

International

Europe toughens stance on Iran, US over nuke dispute

A blow to Tehran amid nuclear standoff

PARIS: Europe has toughened its stance on Iran and warned the US against sanctions in the latest bid to stop the unraveling of the international agreement on Tehran's nuclear program. The decision by Germany, France and Britain to back a UN arms embargo extension on Iran follows growing tensions with Tehran since US President Donald Trump unilaterally pulled out of the 2015 nuclear accord and introduced new sanctions.

The three European signatories to the Iran nuclear deal said they had reservations about lifting the arms embargo, a blow to Tehran which had been calling for an end to the restrictions. The joint statement by three European foreign ministers came after the UN nuclear watchdog on Friday also passed a resolution critical of Iran - the first since 2012 - and demanded Tehran allow more inspections of two of its nuclear sites.

Iran agreed with major world powers in 2015 to halt its nuclear program in return for an end to crippling sanctions. But since Trump pulled out of the deal, Iran has begun to roll back its own commitments, fuelling US criticism it wants to build nuclear arms, a claim Tehran denies. The ban on selling weapons - such as battle tanks, combat aircraft, warships and missiles or missile systems - to Iran had been set to be progressively eased from October. "We believe that the planned lifting of the UN conventional arms embargo established by Resolution 2231 next October would have major implications for regional security and stability," the European ministers said.

But the European nations, who remain committed

to the nuclear deal, also said they opposed Washington's "maximum" pressure tactics with sanctions. "We firmly believe that any unilateral attempt to trigger UN sanctions snapback would have serious adverse consequences" in the UN Security Council, they said. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani earlier this month urged UN Security Council members to oppose a US "conspiracy" to extend the arms embargo. The three European powers said they plan to address the arms embargo issue "in close coordination" with UN Security Council permanent members Russia and China.



Washington warned against sanctions

Need for inspections

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) earlier on Friday passed a resolution put forward by European states, urging Tehran to provide inspectors access to two sites in Iran to help clarify whether undeclared nuclear activity took place there in the early 2000s. It calls on Iran to fully cooperate with the IAEA and satisfy its requests without delay, includ-



This picture made available by the Iranian armed forces office on June 18, 2020 shows a missile being fired out to sea from a mobile launch vehicle reportedly on the southern coast of Iran along the Gulf of Oman during a military exercise. — AFP

ing by providing prompt access to the sites. Iran has been blocking access to the sites for months, prompting a growing diplomatic row. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who has advocated a hard line against Iran on multiple fronts, said Tehran must "immediately comply" or face consequences.

"If Iran fails to cooperate, the international community must be prepared to take further action," he said in a statement. But Iran's envoy to the UN in Vienna, Kazem Gharib Abadi, insisted the reso-

lution will not "encourage Iran to grant access to the Agency based on fabricated and unfounded allegations". "Iran categorically deplores this resolution and will take appropriate action in response," he said. Even though the sites in question are not thought to be directly relevant to Iran's current nuclear program, the agency says it needs to know if activities going back almost two decades have been properly declared and all materials accounted for. — AFP

US' restart hits snags amid new COVID-19 cases

NEW YORK: The US economic restart hit some snags Friday as several states report higher coronavirus cases, with Apple shuttering some recently reopened stores and the US cruise industry extending a suspension. The nation's biggest movie theater chain, AMC Entertainment, also announced it would require face masks at all US theaters, quickly reversing a policy from a day earlier following a public outcry.

The stuttering and fragmented steps to reopen the American economy reflects the absences of national directives on the pandemic, as policies are largely set at the local level and by private industry rather than through Washington mandates. While coronavirus case counts have fallen sharply in the Northeast and much of the Midwest, states including Florida, Nevada and Arizona have seen record COVID-19 case counts in recent days.

