum on Netanyahu – who has become a polarising figure as he stands trial on corruption charges – with each ending in deadlock.

An anti-Netanyahu alliance would be fragile and require outside backing by Palestinian-Israeli members of parliament who oppose much of Bennett's agenda, which includes more settlement expansion in the occupied West Bank, as well as its partial annexation.

It would be expected to focus on the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, while setting aside issues on which members disagree, such as the role of religion in society and Palestinian aspirations for statehood.

Netanyahu said such a coalition was a danger to Israel's security and future.

"What will it do for Israel's deterrence? How will we look in the eyes of our enemies," he said. "What will they do in Iran and in Gaza? What will they say in the halls of government in Washington?"

A Bennett-Lapid agreement had already been reported to be close when violence broke out between Israel and Hamas fighters on May 10 and Bennett suspended the discussions. The fighting ended with a ceasefire after 11 days.

A Palestine Liberation Organization official said, after Bennett's speech, that the prospective government would be "extreme rightist" and no different than the administrations headed by Netanyahu. **aljazeera**

Cigarettes, vaping on the rise among teens in the UAE and Middle East: Experts

A rising number of youngsters across the United Arab Emirates and wider Middle East are smoking cigarettes or becoming hooked on 'tobacco gateway' products such as e-cigarettes and vapes, experts said.

Doctors across the Emirates are warning of the harmful nature of tobacco products as World Health Organization renews its call for greater protection for young people against taking up smoking and e-cigarettes on World No Tobacco Day which is marked every year on May 31.

An ongoing WHO campaign aims to provide a counter-marketing message to give young people the facts about tobacco and e-cigarettes.

Dr Amr Hassan, a consultant hematologist and medical oncologist at Burjeel Specialty Hospital, Sharjah, in the UAE, told Al Arabiya English that while worldwide consumption of tobacco is on the decline due to global anti-smoking campaigns, the same cannot be said for the UAE and wider Middle East.

"Tobacco and cigarettes use in the world has been globally reduced primarily because certain countries like the USA has been successful in reducing the use of tobacco and tobacco products as much as possible," he said. "But unfortunately, in certain parts of the world like the Middle East and the UAE, the use of tobacco products has been on the rise, particularly among young adults and teenagers."

He said this is particularly true for as e-cigarettes and vaping products, which he said is often considered a gateway to smoking cigarettes – a theory backed by numerous studies worldwide.

"Tobacco products like hookah or shisha use, electronic cigarettes use, and vaping have been on the steep slope upward with a significant rise among young adults and teenagers," said the doctor.

He said teens were more likely to try due to the belief that vaping reduces the harm caused by smoking traditional tobacco. However vaping and e-cigarettes carry numerous harmful side-effects.

"Tremendous efforts have been implemented by health organizations around the world and different countries to attempt to decrease the rise in using these tobacco products and protect the population of the world from all the harms associated with tobacco use."

"The concern is that tobacco-like products like vaping and hookah/shisha carry more negative health ramifications even more than cigarette use by far. It carries more risk for lung tissue damage and a higher risk for developing lung malignancies and other malignancies associated with tobacco use."

He said more effort is needed across the region to tackle this steep rise in the usage of tobacco products.

"These might include awareness programs, teaching webinars about the harms of tobacco and the tobacco-like products, robust marketing campaigns to highlight the harms of tobacco use, and programs to raise awareness about not only health care issues related to tobacco use but the economic and financial burden associated with tobacco use."

Dr Fouad Al Rahal, a specialist in emergency medicine at Bareen International Hospital in MBZ City, agreed.

"Many are aware of the harmful effects of tobacco and smoking," he said. "It is the leading cause for many diseases like cancer, heart and lung diseases and diabetes."

"It also weakens your immune system, leaving you susceptible to many other immune diseases.

"Unfortunately, many teenagers continue to smoke cigarettes and shisha which are dangerous and harmful. This can be attributed to peer pressure, lack of awareness on the dangers of smoking, among others. Students and families must be made aware through social media about the dangerous effects of smoking and how we can curb this dangerous habit."

