

US forces to return home in coffins

Says Hezbollah chief
REUTERS, Beirut

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah yesterday said the US military in the Middle East would pay the price for the killing of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, warning that US soldiers and officers would return home in coffins.

In a speech marking the death of Soleimani, Nasrallah said responding to the killing was not only Iran's responsibility but the responsibility of its allies too.

But US civilians should not be targeted, he said.

Founded by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in 1982, Lebanese group Hezbollah is a critical part of an Iranian-backed regional military alliance.

"The American army is the one that killed them and it is the one that will pay the price," Nasrallah said, although US civilians in the region "should not be touched" because this would serve the agenda of US President Donald Trump.

"When the coffins



of American soldiers and officers begin to be transported ... to the United States, Trump and his administration will realise that they have really lost the region and will lose the elections," Nasrallah said, referring to the 2020 US presidential vote.

Nasrallah said the killing marked a new chapter in the history of the Middle East. Attacks on the US military in the region would force US forces to withdraw "humiliated, defeated and in terror ... as they left in the past", he said.



Iranian MPs chanting "death to America" while raising their clenched fists during a meeting at the parliament in the capital Tehran; Iranians yesterday march in the streets of the northwestern city of Ahvaz to pay homage to top general Qassem Soleimani; and an anti-war activist protest in front of the White House in Washington, DC, on Saturday.



PHOTO: AFP

End foreign troop presence

Iraq parliament urges govt after passing resolution, foreign ministry submits complaints to UNSC over US strikes

AGENCIES

The Iraqi parliament yesterday called on the government to work to end all foreign troop presence as a backlash grew after the killing of a top Iranian military commander and an Iraqi militia leader in a US strike in Baghdad.

A resolution passed by a special session of parliament said the government should cancel its request for assistance from a US-led coalition.

Parliament resolutions, unlike laws, are non-binding to the government. But this one is likely to be heeded: Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi had earlier called on parliament to end foreign troop presence as soon as possible.

"Despite the internal and external difficulties that we might face, it remains best for Iraq on principle and practically," Abdul Mahdi said.

The special session was called after a US drone strike on Friday on a convoy at Baghdad airport that killed Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Since the killings, rival Shia political leaders have

called for US troops to be expelled from Iraq in an unusual show of unity among factions that have squabbled for months.

"There is no need for the presence of American forces after defeating Daesh (Islamic State)," said Ammar al-Shibli, a Shia lawmaker and member

Around 5,000 US troops remain in Iraq, most of them in advisory capacity

Iran-led militia and US troops fought side by side during Iraq's 2014-2017 war against IS

of the parliamentary legal committee, before the parliamentary meeting.

"We have our own armed forces which are capable of protecting the country," he told Reuters.

Despite decades of enmity between Iran and the United States, Iran-backed militia and US troops

fought side by side during Iraq's 2014-2017 war against Islamic State militants.

Around 5,000 US troops remain in Iraq, most of them in an advisory capacity.

Abdul Mahdi, who holds the post in a caretaker role after resigning in November amid street protests, called on Friday for parliament to convene the extraordinary session to take legislative steps to protect Iraq's sovereignty.

Meanwhile, Iraq's foreign ministry has lodged official complaints with the United Nations Secretary-General and Security Council over US air strikes on Iraqi soil that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and several Iraqi militia leaders.

The complaint is about "American attacks and aggression on Iraqi military positions and the assassination of Iraqi and allied high level military commanders on Iraqi soil," the ministry said in a statement. It described the attacks as "a dangerous breach of Iraqi sovereignty and of the terms of US presence in Iraq." It called on the Security Council to condemn the attacks.

Australia's 'insurance' koala population halved by bushfires

AFP, Sydney

At least half of Australia's only disease-free koala population, a key "insurance" for the species' future, is feared dead with more badly hurt after bushfires swept through an island sanctuary, rescuers said Sunday.

Kangaroo Island, a popular nature-based tourist attraction off the coast of South Australia state, is home to many wild populations of native animals including the much-loved koala, where the populated was estimated at 50,000.

