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Iran to meet UN technical experts over uranium find

'Wisdom prevails'

BERLIN, March 7, (AP): Iran has agreed to sit down with international technical experts investigating the discovery of uranium particles at three former undeclared sites in the country, the head of the U.N. atomic watchdog said Thursday, after months of frustration at Tehran's lack of a credible explanation.

The agreement came as three of the remaining signatories to the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran - France, Germany and Britain - backed off the idea of a resolution criticizing Iran for its decision to start limiting access by International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to current facilities.

IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi told reporters in Vienna it was not up to him to say whether Iran's move to hold talks with his technical experts was linked to the decision of the so-called E3 group, but suggested it was difficult to separate the political side of Iran's nuclear program from the technical side.

"It is obvious for everybody that all these matters need to have some resolution, and when it comes to Iran - and I'm not saying anything that Iran itself hasn't said - everything is interconnected, of course," he said. "These are different parts of a single whole."

The E3 had floated the idea of the resolution after Iran began restricting international inspections last week. After a last-minute trip to Tehran by Grossi, however, some access was preserved.

Resolution

Russia and China - the other members of the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - were reportedly against the resolution, saying it could antagonize Iran further.

Germany's Foreign Ministry told The Associated Press it was common to "discuss all possible options for action" ahead of such meetings, and that despite dropping the resolution, the E3 still had concerns about Iran's "serious violations" of the nuclear deal.

"Above all, we would like to support the Director General of the IAEA in his efforts to start talks with Iran regarding the open safeguards issues," the ministry said.

Iran's ambassador to the IAEA, Kazem Gharibabadi, tweeted after the decision that "wisdom prevails" and that the E3 had prevented unnecessary tension.

Iran's Foreign Ministry applauded the move. "Today's development can maintain the path of diplomacy opened by Iran and the IAEA, and pave the way for full implementation of commitments by all parties to the nuclear deal," spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

The nuclear deal promised Iran economic incentives in return for the curbs on its nuclear program. President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal unilaterally in 2018, saying it needed to be renegotiated.

Since then, Iran has slowly violated the restrictions to try and pressure the remaining nations to increase the incentives to offset new, economy-crippling U.S. sanctions.

Before the decision to start limiting IAEA access, it had already begun enriching more uranium than allowed and to a greater purity than permitted, among other things.

U.S. President Joe Biden has said he is ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the deal but the violations complicate the matter, and over the weekend Iran turned down a European Union offer to host joint talks.

Outside the JCPOA, Grossi has also been pushing Iran for answers on three sites where inspections had revealed traces of uranium of man-made origin, suggesting they were once connected to Iran's nuclear program.

Issue

Grossi said that with Iran agreeing to face-to-face talks about the findings he hoped that "we could try to go beyond the exchange of letters and messages which, to me, seemed a lot like talking past each other on this issue, and really try to tackle them and try to solve them."

The first meeting is to take place at the beginning of April and Grossi said he hoped to "come to some satisfactory outcome" by the next IAEA board meeting in June.

In his address to the board, U.S. representative Louis Bono urged Iran to cooperate fully with the IAEA to resolve these issues.

He also called Iran's recent restrictions on IAEA inspections "troublesome and counterproductive" and said they should be reversed.

"IAEA verification is the cornerstone of the nuclear nonproliferation regime and the foundation on which the JCPOA is built," Bono said according to a copy of his remarks provided by the U.S. delegation. "Iran should not undermine that foundation at the very time we all seek a return to the deal - especially considering that the IAEA continues to investigate a number of serious, outstanding safeguards concerns regarding possible undeclared nuclear material in Iran."

He said that reliable verification could not be used by Iran as a "bargaining chip" with the U.S.

"As President Biden has made clear, the United States, in close coordination with our allies and partners, is ready to re-engage in meaningful diplomacy to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA, a key achievement of multilateral diplomacy, and a vital instrument in addressing the international community's longstanding concerns with Iran's nuclear program," Bono said.

"We hope that Iran will agree to begin necessary discussions on a diplomatic way forward without delay."

Israelis upgrade contingency plan for attack on Iran targets

'The Iranian nuclear escalation must be stalled'

TEL AVIV, Israel, March 7, (AP): Israel's defense minister said his country is upgrading contingency plans to strike Iranian targets if Tehran shows signs of nuclear escalation, the latest sign of rising tensions between the two archenemies.