Doctors have also warned that studies have shown smokers are more likely to suffer severe complications from COVID-19.

Researchers from the Cleveland Clinic looked at more than 7,000 people with COVID-19 and the results showed that people who smoke have a higher risk of hospitalization and death from the virus.

Heavy smokers, categorized as people who smoked one pack of cigarettes per day for more than 30 years, had the highest risk. This group was nearly two-and-a-half times more likely to be hospitalized, and the risk of death was nearly twice as likely compared to people who never smoked.

"We saw that the more an individual smokes, the more likely that person is going to be hospitalized when he, or she, gets infected with COVID," said Dr Joe Zein, a respiratory specialist who led the research.

The World Health Organization has also launched a year-long campaign to get 100 million people tobacco-free as it revealed millions of smokers now want to kick the habit amid health concerns over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The WHO's "Commit to Quit" campaign aims to help people stop smoking through creating "communities of quitters," a statement from the organization said.

The WHO says smokers have a higher risk of contracting coronavirus because they are constantly putting their hands to their lips. And then, if they have coronavirus, they run a greater risk of their case being severe because their lung function is damaged.

WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said smokers have up to a 50 per cent higher risk of developing severe disease and death from COVID-19.

"So quitting is best thing smokers can do to lower their risk from this coronavirus, as well as the risk of developing cancers, heart disease and respiratory illnesses."

"We urge all countries to play their part by joining the WHO campaign and creating tobacco-free environments that give people the information, support and tools they need to quit, and quit for good." **alarabiya**

Saudi Arabia administered over 13.9 mln COVID-19 vaccine doses so far: Official

More than 13.9 million coronavirus vaccine doses have been administered in 587 inoculation centers across Saudi Arabia, an official said on Sunday.

At least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine was given to 40 percent of the Kingdom's population since the start of the vaccination campaign, the Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health for Preventive Health and Consultant in Contagious Diseases, Dr. Abdullah Asiri, said on his Twitter account.

"Forty out of every 100 people in the Kingdom have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccines to date," he said.

Saudi Arabia launched its national coronavirus vaccination drive on Dec. 17 after the Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

Since then, the AstraZeneca-Oxford's COVID-19 vaccine has also been approved.

The first phase of the campaign was only open to people over the age of 65, those who suffer from chronic disease, and those who work on the frontlines of the pandemic.

However, when the second phase of the drive began on Feb. 18, all citizens and expatriates became eligible to receive shots for free.

Health officials hope to successfully complete the vaccination campaign by the end of 2021.

Dozens kidnapped from Islamic school in northern Nigeria

An armed gang abducted dozens of students from an Islamic school in the northcentral Nigerian state of Niger on Sunday, police and state government officials said.

Some 200 children were at the school at the time of Sunday's attack, the Niger state government said on Twitter, adding that "an unconfirmed number" had been taken.

The abduction came a day after 14 students from a university in northwestern Nigeria were freed, having spent 40 days in captivity.

A spokesman for Niger state's police said in a statement that gunmen on motorcycles attacked the town of Tegina, in the Rafi local government area of the state, at approximately 3pm (14:00 GMT) on Sunday.

He said the attackers were "shooting indiscriminately and abducted a yet to be ascertained number of children at Salihu Tanko Islamic school". One person was shot dead during the attack and a second person was seriously injured, the state governor's spokeswoman said.

Armed groups carrying out kidnapping for ransom have been blamed for a series of raids on schools and universities in northern Nigeria in recent months, abducting more than 700 students for ransom since December.

The school's owner, Abubakar Tegina, told the Reuters news agency in a phone interview that he witnessed the attack.

"I personally saw between 20 and 25 motorcycles with heavily armed people.

They entered the school and went away with about 150 or more of the students," said Tegina, who lives approximately 150 metres (about 500 feet) from the school.

"We can't be exact because most of them have not reported to the school as at that time," he said, when asked for further details of the number taken.

Tegina said there are approximately 300 pupils aged between seven and 15.

He said pupils live at home and only attend classes at the site.

