

AFTERMATH OF SOLEIMANI'S ASSASSINATION

WHO IS SAYING WHAT

'DANGEROUS TIMES'
'We are living in dangerous times. ... This cauldron of tensions is leading more and more countries to take unpredictable decisions with unpredictable consequences and a profound risk of miscalculation. ... Let us not forget the terrible human suffering caused by war. As always, ordinary people pay the highest price. It is our common duty to avoid it.'



Un Secretary General Antonio Guterres



China's UN Ambassador Zhang Jun after US slams Moscow, Beijing at UN for failure to condemn embassy attack in Baghdad.

UNSC IMPASSE OVER US EMBASSY ATTACK

'China does not accept the US accusation. China firmly supports the protection of the safety of foreign missions in accordance with international law. [But] The US unilateral military action has led to drastic changes in (the) regional situation.'

BID TO LIMIT TRUMP'S WAR POWERS

'This action (attack on Iranian general) endangered our servicemembers, diplomats and others by risking a serious escalation of tensions with Iran. As members of Congress, our first responsibility is to keep the American people safe. For this reason, we are concerned that the administration took this action without the consultation of Congress and without respect for Congress's war powers granted to it by the Constitution.'



US Speaker Nancy Pelosi



Iranian FM Javad Zarif

TERRORIST ASSASSINATION

'What the US has accomplished in its terrorist assassination of anti-ISIS heroes is to unleash global anti-US fury and a worldwide rancor--on a scale not seen in recent memory. End of malign US presence in West Asia has begun.'



US Defense Secretary Mark Esper



Malaysian PM Mahathir Mohamad

MUSLIMS SHOULD UNITE

'The time is right for Muslim countries to come together. We are no longer safe now. If anybody insults or says something that somebody doesn't like, it is all right for that person from another country to send a drone and perhaps have a shot at me.'

NO DECISION TO LEAVE IRAQ

'There is no decision whatsoever to leave Iraq... There has been no decision made to leave Iraq. Period. That letter is inconsistent with where we are right now.'

IRAN'S REGIONAL ALLIES AND POSSIBLE SITES OF RESPONSE TO US ATTACK



Philippines readies for evacuation

REUTERS, Manila
The Philippines is preparing to evacuate thousands of Filipinos working in the Middle East as regional tensions rise following the killing of a top Iranian commander by the United States. About 2.3 million people from the Philippines are working in the Middle East as domestic helpers, construction workers, engineers and nurses. President Rodrigo Duterte has ordered the armed forces to prepare air and naval assets for the evacuation of Filipinos in Iraq, Iran and nearby Arab countries, his spokesman Salvador Panelo said on Tuesday.

Germany to withdraw some troops from Iraq

AFP, Berlin
Germany will withdraw some of its troops deployed as part of the anti-IS coalition in Iraq, the defence ministry said yesterday, in the latest fallout over the US drone strike that killed a top Iranian general. About 30 soldiers stationed in Baghdad and Taji will be moved to Jordan and Kuwait. Germany has deployed about 415 soldiers as part of the anti-IS coalition, with about 120 of its troops stationed in Iraq.

Zarif denied visa for UN summit

REUTERS, Washington
The United States has denied a visa to Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif that would have allowed him to attend a United Nations Security Council meeting in New York on Thursday, a US official said. Under the 1947 UN 'headquarters agreement,' the United States is generally required to allow access to the United Nations for foreign diplomats. But Washington says it can deny visas for 'security, terrorism and foreign policy' reasons.

Trump's gamble in Middle East backfires

AFP, Baghdad

The US killing of general Qasem Soleimani was meant to cripple Tehran's clout in the Middle East, but analysts see the allies of Iran closing rank instead.

The deadly US drone strike in Baghdad has also rocked America's ties with allies on the ground, left diplomats scrambling to contain the fallout and Iraqi officials outraged at the airspace violation.

The strike on the outskirts of Baghdad's airport early Friday killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and top Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, among others.

The US has hailed it as a win for 'peace and stability' in the region, in contrast to Western diplomats and US military officials in Baghdad. None had received prior warning of the pre-dawn strike and learned of it when they woke up, sending them into crisis talks to salvage ties with Iraqi officials.

