

Morocco inaugurates Africa's fastest train

Author:

Reuters

ID:

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Thu, 2018-11-15 15:53

RABAT: Morocco inaugurated on Thursday Africa's fastest train which will halve traveling time between the commercial and industrial hubs of Casablanca and Tangier.

After seven years of work on the high-speed railway line, King Mohammed VI and French President Emmanuel Macron boarded the train for the inaugural trip from Tangier to the capital Rabat.

The train, which was tested at a speed of 357 km (222 miles) per hour and is planned to run at 320 km (198 miles) per hour, will more than halve the 200 km (124 miles) Casablanca-Tangier journey to around two hours. It is about twice as fast as South Africa's high-speed Gautrain linking Johannesburg's international airport to the city's financial district Sandton.

Alstom at the heart of the Tangier-Casablanca high-speed line's inauguration in [#Morocco https://t.co/gaTGeCiuIZ](https://t.co/gaTGeCiuIZ)
pic.twitter.com/NpkTn8zyHH

– Alstom (@Alstom) [November 15, 2018](#)

The high-speed line was completed at a total cost of 22.9 billion dirhams (\$2.4 billion), according to state news agency MAP. Transport officials were not immediately available for comment. 51 percent of the project was financed by France, Morocco contributed 28 percent and the remaining 21 percent was provided by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Morocco bought 12 double-decker high-speed-trains from French group Alstom that will be operated by state-owned railway ONCF which expects six million passengers on the new train service annually.

The king named the first line Al Boraq after a mythical winged creature that transported the prophets to the heavens. While the Moroccan government and businesses praised the project as a key achievement in developing the country's infrastructure, the line has sparked controversy for its high cost. Critics say that Morocco should be investing in education and health instead.

Officials have said the project will boost growth in Tangier and help attract more investments to northern Morocco where one of Africa's largest ports is located.

But critics perceive the project as symbolising a two-speed Morocco further accentuating disparities between territories as vast regions in the south and key cities such as Agadir remain without a basic train service.

A train derailment last month near Kenitra 15 km (10 miles) north of Rabat, which killed seven people and injured 125 others, triggered calls for a better allocation of resources by giving priority to improving safety and infrastructure as well as punctuality of basic railway services.









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Morocco imposes online entry permit rule for African travelers
Populists battle over Italy-France train project

[UN Palestinian agency says overcoming Trump funding cuts](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

1542295715452347200

Thu, 2018-11-15 15:24

GENEVA: The United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees has nearly

overcome a crippling funding crisis caused by President Donald Trump canceling the US aid contribution, agency chief Pierre Kraehenbuehl said Thursday.

The organization, known as UNRWA, had counted on a budget of \$1.2 billion (1 billion euros) for 2018 but faced a gap of \$446 million when the Trump administration announced it was cutting support.

UNRWA responded to its "unprecedented" financial pressures by seeking support across UN member-states and raised an additional \$382 million, bringing the shortfall for the year down to just \$64 million, Kraehenbuehl told reporters in Geneva.

He said he hoped the gap could still be trimmed further in the coming weeks. "I'll be very honest in saying, I don't think many people believed that we would be able to overcome a \$446 million shortfall at the beginning of the year," said Kraehenbuehl, who took charge of UNRWA in 2014.

He credited the European Union and especially four Gulf countries with increasing support.

Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates upped their support to \$50 million each to offset Trump's cuts, the UNRWA chief said.

The agency's 2019 budget has not been finalized, but Kraehenbuehl stressed it was important "to preserve those new levels of funding."

The United States had previously been UNRWA's largest contributor.

But the Trump administration as well as Israel say they oppose the way the organization operates and how it calculates the number of Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA was set up in 1950 to help Palestinian refugees who lost their homes because of the 1948 Middle East conflict. Its assistance includes schools, health care centers and food distribution.

More than 750,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled during the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

They and all their descendants are deemed by the UN agency to be refugees who fall under its remit.