Those trends have complicated efforts to revive a US economy, which has seen more than 45 million workers file

for unemployment since March, and at least 20.5 million remain unemployed. Apple said it was closing 11 stores, six of in Arizona, and two each in North Carolina and Florida, as well as one in South Carolina. "Due to current COVID-19 conditions in some of the communities we serve, we are temporarily closing stores in these areas," an Apple spokesperson said in a statement. "We take this step with an abundance of caution as we closely monitor the situation and we look forward to having our teams and customers back as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, the Cruise Line International Association announced Friday it was voluntarily extending a suspension of operations through September 15, beyond the July 24 restriction from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "It is increasingly clear that more time will be needed to resolve barriers to resumption in the United States," the trade group said. "Although we are confident that future cruises will be healthy and safe, and will fully reflect the latest protective measures, we also feel that it is appropriate to err on the side of caution to help ensure the best interests of our passengers and crewmembers."

AMC's about face
AMC, meanwhile, reversed course on



CALIFORNIA: Medical staff from myCovidMD provide free COVID-19 virus antibody testing in observance of Juneteenth at the Faith Central Bible Church, in the predominately African American city of Inglewood, California. — AFP

its safety policy as it targets July as a timeframe for reopening its 8,000 theaters across the country. While the company had side-stepped the question of whether to require masks of customers, saying it would defer to the rules of local governments, but said it always intended to require masks of employees. Though AMC said it planned to "strongly encourage mask usage," the decision not to mandate masks of all customers "prompted an intense and immediate outcry from our customers." "It is clear from this response that we

did not go far enough on the usage of mask," the company said in a statement, adding that "with the full support of our scientific advisors, we are reversing course and are changing our guest mask policy." Although masks are broadly accepted in much of the US, governments in more politically conservative parts of the country have seen resistance and even protests against obligatory mask usage. The White House has sent mixed messages on masks and President Donald Trump has not been photographed in a face covering. — AFP

Amid COVID East Africa braces for locust invasion

NAIROBI: East Africa is bracing for a third outbreak of desert locusts, with billions of the destructive insects about to hatch and threaten food supplies in a region already reeling from damaging rains and the coronavirus pandemic. Spurred by favorable weather conditions, the migratory pests have descended on East Africa in record numbers since late 2019 and another wave is about to take to the skies despite the concerted use of pesticides.

"Tens of thousands of hectares of cropland and pasture have already been damaged across the Horn and East Africa," the International Rescue Committee said in a report this month, noting even a small swarm could devour the same amount of food in a day as approximately 35,000 people. In Ethiopia between January and April, locusts destroyed 1.3 million hectares of grazing land and nearly 200,000 hectares of crops, resulting in the loss of 350,000 tons of cereals, IGAD, the East Africa regional organization, said in a June report. But these initial estimates - corresponding to the first and second locust waves - do not fully capture the

extent of damage as field surveys have been hindered by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Until we get extended figures, I would just say Ethiopia was definitely the most affected in terms of croplands, then Somalia," says Kenneth Kemucie Mwangi from ICPAC, the climate monitoring program of IGAD. Somalia, which like Kenya experienced heavy rains and flooding in recent months that left scores dead, had already declared a "national emergency" against the locust scourge in February. So far East African neighbors Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi have been spared the insects, which travel in huge swarms billions of insects strong, and can migrate 150 kilometers in a single day.

400 billion killed

The World Bank in May approved a \$500 million (445 million euro) program to help countries vulnerable to hunger in East Africa fight the pests eating their way across the region. Pesticide spraying operations have been underway since February, helping wipe out staggering numbers of the insects capable of multiplying their numbers 20-fold every three months. "About 400,000 hectares were controlled in the region between January and mid May. We estimate that 400 billion locusts have been exterminated," says Cyril Ferrand, a Nairobi-based expert with the FAO. "We can't estimate the total population because we don't have access to certain areas, especially in Somalia. But we know that it's been seriously reduced." — AFP



In this file photo, locusts swarm from ground vegetation as people approach at Lerata village, near Archers Post in Samburu county, approximately 300 kilometers north of Kenyan capital, Nairobi. — AFP

Belgium should apologize for its colonial past

BRUSSELS: Belgium is due a reckoning with its colonial past, and things left unsaid must now be discussed, argues the Congolese-born 72-year-old who became the country's first black mayor. Pierre Kompany's family has made a name for itself in Belgium. He is a former refugee turned pioneering politician, and his son Vincent Kompany is a star footballer in the national squad, the world's top-ranked team.