One of the school's officials, who asked not to be named, told the AFP news agency that the attackers initially took more than 100 children "but later sent back those they considered too small for them, those between four and 12 years old".

The state government, in a series of tweets, said the attackers had released 11 of the pupils who were "too small and couldn't walk" very far.

Most students kidnapped in recent months have been taken from boarding schools.

Armed gangs have been terrorising people in northwest and central Nigeria by looting villages, stealing cattle, and kidnapping people for ransom.

On April 20, gunmen known locally as "bandits" stormed Greenfield University in northwestern Nigeria and kidnapped about 20 students, killing a member of staff in the process.

Five students were executed a few days later to force families and the government to pay a ransom, and some 14 students were released on Saturday.

Local press said that the families had paid a ransom totalling 180 million naira ($440,000) for their release.

The criminal gangs maintain camps in the Rugu forest which straddles Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states.

Egypt's FM urges Israel to refrain from actions that lead to escalation

Egypt's foreign minister in a meeting with his Israeli counterpart on Sunday stressed the need to refrain from all practices that lead to escalation, especially in the Palestinian territories, the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Sameh Shoukry told visiting counterpart Gabi Ashkenazi that Israel has to take into account the special sensitivity associated with East Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa Mosque and all Islamic and Christian holy sites, the statement added.

It was the first public visit by an Israeli foreign minister to Egypt since 2008, the Israeli Embassy in Cairo said. It wrote that the two ministers would discuss topics including the cease-fire and the release of Israeli soldiers and citizens being held by Hamas.

"We will discuss establishing a permanent ceasefire with #Hamas, a mechanism for providing humanitarian aid & the reconstruction of #Gaza with a pivotal role played by the intl. community," Ashkenazi tweeted upon arrival in Cairo. Hamas is holding the remains of two Israeli soldiers killed in a 2014 war. It also is holding two Israeli civilians who were captured after entering Gaza. As part of the ceasefire efforts, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu hosted Abbas Kamel, Egypt's intelligence chief, in Jerusalem. Netanyahu said he had raised the issue of returning the remains of soldiers and the two civilians as well as Israeli demands to prevent Hamas from gaining strength or diverting resources meant for the civilian population.

NSA spying row: Denmark helped US gather data on European officials, says report

Denmark's secret service helped the US spy on European politicians including German Chancellor Angela Merkel from 2012 to 2014, Danish media report.

The Defence Intelligence Service (FE) collaborated with the US National Security Agency (NSA) to gather information, according to a report by Danish broadcaster Danmarks Radio.

Then, secrets leaked by US whistleblower Edward Snowden alleged tapping of the German chancellor's phone by the NSA.

When those allegations were made, the White House gave no outright denial, but said Mrs Merkel's phone was not being bugged at the time and would not be in future.

In a new report shared with several European news agencies, the NSA is said to have accessed text messages and the phone conversations of a number of prominent individuals by tapping in to Danish internet cables in co-operation with the FE.

The alleged set-up, said in the report to have been codenamed "Operation Dunhammer", allowed the NSA to obtain data using the telephone numbers of politicians as search parameters, according to Danmarks Radio.

The report follows an investigation by the broadcaster involving interviews with nine sources, all of whom were said to have had access to classified information held by the FE.

Along with Mrs Merkel, then-German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and opposition leader at the time Peer Steinbruck were also said to have been targeted.

Denmark's Defence Minister Trine Bramsen, who had reportedly been earlier informed of the espionage, told Danmarks Radio that "systematic wiretapping of close allies is unacceptable".

Neither the FE nor the NSA have yet commented on the latest reports.

Following news of the report on Sunday, Mr Snowden accused US President Joe Biden of being "deeply involved in this scandal the first time around". Mr Biden was US vice-president at the time the reported surveillance took place.

"There should be an explicit requirement for full public disclosure not only from Denmark, but their senior partner as well," he tweeted.

In 2013, Mr Snowden - a former contractor for the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) - leaked to the media details of extensive internet and phone surveillance by US intelligence. **bbc**