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[UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees \(UNRWA\)](#)

[Donald Trump](#)

[cuts](#)

UNRWA concerned over plan to shut its East Jerusalem operation UNRWA seeking more funds from Gulf, Europe after US cuts

[Egypt, 5 Arab nations in live ammunition military drills](#)

Author:

Associated Press

ID:

1542291077591926300

Thu, 2018-11-15 (All day)

MARSA MATROUH, EGYPT: Military units from Egypt and five other Arab nations have conducted war drills with live ammunition in the Egyptian desert west of Cairo.

Thursday's drills were held in the western desert around the "Mohammed

Naguib” military base near the coastal Mediterranean city of Marsa Matrouh. The drills, codenamed “Arab Shield,” bring together ground, naval and air units from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait. They are scheduled to end Friday.

Thursday’s drills involved target practice by rocket launchers, tanks and fighter-jets.

Egypt has been holding separate drills with each of these five Arab nations in recent years, but Arab Shield marked the first time that all six allies simultaneously participated in war games.





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Jordan aims to import a third of its gas from Egypt
Saudi forces to take part in 'Arab Shield-1' drill

[Palestinian killed in Gaza despite Hamas-Israel cease-fire](#)

Author:

Wed, 2018-11-14 23:43

JERUSALEM: A Palestinian was killed by Israeli fire along the shore of the northern Gaza Strip on Wednesday despite an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire

after the worst escalation between Israel and Hamas since a 2014 war.

The man killed was identified as Nawaf Al-Aatar, 20, and a Gazan security source said he was fishing at the time near the border fence. An Israeli military spokesman said they were looking into the incident.

The truce may have halted violence but the political situation remained volatile and the deal provoked sharp disagreement within the Israeli government.

Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman on Wednesday announced his resignation and called for early elections throwing the government into turmoil.

Lieberman also said his party was quitting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition, leaving the premier with only a one-seat majority in Parliament.

Elections are not due until November 2019, but Lieberman's resignation increases the likelihood of an earlier vote.

The party of another Netanyahu rival, Naftali Bennett, has already announced that if he is not appointed defense minister it will also quit the coalition – a move that would trigger early elections.

Given Bennett's sometimes rocky relationship with Netanyahu, it is far from certain he will be given the powerful defense post. Yair Lapid, head of the opposition Yesh Atid Party, said "the countdown has begun" to the end of Netanyahu's term in office.

The agreement also led to protests by several hundred Israelis living near the border with Gaza who called for further action against Hamas.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not comment in detail on the agreement, but defended his strategy and said: "Our enemies begged for a cease-fire.

"In times of emergency, when making decisions crucial to security, the public can't always be privy to the considerations that must be hidden from the enemy," he said at a ceremony on Wednesday morning in honor of Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion.

Hamas portrayed the cease-fire as a victory and thousands of residents of the blockaded enclave took to the streets late Tuesday to celebrate.

"The resistance has defended itself and defended its people against Israeli aggression," Hamas leader Ismail Haniya said.

The truce was announced by Gaza militant groups, including Hamas, on Tuesday.

Hamas said it would abide by the deal, which the UN also helped broker, as long as Israel did the same.

A diplomatic source familiar with the agreement said it involved returning to arrangements put in place following the 2014 war, but warned: "The situation remains very precarious and can blow up again.

"What we have seen in the past 48 hours was very dangerous and no efforts should be spared to avoid similar flare-ups."

The violence saw seven Gazans killed in 24 hours as Israeli strikes targeted militants and flattened buildings, sending fireballs and plumes of smoke into the sky.

Sirens wailed in southern Israel, as militants unleashed barrages of rocket and mortar fire, sending residents rushing to shelters.

Around 460 rockets and mortar rounds were fired at Israel, the army said.

An anti-tank missile hit a bus near the Gaza border that Hamas says was being used by Israel's army. An Israeli soldier was severely wounded.

