

US ambassador blasts Iran

Iran asks UN to hold US accountable for plane interception

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 9, (AP): Iran is urging the United Nations to hold the United States accountable for the interception of an Iranian passenger plane by two U.S. fighter jets in the skies over Syria last month, which it called an "unlawful" and an "adventurist act."

Iran's U.N. ambassador, Majid Takht Ravanchi, said in identical letters to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the U.N. Security Council circulated Friday that Iran "expresses its strongest objections against this violation of international law and will pursue the issue through relevant international bodies."

Ravanchi said a Mahan Airlines Airbus A310 en route from Tehran to Beirut on July 23 "was aggressively and unexpectedly intercepted" by two U.S. F-15 fighter jets while traveling through internationally specified air corridors in Syria's airspace.

"In reaction to the offensive and hazardous maneuverings of the United States fighter jets and in order to save the civil aircraft and passengers' lives, the airliner had to change

altitude abruptly, causing injuries to the passengers onboard," the ambassador said.

U.S. Navy Capt. Bill Urban, a Central Command spokesman, told The Associated Press at the time of the incident that a U.S. F-15 "conducted a standard visual inspection" of the Iranian plane "at a safe distance of approximately 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) from the airliner."

He said the inspection was meant to ensure the safety of U.S. coalition troops in al-Tanf in Syria as the plane was flying over that area. He said once the aircraft was identified as a passenger plane, "the F-15 safely opened distance from the aircraft."

The Iranian ambassador said that in line with provisions of the Convention on International Civil Aviation, Iran's civil aviation organization contacted Syrian authorities and called for "a prompt and accurate investigation of the incident." He said Iranian authorities also launched an investigation after the plane returned from Beirut.

The results of both investigations will be released "after the revision and finalization of the collected data

and information" by both teams, Ravanchi said.

"It is obvious that the act by the United States fighter jets is a flagrant violation of the aviation security and freedom of civil aviation reflected in the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation and its relevant annexes as well as an infringement of the 1971 Montreal Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation," he said.

Ravanchi said: "It is incumbent upon the United Nations to reject such an unlawful and yet adventurist act and hold the United States accountable for this irresponsible behavior."

Meanwhile, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations called Iran "the world's number one sponsor of terrorism" on Thursday and warned Russia and China that they will become "co-sponsors" if they block a resolution to extend the U.N. arms embargo on Iran.

Ambassador Kelly Craft said the United States hopes Russia and China "will not be co-sponsors of the num-

ber one state that sponsors terrorism" and "will see the importance of peace in the Middle East."

But she said the partnership between Russia and China, not only on backing Iran, is very clear: "They're just going to be promoting chaos, conflict and mayhem outside their borders, so we have to just corner them."

Craft and Brian Hook, the top U.S. envoy for Iran, briefed a group of reporters following Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's announcement Wednesday that the United States will call for a Security Council vote next week on a U.S.-drafted resolution to extend indefinitely the arms embargo that is due to expire Oct. 18. Hook announced hours later he is stepping down from the post.

The foreign ministers of Russia and China in separate letters to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Security Council last month were sharply critical of the U.S. effort, and gave every indication they would veto the resolution if it gets the minimum nine "yes" votes in the 15-member council, which appears

unlikely.

If the vote fails, Pompeo suggested the U.S. would invoke the "snapback" mechanism that would restore all U.N. sanctions on Iran. Snapback was envisioned in the 2015 nuclear deal in the event Iran was proven to be in violation of the accord, under which it received billions of dollars in sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused the Trump administration of unleashing a politically motivated campaign against Iran and called for "universal condemnation" of the U.S. attempt to impose a permanent arms embargo on the Islamic Republic.

He said President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and six major powers and now has no legal right to try to use the U.N. resolution endorsing the deal to indefinitely continue the embargo.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said the arms embargo should be lifted Oct. 18. He also referred to the "snapback" provision, saying that

since the U.S. is no longer a party to the nuclear deal it "has no right to demand the Security Council to activate the rapid reinstatement of sanctions mechanism."

The vote on the U.S.-drafted resolution, which could come as early as Monday, and its expected defeat will set the stage for a potential crisis at the Security Council amid rising tensions in the Middle East and the U.S. determination to maintain the U.N. arms embargo.

The five remaining parties to the 2015 nuclear deal - Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany - are determined to maintain it, and are very concerned that extending the arms embargo would lead to Iran's exit from the agreement and its speed-up pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Hook, the U.S. envoy, said Iran has not been cooperating with the U.N. nuclear agency for a year and "there isn't some acceptable level of non-compliance that we will accept out of fear that they'll do something worse."

"That is by definition nuclear blackmail," he said. "We just don't follow that playbook."

News in Brief

RIYADH: The Saudi Health Ministry reported on Saturday that 37 patients succumbed to COVID-19 and 1,469 infections and 1,492 recovery cases in the last 24 hours.