Benny Gantz told the American cable network Fox News that Israel is still working on its plans, but that "we have them in our hands of course."

His comments came as President Joe Biden considers rejoining a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers to limit Iran's nuclear program, with some changes to toughen curbs on Tehran's

activities. Former President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the atomic accord in 2018 and imposed a so-called campaign of maximum pressure, including sanctions, on Tehran.

Since then, Iran has stepped up uranium enrichment. The U.N. atomic watchdog agency said earlier this week that Iran nearly tripled its stockpile of enriched uranium since November in violation of its deal with world powers.

Iran and the Biden administration are deadlocked over how to revive the deal, with Tehran demanding an immediate lifting of sanctions and the U.S. calling on Iran to first return to full compliance with the restrictions of the nuclear agreement.

Israel has vehemently opposed the nuclear deal. At the same time, tensions have been rising between arch foes Israel and Iran.

Last week, an Israeli-owned cargo ship, the MS Helios Ray, was damaged by a mysterious explosion in the strategically important Strait of Hormuz. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Iran of attacking the vessel. Iran denied the charge.

In the interview with Fox News on Thursday, Gantz was asked about the ongoing uranium enrichment and whether Israel was completing preparations to strike Iranian targets if needed.

"We have them (plans) in our hands of course but we will continue constantly improving them," Gantz said. "The Iranian nuclear escalation must be stalled. If the world stops them before, it's very much good. But if not, we must stand independently and we must defend ourselves by ourselves."

Iran denies it is pursuing nuclear weapons, and says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.



Pope Francis, surrounded by shells of destroyed churches, arrives to pray for the victims of war at Hosh al-Bieea Church Square, in Mosul, Iraq, once the de-facto capital of IS, March 7. The long 2014-2017 war to drive IS out left ransacked homes and charred or pulverized buildings around the north of Iraq, all sites Francis visited on Sunday. (AP)

Pope addresses plight of Yazidis

Mosul ... Mass as Pontiff calls for peace

QARAQOSH, Iraq, March 7, (AP): Pope Francis made a emphatic appeal for peaceful coexistence in Iraq on Sunday as he prayed for the country's war dead amid the ruins of four demolished churches in Mosul, which suffered widespread destruction in the war against the Islamic State group.

Francis travelled to northern Iraq on the final day of his historic visit to minister to the country's dwindling number of Christians, who were forced to leave their homes en masse when IS militants overtook vast swaths of northern Iraq in the summer of 2014.

Few have returned in the years since IS was routed in 2017, and Francis came to Iraq to encourage them to stay and help rebuild the country and restore what he called its "intricately designed carpet" of faith and ethnic groups. For the Vatican, the continued presence of Christians in Iraq is vital to keeping alive faith communities that have existed here since the time of Christ.

In a scene unimaginable just four years ago, the pontiff mounted a stage in a city square surrounded by the remnants of four heavily damaged churches belonging to some of Iraq's myriad Christian rites and denominations. A jubilant crowd welcomed him.

"How cruel it is that this country, the cradle of civilization, should have been afflicted by so barbarous a blow, with ancient places of worship destroyed and many thousands of people - Muslims, Christians, Yazidis - who were cruelly annihilated by terrorism - and others forcibly displaced or killed," Francis said.

He deviated from his prepared speech to address the plight of Iraq's Yazidi minority, which was subjected to mass killings, abductions and sexual slavery at the hands of IS.

Today, however, we reaffirm our conviction that fraternity is more durable than fratricide, that hope is more powerful than hatred, that peace more powerful than war."

The square where he spoke is home to four different churches - Syro-Catholic, Armenian-Orthodox, Syro-Orthodox and Chaldean - each of them left in ruins.

IS overran Mosul in June 2014 and declared a caliphate stretching from territory in northern Syria deep into Iraq's north and west. It was from Mosul's al-Nuri mosque that the group's leader,

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, made his only public appearance when he gave a Friday sermon calling on all Muslims to follow him as "caliph."

Mosul held deep symbolic importance for IS and became the bureaucratic and financial backbone of the group. It was finally liberated in July 2017 after a ferocious nine-month battle. Between 9,000 and 11,000 civilians were killed, according to an AP investigation at the time. Al-Baghdadi was killed in a U.S. raid in Syria in 2019.