In all, some 27 Israelis were wounded, three of them severely.

A Palestinian laborer from the occupied West Bank was killed when a rocket hit a building in the Israeli city of Ashkelon.

The violence began on Sunday with a botched Israeli special forces operation inside the Gaza Strip that turned deadly and prompted Hamas to vow revenge.

The clash that resulted from the blown operation killed seven Palestinian militants, including a local Hamas military commander, as well as an Israeli army officer.

Militants responded with the rocket barrages and anti-tank missile, prompting Israeli airstrikes across Gaza.

The Israeli army said it struck some 160 targets, including Hamas' Al-Aqsa TV station and internal security headquarters in Gaza City.

At least five of the dead in Gaza were claimed as members of various militant groups. Some 26 people were wounded, according to territory's Health Ministry.

The escalation came despite Netanyahu's decision to allow Qatar to transfer millions of dollars in aid to Gaza for salaries as well as fuel to ease a chronic electricity shortage.

The agreements had led to calmer protests along the border after months of deadly unrest.

Sunday's special forces operation and resulting clash upset those efforts, leading to questions over the timing of the covert Israeli move.

Israel said it was an intelligence-gathering operation and that those efforts must continue to defend the country.

Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza have fought three wars since 2008, and protests and clashes along the Gaza border since March 30 have repeatedly raised fears of a fourth.

At least 234 Palestinians in Gaza have since been killed by Israeli fire, the majority during protests and clashes.

Two Israeli soldiers have been killed over the same period.



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Netanyahu defends Gaza ceasefire after Israeli criticism
Israel defense minister Lieberman resigns over Gaza ceasefire

[Lebanon's Christian rivals shake hands after decades of hostility](#)

Wed, 2018-11-14 21:39

BEIRUT: Christian rivals from the Lebanese civil war, Samir Geagea and Suleiman Frangieh, shook hands with each other on Wednesday, marking a formal reconciliation to end more than four decades of enmity.

Geagea, leader of the Lebanese Forces (LF) political party, and Frangieh, head of the Marada party, have been foes since the early days of the 1975-1990 civil war.

The two parties had armed militias during the conflict that battled against each other. The war, which drew in regional powers, included fighting between the country's main sects and rival factions within those sects.

[#صفحة_جديدة@sleimanfrangieh pic.twitter.com/sL0Fod0dxY](https://twitter.com/sL0Fod0dxY)

– SAMIR GEAGEA (@DRSAMIRGEAGEA) [November 14, 2018](#)

The men, both Maronite Christians, met to reconcile at the seat of the sect's Patriarch Bechara Al-Rai in Bkerki, north of Beirut. They shook hands with Rai and then with each other after several failed reconciliation attempts over the years.

Geagea has been accused of leading a raid in 1978 on the home of Frangieh's father, Tony Franjeh, a rival Maronite Christian chieftain, who was killed with his wife, daughter and others. Geagea has said he was wounded before reaching Frangieh's house, and did not take part himself.

This is the second rapprochement of recent years between civil war Maronite Christian rivals.

In January 2016 Geagea endorsed then presidential candidate Michel Aoun for the Lebanese presidency, ending his own rival candidacy for the position, which must be held by a Maronite Christian under Lebanon's sectarian power sharing system.

Geagea and Aoun, who fought each other in the 1975-90 civil war, have been on opposite sides of the political divide since Syrian forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2005.

President Aoun is a political ally of the Iran-backed Shiite group Hezbollah, whereas Geagea is a staunch opponent of the group. Frangieh is a close ally of Syrian President and Hezbollah ally Bashar Assad.

Tony Frangieh, Suleiman's son, said the reconciliation was a good thing for all Lebanese and was not connected to any presidential aims.

"We are looking forward to the future by achieving this reconciliation," he told Lebanese broadcaster Al-Jadeed at the ceremony.



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Hezbollah 'blocking formation of Lebanon government' Lebanon to form body to probe civil war disappearances