But, in an interview with AFP before the June 30 anniversary of the then Belgian Congo's independence, and against a backdrop of anti-racism protests, Kompany senior said it was time for some home truths. While in the United States activists declaring "Black Lives Matter" have targeted the symbols of the slave-holding Confederacy, in Belgium the protests have focused around statues of Leopold II, "King Builder" of the Belgian nation. Reigning between 1865 and 1909, Leopold held Belgium's central African territory - now the Democratic Republic of Congo - as a personal fiefdom, profiting directly from rubber plantations run with sadistic and murderous brutality.

Historians and writers have documented the crimes of the era, in which up to 10 million Congolese were killed or fell victim to disease and torture, but Leopold's statues still look down on parks and squares across modern Belgium. For Kompany, the monuments should have been taken down and placed in museums years before they became the target of protests and night-raids by activists, as part of a broader reckoning with the past that could heal some modern wounds. "No one would go into a museum to smash them," smiles Kompany, who was elected bourgmestre or mayor of the Brussels suburb of Ganshoren in 2018 and represents the centrist CDH party in the capital's regional parliament. "There is a flagrant reality, it's not in doubt," he says of the crimes carried out in Leopold II's name. For Kompany, Belgium missed an important opportunity to face up to its past in 2009, the centenary of the former king's death, which the Belgium state allowed to pass without fanfare, embarrassed to revive debate over his legacy. — AFP

Conservative Supreme Court proves 'political bad news' for Trump

WASHINGTON: Just months before President Donald Trump stands for reelection, his central pitch to conservatives - that he has remade the US justice system in their image - is unraveling. Twice this week the Supreme Court dealt defeats on issues dear to Trump's supporters: it expanded equal protection rights to gay and transgender people, and sustained protections for certain undocumented immigrants that Trump had sought to end.

It was not supposed to be this way. In his three and a half years in office Trump has replaced two of the nine justices, seemingly tilting the high court to the right for years to come. But the two rulings this week favored the left - angering conservatives and threatening Trump's reelection. "I think that what has happened could be critical to the campaign," said Carl Tobias, a law professor at the University of Richmond. "Many Trump supporters hold their noses and vote for him because of the judges whom he appoints. But this week seems to show that he cannot deliver on that promise," he said.

Keeping a promise

In 2016 the New York billionaire captured the support of the powerful religious right by promising to fill federal courts with judges who are against gun regulation, abortion, gay marriage, and other flashpoint issues. Trump has kept his pledge, naming 195 conservative judges, significantly shifting the pool of 860 federal judges to the right. The centerpiece was naming Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, cementing an apparent 5-4 tilt to the right. On Thursday the Senate confirmed another Trump pick, Justin Walker, to the Washington, DC Court of Appeals. Critics say the 37-year-old is much too inexperienced to sit on one of the country's most powerful courts. But he is closely tied to Republicans. As the White House points out, the average age of Trump's judges is under 50, ensuring they "will make a lasting impact on the courts for decades to come."

A week of setbacks

But on Monday, Gorsuch and Chief Justice John Roberts stunned observers in siding with the four Democratic-appointed justices to extend equal rights protections to gay and transgender people. The same day the court refused to take up two administration-backed cases: one to rule on its powers to round up illegal immigrants, the second to rule on gun restrictions dislike by conservatives. Then on Thursday Roberts joined the four liberals to overrule a hallmark of Trump's anti-immigration policies, his cancellation of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that gives legal protections to some 700,000 undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children. That added to concerns on the right that Roberts is not the conservative people expected when appointed by Republican president George W. Bush in 2005.

Trump lashed out, calling the DACA decision "highly political" and "seemingly not based on the law." "Do you get the impression that the Supreme Court doesn't like me?" he tweeted. "These horrible & politically charged decisions coming out of the Supreme Court are shotgun blasts into the face of people that are proud to call themselves Republicans or Conservatives." Analysts faulted Trump for making it personal. "It shows how ignorant is Trump's belief that he can manipulate the Supreme Court by appointing justices who will rubberstamp his illegal behavior," said Tobias. — AFP