The Vatican hopes that the landmark visit will rally the country's Christian communities and encourage them to stay despite decades of war and instability. Throughout the visit, Francis has delivered a message of interreligious tolerance and fraternity to Muslim leaders, including in an historic meeting Saturday with Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

The Rev. Raed Kallo, was among the few who returned to Mosul after IS was defeated. "I returned three years ago and my Muslim brothers received me after the liberation of the city with great hospitality and love," he said on stage before the pontiff.

Kallo said he left the city in June 10, 2014, when IS overran the city. He had a parish of 500 Christian families, most of whom have emigrated abroad. Now only 70 families remain. "But today I live among 2 million Muslims who call me their Father Raed," he said.

Gutayba Aagha, the Muslim head of the Independent Social and Cultural Council for the Families of Mosul, encouraged other Christians to return.

"In the name of the council I invite all our Christian brothers to return to this, their city, their properties and their businesses."

Francis will later travel by helicopter across the Nineveh plains to the small Christian community of Qaraqosh, where only a fraction of families have returned after fleeing the IS onslaught in 2014. He will hear testimonies from residents and pray in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, which was believed to have been torched by IS and has been restored in recent years.

He wraps up the day with a Mass in the stadium in Irbil, in the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, that is expected to draw as many as 10,000 people. He arrived in Irbil early Sunday, where he was greeted by children in traditional dress and one outlined as a pope.

Saudis 'down' Houthi drones

JEDDAH, March 7, (KUNA): A Saudi-led Arab coalition intercepted and destroyed 10 explosive-laden drones fired by Houthi militias against civilian population in Saudi Arabia, a coalition spokesman said Sunday, stepping up attacks on the Kingdom after lifting its name from the terror list.

"Lifting the Houthis from the list of terrorist groups has been justified in a hostile manner by the militias," Colonel Turki Al-Malki was quoted by Saudi press agency as saying.

He said systematic attacks by the Houthis against populated areas and hundreds of civilians were violating international humanitarian law.

"Victories of the Yemeni army and tribes in Maareb against elements of the militias explain the recent escalation of terrorist acts," he said.

The coalition forces, asserted Al-Malki, would take all possible measures to protect civilians from attacks by the Houthis.

Arab League chief urges necessity of further pressure on Houthis.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboulgheit assured the importance of putting more international pressure on the Houthi group, to persuade them into halting their military actions.

This came during a meeting between Aboulgheit and Yemen's Foreign Minister Ahmed Mubarak, an Arab League statement revealed.

News watch

KUWAIT CITY: Director General of Public Authority for Civil Information **Musaed Al-Asousi**, said Sunday, PACI reactivated permit function, which enables public to leave houses curfew of a period not exceeding two hours.

He explained the permits would be granted for specific reasons like medical treatment, patient aid, blood donation, Covid-19 swab and vaccine.

Al-Asousi explained that these permits, in coordination with Ministries of Health and Interior, can be obtained through: www.paci.gov.kw.

He also added that the authority also reactivated curfew permits for employees in government and private sectors who would be working during curfew hours.

Curfew Permits application will be used by security personnel to verify the validity of these permits, he added. (KUNA)

BEIRUT: A suspected missile strike on an oil-loading facility used by **Turkey**-backed opposition forces in northern **Syria** appears to have sparked a massive fire across a large area where oil tankers are normally parked, satellite images show.

Syrian opposition groups and at least one war monitor blamed **Russia** for the strike Friday night near the towns of **Jarablus** and **al-Bab**, near the border with **Turkey**. (AP)

BERLIN: A young Syrian man has been charged with murder over an Islamic extremist attack on two tourists last year, German federal prosecutors said Thursday.

Abdullah A.H.H., whose last name wasn't given in line with privacy laws, is alleged to have attacked two German tourists, aged 55 and 53, in the eastern city of Dresden in October. (AP)

BERLIN: Swiss voters decide Sunday on a proposal to ban face coverings, both the niqabs and burqas worn by a few Muslim women in the country and the ski masks and bandannas used by protesters. Polls are pointing to a close outcome.

The measure would outlaw covering one's face in public places like restaurants, sports stadiums, public transport or simply walking in the street. (AP)