The death toll rose to 2,130 and 287,262 confirmed cases, while 250,440 recovered from COVID-19, said ministry in a daily report. (KUNA)

DUBAI: Up to 239 people tested positive for the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) during past 24 hours raising caseload of contaminations with the contagion in the UAE to 62,300.

According to the local health department, 230 patients who suffered from contamination pandemic recovered putting whole count of those who were cured at 56,245. (KUNA)

MUSCAT: Up to 290 people were diagnosed with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), during past 24 hours, raising caseload of contaminations with the bug to 81,357 in the Sultanate of Oman.

Official Oman News Agency (OMNA) said in a statement on Saturday a total of 73,481 patients recovered, while death toll stood at 509. (KUNA)

MANAMA: A single patient infected with the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has fought for his life in vain and joined 158 others who could not resist infection with the deadly germ.

However, a total of 40,276 other patients have successfully made it and got cured of the infection with the contagion, Bahraini Ministry of Health said in a statement on Saturday. (KUNA)

BAGHDAD: Up to 74 people lost struggle for their lives after they got infected with the creeping bug, COVID-19, in Iraq during past 24 hours, the local health ministry reported.

The department reported 3,325 infection cases with the caseload growing to 147,389 since the contagion outbreak across the nation, including the Kurdistan region. (KUNA)

RAMALLAH: The Palestinian Health Ministry announced Saturday that six patients have passed away due to COVID-19 and 426 new infections in the past 24 hours.

The four death cases and 220 new COVID-19 cases were recorded in Jerusalem and two dead in Al-Khalil, increasing the death toll to 102 and 18,374 confirmed cases, the ministry added. (KUNA)

AMMAN: Jordan announced Saturday nine new COVID-19 cases, increasing the total to 1,246 confirmed cases.

Jordanian Premiership and Health Ministry said in a joint statement that it did not record any recovered cases, adding that the authorities conducted around 5,800 tests, bringing the total number of tests since the epidemic to 640,500. (KUNA)

ANKARA: Some 16 new patients succumbed to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) and 1,172 people tested positive for the virus in the past 24 hours, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Saturday.

The aforementioned figures raised the total death toll to 5,829 and the infections to 239,622, Turkey's Anadolu Agency quoted Koca in a press statement as saying. (KUNA)

TUNIS: Tunisian Health Ministry on Saturday reported 22 infections of COVID-19, taking the caseload to 1,678 and 51 deaths.

The Ministry indicated that it carried out 1,382 tests in the last 24 hours and recoveries are at 1,259 (KUNA)



An anti-government protester clashes with riot police officers during a protest against the political elites and the government after this week's deadly explosion at Beirut port which devastated large parts of the capital in Beirut, Lebanon on Aug 8. (Inset): Anti-government protesters shout slogans after they entered the Lebanese Foreign Ministry, during a protest. (AP)

Fury over Beirut blast fuels protests, clashes with police

Info minister quits over blast

BEIRUT, Aug 9, (AP): Public fury over this week's massive explosion in Beirut took a new turn Saturday night as protesters stormed government institutions and clashed for hours with security forces, who responded with heavy volleys of tear gas and rubber bullets.

Tehran indifferent

Trump's Iran envoy quits as US 'pushes embargo'

WASHINGTON, Aug 9, (AP): The Trump administration's top envoy for Iran is stepping down just as the United States tries to move ahead with a major diplomatic effort that would extend a UN arms embargo against Tehran in the face of widespread international opposition.

Brian Hook announced his departure on Thursday, a day after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US would call for a UN Security Council vote next week on a resolution to indefinitely extend the embargo, which is due to expire in October.

That resolution is expected to fail, setting the stage for a showdown between the US and the other Security Council members over the reimposition of all international sanctions on Iran. President Donald Trump withdrew the US from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal two years ago but his administration argues it retains the right to invoke the "snapback" of UN sanctions because it is a council member. Others disagree.

Hook did not give a reason for leaving, although he has young children and was frequently away from home on travel. He had just returned to the US from an extended trip to the Middle East and Europe during which he tried to drum up support for the Iran arms embargo extension.

Hook, 52, had given few people inside the administration advance notice that he intended to leave and on Wednesday had appeared at a session on Iran at the Aspen Security Forum. Last year, he had been criticized by the now-fired State Department inspector general for alleged political retaliation against a career diplomat on the policy planning staff. Hook denied the charges and was not reprimanded.

Pompeo said in a statement that Hook "has been my point person on Iran for over two years and he has achieved historic results." Hook will be replaced after an as-yet undetermined transition period by Abrams, a noted hawk on numerous policy issues who is the US special envoy for Venezuela. Abrams also will continue in his job as Venezuela envoy, Pompeo said.

Meanwhile, Iran's foreign ministry on Friday expressed indifference to the change in the Trump administration's top envoy for Iran, alleging that the new US official in the post would be no different from his predecessor.