Massive bushfires have flared up in the vast country's southeast in a months-long crisis, killing nearly half a billion native animals in New South Wales state alone, scientists estimate.

Authorities began assessing the damage from bushfires yesterday, as cooler conditions provided a temporary respite

from blazes that have scarred the country's east coast for weeks.

Light rain and cooler temperatures in the southeast of the country were a welcome change from the searing heat that has fuelled the devastating fires, but officials warned they were not enough to put out almost 200 fires still burning.

"Over 50 percent (of the population) has been lost," Sam Mitchell of Kangaroo Island Wildlife Park, which is raising funds to care for the injured koalas, told AFP.

"Injuries are extreme. Others have been left with no habitat to go back to, so starvation will be an issue in coming weeks."

A University of Adelaide study published in July found that the Kangaroo Island koala species is particularly important to the survival of the wider population as it is the only large group free from chlamydia.



Police detain anti-government protesters after an anti-parallel trading protest at Sheung Shui, a border town in Hong Kong, yesterday. Scuffles erupted between police and protesters in Hong Kong yesterday, with dozens of arrests made, after thousands marched near the border, shouting pro-democracy slogans and venting their anger at mainland Chinese traders.

PHOTO: AFP

Shabaab jihadists attack US-Kenya military base

Jihadists from Somalia's Al-Shabaab group yesterday attacked a military base used by US and Kenyan forces in Kenya's coastal Lamu region, the army spokesman said. The strike on the base known as Camp Simba in Manda Bay near the picturesque tourist drawcard of Lamu Island is the latest by the group in Kenya since Nairobi sent troops across the border in 2011. Kenya's army spokesman Colonel Paul Njuguna said in a statement that at 5:30am an attempt was made to breach security at Manda Air Strip which was repulsed. He claimed 4 jihadists have been killed. The US military command for Africa, AFRICOM, confirmed there had been an attack in a brief statement. Al-Shabaab said there had been both Kenyan and American casualties, but this could not be immediately verified.

Cambodia building collapse toll hits 36; rescue called off

The search for victims in the rubble of a collapsed building in southern Cambodia drew to a close yesterday with the final death toll at 36 -- the latest tragedy in a string of deadly construction accidents. Cambodia Prime Minister Hun Sen, said 23 people had been pulled alive from the rubble of the seven-storey hotel, which crumpled to the ground in seaside Kep on Friday afternoon. Hun Sen told reporters the contractor responsible for the construction had died in the accident, while the building's owner had been detained. The rescue effort lasted more 40 hours, mobilizing hundreds of soldiers and labourers using excavators, drills and power saws to clear concrete and cut through metal bars of the pancaked structure. Cambodia is undergoing a construction boom, with hotels, high-rises and casinos springing up under little regulatory oversight.

\$1.8 million for a tuna!



A celebrated Japanese sushi businessman, nicknamed "Tuna King", paid \$1.8 million for a giant tuna at New Year's auction at Tokyo's main fish market yesterday. Kiyoshi Kimura, who runs a successful sushi restaurant chain, paid 193 million yen (\$1.8 million) to purchase a 276-kilogramme (608-pound) bluefin tuna, caught off the Aomori region in northern Japan. "This is the best," Kimura told reporters after the pre-dawn auction. "Yes, this is expensive, isn't it? I want our customers to eat very tasty ones this year too," he said. Media-savvy Kimura regularly pays top price at the first auction of the year at the Japanese capital's main fish market, making himself and his business a fixture in national news during this season. In last year's new year auction, Kimura paid a record \$3.1 million to win a 278-kilogramme (612-pound) tuna.

SOURCE: AFP

IRAN TENSIONS

Anti-war protests in 70 US cities

AFP, Washington

Demonstrators chanting "no war on Iran" rallied Saturday in Washington, New York and across the US to protest the assassination of a top Iranian military commander in a US drone strike.

Outside the White House, around 200 people gathered as part of a wave of rallies called by left-leaning organizations. They chanted slogans including "No Justice, No Peace, US out of the Middle East."

