



US to urge pressure against N Korea at Asian talks

## The Venezuelan city where nothing works anymore



TEHRAN: People walk through Tehran's ancient Grand Bazaar. — AFP

# Iran slams US 'threats and PR stunts'

## 'Try respect: For Iranians & for (international) commitments'

TEHRAN: Iran waved away US President Donald Trump's claims that talks with the country's leaders were imminent, saying "threats, sanctions and PR stunts won't work". With Washington pulling out of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal and set to reimpose full sanctions on Iran from August 6, Tehran has responded coolly to Trump's offer on Monday to talk "any time" without preconditions. "Threats, sanctions & PR stunts won't work. Try respect: for Iranians & for (international) commitments," tweeted Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

The Revolutionary Guards also made their opposition to talks clear. "The Iranian people do not authorize officials to meet the Great Satan... Mr Trump, Iran is not North Korea," said General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Guards, in an open letter published in local media. Trump told a rally in Tampa, Florida earlier on Tuesday: "I have a feeling they'll be talking to us pretty soon... And maybe not, and that's OK too."

He used the occasion to again blast the "horrible, one-sided" 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers which he abandoned in May. "It's a horror show," Trump said. "I hope it works out well with Iran. They are having a lot of difficulty right now." There was not yet an official response from the top leadership, but supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said a fortnight

ago that talks with Trump would be "useless." Skepticism is indeed rife in Tehran over Trump's latest tactic, with one high-profile lawmaker saying negotiations would be a "humiliation."

### 'People are worried'

Despite the rejection, many Iranians are deeply concerned that sanctions could tip the country into a major crisis. Tehran's Grand Bazaar was packed on Wednesday lunchtime as customers rushed to snap up goods for fear of what might happen when full sanctions return on Monday. "It's been really busy these last few days. People are worried that if they don't buy things today, they won't be available tomorrow," said Ali, who runs a kitchen store in the bazaar. "They are right—if I sell these knives, I won't be able to get any more."

He said the reason was that wholesalers and importers were refusing to provide new stock, preferring to sit on their inventory until the extent of the economic

crisis is better understood—a claim backed by other shopkeepers. The biggest sign of the crisis so far has been the collapse of the currency, which has lost two-thirds of its value since the start of the year, including a near-20-percent drop on Sunday and Monday alone.

The rial rallied slightly after Trump's offer of talks, but still stood at 109,000 to the dollar on Wednesday morning—a figure that would have seemed incredible even a few months ago. Several Iranian public figures said it was impossible to imagine negotiations with Washington after all the hostility of recent months. "Iran & US had 2 yrs of talks. With EU/E3+Russia+China, we produced a unique multilateral accord—the JCPOA (nuclear deal). It's been working. US can only blame itself for pulling out & leaving the table," Zarif wrote on Twitter.

Ali Motahari, the high-profile deputy speaker of parliament, said: "With the contemptuous statements (Trump) addressed to Iran, the idea of negotiating is inconceivable. It would be a humiliation." Only last

week, Trump fired off an all-caps tirade at his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani on Twitter, warning of untold "suffering" if Iran continued to threaten the United States. "We cannot negotiate with someone who violates international commitments, threatens to destroy countries, and constantly changes his position," said analyst Mohammad Marandi, of the University of Tehran, who was part of the nuclear negotiating team.

Some officials remained more receptive. "Negotiations with the United States must not be a taboo," said Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, head of parliament's foreign affairs commission, in an interview with the semi-official ISNA news agency. Motahari added that hardliners, who have long opposed any rapprochement with the US, share the blame for the collapse of the nuclear deal. "If the whole Iranian system had worked to implement this agreement, today we would be witnessing the presence of European companies in Iran and their investments, and even Trump would not be able to withdraw so easily from the deal," he said.

"But from the start one part of the system did not want the agreement to work." The Trump administration says its "maximum pressure campaign" is designed to force Iran into a new deal that goes beyond limiting its nuclear program and includes curbs to its regional behavior and missile program. — AFP



### Talks with Trump would be "useless"

## Thieves snatch royal jewels in daylight heist

STOCKHOLM: Robbers who nabbed two 17th century royal crowns and an orb from a Swedish cathedral remained at large yesterday, a day after fleeing their daring midday heist by motorboat. The thieves, who have not been identified, and the jewels are being sought internationally via Interpol, Swedish police spokesman Stefan Dangardt said, noting the objects were a "national treasure" and would likely be "very difficult to sell".