The envoy, Brian Hook announced his departure on Thursday, a day after US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the US would call for a UN Security Council vote next week on a resolution to indefinitely extend the arms embargo on Iran, which is due to expire in October.

One police officer was killed and dozens of people hurt in the confrontations, which played out in streets that were wrecked from Tuesday's blast at the port that devastated much of the city and killed nearly 160 people. Dozens were still missing and nearly 6,000 people injured.

The disaster has taken popular anger to a new level in a country already reeling from an unprecedented economic and financial crisis and near bankruptcy.

Activists who called for the protest set up symbolic nooses at Beirut's Martyrs' Square to hang politicians whose corruption and negligence they blame for the explosion. The blast was fueled by thousands of tons of ammonium nitrate that had been improperly stored at the port for more than six years. Apparently set off by a fire, the explosion was by far the biggest in Lebanon's troubled history and caused an estimated \$10 billion to 15 billion in damage, according to Beirut's governor. It also damaged 6,200 buildings and left hundreds of thousands of people homeless.

"Resignation or hang," read a banner held by protesters, who also planned to hold a symbolic funeral for the dead. Some nooses were also set up along the bridges outside the port.

Khodr Ghadir, 23, said the noose was for everyone who has been in power for the last 30 years. "What happened was a spark for people to return to the streets."

A placard listed the names of the dead, printed over a photo of the blast's enormous pink mushroom cloud. "We are here for you," it read.

Dozens of protesters stormed the buildings of government ministries and the headquarters of the banking association, turning their rage to state and financial institutions.

Earlier Saturday, the protesters entered the empty buildings of the foreign ministry, declaring it a headquarters of their movement. Others then fanned out to enter the economy and energy ministries, some walking away with documents claiming they will reveal the extent of corruption that permeates the government. Some also entered the environment ministry.

Many protesters said they now had only their homes and even those are no longer safe. They blamed the government's inefficiency and political division for the country ills, including the recent disaster that hit almost every home.

The violence unfolded on the eve of an international conference co-hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron and United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres aimed at bringing donors together to supply emergency aid and equipment to the Lebanese population.

In a televised speech Saturday evening, Prime Minister Hassan Diab said the only solution was to hold early elections, which he planned to propose in a draft bill. He called on all political parties to put aside their disagreements and said he was prepared to stay in the post for two months to allow time for politicians to work on structural reforms.

In central Beirut, some protesters threw stones at security forces, who then released heavy tear gas. Near parliament, protesters tried to jump over barriers that closed the road leading to the legislature. The protesters later set on fire a truck that was fortifying barriers on a road leading to parliament.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's information minister resigned on Sunday as the country grapples with the aftermath of the devastating blast that ripped through the capital and raised public anger to new levels.

The resignation comes as public anger is mounting against the ruling elite, blamed for the chronic mismanagement and corruption that is believed to be behind the explosion in a Beirut Port warehouse. Hundreds of tons of highly explosive material was stored in the waterfront hangar, and a blast sent a shock wave that killed at least 160 people, wounded nearly 6,000 and defaced the coastline of Beirut - destroying hundreds of buildings.

'Crime Minister'

Thousands turn out in anti-Bibi 'protest'

JERUSALEM, Aug 9, (AP): Thousands of demonstrators thronged the streets near the official residence of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in central Jerusalem on Saturday night, in a renewed show of strength as weeks of protests against the Israeli leader showed no signs of slowing.

Throughout the summer, thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets to call on Netanyahu to resign, protesting his handling of the country's coronavirus crisis and saying he should not remain in office while on trial for corruption charges. Self-employed workers whose businesses have been hurt by the economic crisis also joined Saturday's march.

Though Netanyahu has tried to downplay the protests, the gatherings only appear to be getting stronger.

In Jerusalem on Saturday, protesters held Israeli flags, blew horns and chanted slogans against Netanyahu. Some held posters that said "Crime Minister" or called him "out of touch." A large banner projected onto a nearby building said "Balfour is in our hands," a reference to the street where Netanyahu lives.

The demonstrators accuse Netanyahu of corruption and say that he and the country's bloated coalition government have failed to recognize the suffering of its citizens.

Israeli media estimated some 15,000 people at the Jerusalem demonstration. An estimated 1,000 also protested at an intersection near Netanyahu's beach house in the upscale coastal town of Caesaria, and smaller gatherings took place on bridges and at intersections across the country.

There was a heavy police presence at the demonstrations but no reports of violence in the loud but orderly protests.

The rallies against Netanyahu are the largest Israel has seen since 2011 protests over the country's high cost of living.

After moving quickly to contain the virus last spring, many believe Israel reopened its economy too quickly, leading to a surge in cases. The country is now coping with record levels of coronavirus, while unemployment has surged to over 20%.

Many of the demonstrators, including many young unemployed Israelis, accuse Netanyahu of mishandling the coronavirus crisis and the economic damage it has caused.