Organisers said demonstrations were convened in some 70 US cities to denounce the killing of Major General Qasem Soleimani early Friday in Baghdad on orders from President Donald Trump. The attack has prompted fears of a major conflagration in the Middle East.

"We will not allow our country to be led into another reckless war," one speaker outside the White House said.

"Need a distraction? Start of a war," read a sign held by Sam Crook, 66.

Trump faces a looming trial in the Senate following his impeachment by the House of Representatives in the Ukraine scandal.

Shirin, a 31-year-old Iranian-American who would not give her last name, said she was worried about the possibility of war with Iran, which has vowed revenge for the death of Soleimani.

At Times Square in New York, demonstrators marched with signs crying out against the prospect of war with Iran and calling for the withdrawal of the 5,000-odd US troops in Iraq.

"War is not a re-election strategy," read one sign in that procession.

Demonstrators also marched in cities including Chicago and Los Angeles.

Can India implement' citizenship law?

Kerala CM writes to 11 of his counterparts, urging them to unite and coordinate efforts against the law amid protests

AGENCIES

Political challenges for Prime Minister Narendra Modi over the passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) are mounting with a number of Indian states saying they will not implement the contentious law seen as anti-Muslim, and backing nationwide protests against it.

On Friday, Pinarayi Vijayan, chief minister of the southern state of Kerala, wrote to 11 of his counterparts, urging them to unite and coordinate their efforts as part of the opposition's pushback against the CAA.

"Wrote to 11 Chief Ministers requesting intervention on CAA. Why we resist?" Vijayan posted on Twitter, along with a copy of the letter he sent.

UP becomes first state to implement CAA; shortlisting of eligible migrants begins

"Apprehensions have arisen among large sections of our society consequent to the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019. The need of the hour is unity among all Indians wishing to protect democracy and secularism," his letter said.

Meanwhile, 27 people have died in nearly a month of protests against the law, with at least 19 of those deaths reported from Uttar Pradesh state, governed by a hardline Hindu nationalist belonging to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The UP government yesterday ordered identification of migrants, making UP the state first in the country to begin the exercise of shortlisting eligible migrants for granting citizenship. Sources said, this will also help collate data on illegal migrants.

Bihar Deputy Chief Minister and senior Bharatiya Janata Party leader Sushil Kumar Modi has said the updating of the National



Population Register (NPR) will be carried out in the state from May 15 to May 28 this year.

Opposition parties and legal experts argue the law is discriminatory since it singles out Muslims in an officially secular nation of 1.3 billion people, nearly 15 percent of whom are Muslim, who fear the law is aimed at marginalising them.

The fears have been compounded with a planned

National Register of Citizens (NRC), a count of India's citizens which the BJP wants to conduct across the country, triggering anxieties over the documents people would need to prove their citizenship.

NRC was originally an exercise exclusive to the ethnically-diverse northeastern state of Assam, where a movement against allowing any undocumented migrant, irrespective of religion, to settle there has been ongoing

for decades.

A final list of citizens, published in August, excluded nearly 1.9 million residents, effectively rendering them stateless.

Recently, Modi's government approved almost \$130bn to conduct a nationwide National Population Register (NPR), which Muslims and activists claim is a precursor to NRC.

Critics say the moves are part of a Hindu supremacist agenda pushed by Modi since he came to power nearly six years ago.

Multiple petitions challenging the new law as unconstitutional have been filed in India's Supreme Court, which will hear some of those pleas on January 22.

West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, a staunch Modi critic, has led several mass rallies in her state against the law. Last week, she said she will not implement CAA "as long as I am alive".

Punjab, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra - governed by the main opposition Congress party - also announced they will not impose the new law in their states.

Modi's government, meanwhile, remains defiant, with the federal law minister this week saying the states have a "constitutional duty" to implement laws passed by the parliament.

At a rally in Rajasthan on Friday, Modi's close aide and India's Home Minister Amit Shah said: "Even if all these [opposition] parties come together, BJP will not move back even an inch on this issue of CAA."