The 1611 gold burial crowns belonging to King Karl IX and his wife Queen Christina were originally interred with the couple but were later exhumed and had been on display in a locked cabinet in Strangnas Cathedral, located 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of Stockholm. King Karl IX's crown is made of gold and features crystals and pearls, while Christina's is smaller and made of gold, precious stones and pearls.

"We have as yet no value of the stolen goods, except that it is a national treasure," Dangardt told AFP. "Several people were seen leaving the church by boat or waterscooter after the theft. We have spoken to witnesses, but we are interested in further information from anyone that has made any observations," he said.

Tom Rowsell, who was having lunch outside the cathedral where he is to be married this weekend, told daily Aftonbladet he saw two men dash from the building toward a



STRANGNAS: This undated file handout picture released by Swedish police yesterday shows Swedish royal funeral regalia, including gold burial crowns (dated from the 17th century) belonging to King Karl IX (top-L) and his wife Queen Christina (top-R) that were on display at the Strangnas Cathedral, located 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of Stockholm. — AFP

motorboat waiting on Lake Malaren. "I saw a white little boat with an outboard motor on the back. The two men hurriedly jumped on board and it sped off," he said. "I knew immediately they were burglars, because of the way they were behaving," he added.

### 'Not possible to sell'

The theft occurred just before noon on Tuesday, and police quickly had helicopters, patrols, and search dogs looking for the thieves but their efforts have so far proved fruitless, Dangardt said. "There is of course going to be a lot of media interest in these types of objects. There will be pictures in the

media. It's just not possible to sell these kinds of objects," the national police coordinator for thefts of cultural artefacts, Maria Ellor, told news agency TT.

"So we can only speculate about (the thieves) intentions," she added. Similar heists have occurred before. In 2013, King Johan III's burial regalia was stolen from Vasteras Cathedral. It was recovered several days later in a garbage bag left on a countryside road, following an anonymous tip. "One can hope that something like that will happen in this case," Ellor said. The perpetrators of Tuesday's heist risk up to six years in prison for aggravated theft. — AFP

## Eiffel Tower shut in dispute over 'monstrous' queues

PARIS: Staff at the Eiffel Tower shut down the Paris landmark yesterday afternoon in protest over a new access policy which they say is generating "monstrous" queues for tourists. Access to the monument, which welcomed more than six million visitors last year, was blocked from 1400 GMT, according to a sign at the base of the tower. Staff had already been set to strike today.

The site's management said staff took action after talks with unions fell apart earlier yesterday afternoon. The site was not evacuated, and tourists already inside were allowed to finish their visit. Staff are angry over a decision last month to start setting aside half of the Eiffel Tower's daily tickets for people who buy them online in advance and choose a scheduled time for their visit. Previously just 20 percent of tickets to go up the 324-metre "Iron Lady" could be booked ahead of time. The tower's management has also started reserving specific elevators for each type of ticket holder, a move which "creates lines that are at times monstrous and often lopsided," the CGT

union said.

During off-peak times for pre-booked tickets, such as the early afternoon, the reserved elevator might be half empty — despite lines of up to three hours at the elevator for walk-ins. And high demand at the pre-booked elevator can cause back-ups that force people to wait long beyond their scheduled visit. "Employees' patience has run out," the CGT's Denis Vavassori said on Monday, adding that many visitors were unhappy with the long waits.

Staff want all the elevators to be available to all visitors, no matter what kind of ticket they have bought. SETE, the company which runs the site, says it sells 10,000 online tickets for the tower every day and that "the waiting time is very short". "For visitors who come without tickets, the waiting time at the checkouts at the foot of the Eiffel Tower is exactly the same as last year, while the number of visitors has increased," it insisted. The tower has been hit by repeated strikes by its 300-strong staff in recent years over issues ranging from pick-pocketing to maintenance work. — AFP