

International

Washington no longer refers to Golan as 'Israel-occupied'

US slams China, Iran rights record, goes easier on North Korea

WASHINGTON: The US no longer refers to the Golan Heights as an "Israeli-occupied" territory in its latest annual human rights report, published Wednesday, though the State Department insists the wording change doesn't mean a policy change. The report now calls the area the "Israeli-controlled Golan Heights."

When asked about the change on such a sensitive Middle East subject, a senior US official told reporters in Washington "there's no change in our outlook or our policy vis-a-vis these territories and the need for a negotiated settlement there." "This, by the way, is not a human rights issue, it's a legal status issue," said Michael Kozak of the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

"What we try to do is to report on the human rights situation in those territories, and so you're just trying to find the way of describing the place that you're reporting on," he said. "And 'occupied territory' has a legal meaning to it; I think what they tried to do is to shift more to just a geographic description." And another semantic change that appeared in last year's report showed up again this year, with a section titled "Israel, Golan Heights, West Bank and Gaza," instead of its previous "Israel and the Occupied Territories" heading.

President Donald Trump, who has shown robust support for close US ally Israel, recognized Jerusalem as the country's capital in 2017, defying international consensus much to the chagrin of Palestinian leaders, who view Israeli-annexed east

Jerusalem as the capital of their future state. Israel seized much of the Golan Heights from Syria during the 1967 Six-Day War and then effectively annexed it in 1981, a move that was never recognized by the international community.

Israel and Syria remain technically at war after the 1973 Yom Kippur War, though a demilitarized border zone established through an armistice had long been relatively calm until the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. Influential Trump ally US Senator Lindsey Graham said Monday during a visit to the Golan Heights with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he would push for US recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the strategic region "now and forever."

US slams China and Iran

In another development, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo slammed China's mass detention of Muslims but took a lighter hand on North Korea as the State Department released its annual human rights report Wednesday. Iran also came in for harsh criticism while rival Saudi Arabia, cited for many identical domestic rights abuses as well as the murder of US-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi, was given easier treatment.

And in a small semantic change, the report appeared to shift the US view of Israel's hold on the Golan Heights seized from Syria in 1967, calling it "Israeli-controlled" instead of "Israeli-occupied" as before. Introducing the annual report, a fact-based country-by-country review, Pompeo excoriated Beijing for its allegedly de-



GOLAN HEIGHTS: Avigdor Lieberman, Yisrael Beiteinu party leader and Israel's former defense minister, looks through binoculars during a visit to a looking point in Mount Bental in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. — AFP

teriorating rights situation. China is "in a league of its own when it comes to human rights violations," Pompeo said. He said Beijing intensified its campaign of repression against Muslims in the far western province of Xinjiang "to record levels" during 2018. "Today, more than one million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and other Muslims

are interned in reeducation camps designed to erase their religious and ethnic identities," he said. "The government also is increasing its persecution against Christians, Tibetans, and anyone who espouses different views from those or advocates those of government-or advocates change in government." —Agencies

Black boxes: Crucial to air crash probes

PARIS: A top priority for air crash investigators is to locate and analyse a plane's two black boxes which hold vital clues to what caused it to go down, including cockpit conversations. On Sunday, an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 8 crashed, killing all 157 people on board. The airline said Thursday that the black box flight recorders from the crashed plane had been flown to Paris for analysis by the BEA, France's aviation investigation and analysis agency. It is uncertain how much of their content can be retrieved as both the aircraft's black boxes, found Monday, were damaged in the crash.

What are black boxes?

Introduced in the late 1950s, black boxes help explain nearly 90 percent of all crashes, according to aviation experts. All commercial planes are required to have two of them on board—a flight data recorder and a cockpit voice recorder. The data recorder stores up to 25 hours worth of second-by-second information including on speed, altitude, engine performance and flight trajectory. In the case of the October Lion Air accident in Indonesia killing 189 — the first of two Boeing 737 MAX 8 crashes within five months—black box analysis showed that there was a problem with the aircraft's speed when it went down.

The voice recorder picks up conversations by pilots and flight attendants and also other sounds on board, including possible alarms. All black boxes used in civil aviation function the same way according to a common user protocol, regardless of their make, the BEA said. It can take weeks for investigators to retrieve the data inside, and results are typically withheld from the public until the information has been thoroughly examined—which can take years. —AFP

Former British soldier charged with N Ireland 'Bloody Sunday' killings

DERRY: Northern Irish prosecutors yesterday charged a former British soldier with murder over the "Bloody Sunday" killings of 1972 in a politically sensitive case that has stirred passions in both Britain and Ireland. The ex-paratrooper, known only as Soldier F, was charged with murdering two people and the attempted murder of four others when troops opened fire on a demonstration in Derry in which 13 protesters were shot dead. Soldier F was one of 17 British veterans who had faced investigation over Bloody Sunday but he was the only one charged. "This is a remarkable achievement by the families and victims of Bloody Sunday," said Ciaran Shiels, a solicitor for some of the victims' families.

But Shiels added: "We are disappointed that not all of those responsible are to face trial." Relatives looked somber as they emerged from a press conference in which the decision was announced by the Public Prosecution Service of Northern Ireland. "There is sufficient available evidence to prosecute one former soldier, Soldier F, for the murder of James Wray and William McKinney; and for the attempted murders of Joseph Friel, Michael Quinn, Joe Mahon and Patrick O'Donnell," said PPS director Stephen Herron.

'Indebted' to soldiers: Williamson

British Defense Secretary Gavin Williamson said the

defense ministry would support Soldier F and pay his legal costs. "We are indebted to those soldiers who served with courage and distinction to bring peace to Northern Ireland," he said. "The welfare of our former service personnel is of the utmost importance and we will offer full legal and pastoral support," he said. He added that the government was working to reform the system "for dealing with legacy issues". "Our serving and former personnel cannot live in constant fear of prosecution," he said.

Besides 16 former British soldiers not charged, state prosecutors also declined to bring charges against two alleged ex-members of the Irish Republican Army for their role on the day, one of the seminal events in the three-decades-long Northern Irish conflict known as "The Troubles". "In respect of the other 18 suspects, including 16 former soldiers and two alleged Official IRA members, it has been concluded that the available evidence is insufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of conviction," said prosecutor Herron.

Thirteen demonstrators were killed on January 30, 1972 as they participated in a civil rights march in the majority Catholic area of the Bogside in Derry when soldiers from the British Parachute Regiment opened fire. A fourteenth died of his wounds later. In 2010, then British prime minister David Cameron issued a formal state apology for the killings, calling them "unjustified and unjustifiable". A public inquiry found that British troops fired first and had given misleading accounts of what happened. Yesterday, families of those who died marched from a memorial to Derry city centre. John Kelly, whose brother Michael was shot dead at the age of 17, said he was "hoping and praying" for justice. "I'm standing here, where Michael was shot dead, hoping he's looking down on me and saying 'Fair play to you, I'm very proud of you,'" he said. —AFP