'The strike was such a surprise to all of us,' one Western diplomat said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

'Speaking to the Americans now is extremely complex. We're talking a lot together as the European Union but the Americans have their own problems now,' the diplomat said.

Even at the military level, the strike strained ties between the United States and its other partners in the coalition fighting the Islamic

resurgence of IS.

On Sunday, in reaction to the strike, Iraq's parliament voted in favour of rescinding that invitation and ousting all foreign troops.

As the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, Soleimani oversaw Tehran's interventions in regional power

'axis of resistance'.

'The strike unified the resistance forces and made combatting the United States a priority,' said Qassem Qasbi, a Lebanese expert in Islamic movements.

Indeed, pro-Iran factions in Iraq have seized on the strike to secure a political and popular revival.

The strike gave Shia factions led by Kataeb Hezbollah, Iraqi populist cleric Moqtada Sadr and Qais al-Khazali to unify call against the US.

Further afield in Lebanon, Iran-backed Hezbollah said the strike represented a threat to 'all the movements, leaders and countries of the axis of resistance'.

Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen, meanwhile, called for 'direct and swift reprisals' to the strike. Palestinian movement Hamas slammed it as an 'American rampage.'

'Soon enough, this decision by (US President) Donald Trump will be seen as counter-productive,' predicted Karim Bitar of the Paris-based Institute for International and Strategic Affairs.

US ties with Iraq, allies take hit after drone strike

Meant to cripple Iran's clout, US strike unites its allies



State jihadist group. 'As for our Western allies, in the grand scheme of things, it appears we screwed them over,' a top US defence official deployed in Iraq told AFP.

Some 5,200 US soldiers are stationed across Iraqi bases to support local troops preventing a

struggles from Lebanon and Iraq to Syria and Yemen.

Washington had hoped his killing in a Baghdad drone strike Friday would deal a blow to Iran and its network of proxies -- but the plan appears to have backfired by uniting pro-Iran factions under an

LIBYA CHAOS

Haftar forces seize control of Sirte

AFP, Benghazi

Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar's forces Monday seized the coastal city of Sirte from factions loyal to the Tripoli government, raising tensions as Turkey said it was deploying troops in the North African country.

Sirte, some 450 kilometres (280 miles) east of the capital Tripoli, had been held since 2016 by forces allied with the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA).

But on Monday, a spokesman for Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) said the city had fallen to his fighters within hours.

'Sirte has been totally liberated,' Ahmad al-Mesmari announced on television.

'The operation was quick and lasted only three hours,' Mesmari said, although preparations had started months earlier with air strikes on positions of pro-GNA forces.

He said Haftar loyalists struck from five land and sea positions and had air cover. He did not give further details.

The GNA did not immediately confirm the fall of Sirte, but a pro-GNA military commander in the city, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged the loss.

The oil-rich North African country has been plunged into chaos since the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that killed longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi.

It is now divided between the GNA based in the capital Tripoli and Haftar's forces in the east and which also control most of the country's south.

On Sunday, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that his soldiers had begun deploying in Libya.

Wildlife death toll soars to over 1b

AGENCIES

The number of wildlife estimated to have died in Australia's wildfire catastrophe has skyrocketed to more than 1 billion, according to wildlife experts.

The report came as firefighters raced to quell massive bushfires in southeastern Australia yesterday, taking advantage of a brief drop in temperatures and some much-needed rainfall before another heatwave strikes later this week.

Chris Dickman, an ecologist at the University of Sydney, told HuffPost that his original estimate of 480 million animals was not only conservative, it was also exclusive to the state of New South Wales and excluded significant groups of wildlife for which they had no population data.

'The original figure of 480 million was based on mammals, birds and reptiles for which we do have densities, and that figure now is a little bit out of date. It's over 800 million given the extent of the fires now in New South Wales alone,' he said.

'If 800 million sounds a lot, it's not all the animals in the firing line,' he added.

That figure excluded animals



including bats, frogs and invertebrates. With these numbers included, Dickman said, it was 'without any doubt at all' that the losses exceeded 1 billion. 'Over a billion would be a very conservative figure,' he said.

An environmental scientist at the World Wildlife Fund Australia, Stuart Blanch, confirmed these estimates, reiterating that, given the expansion of the fires since the last calculations, 1 billion was a modest guess.

'It's our climate impact and our

obsession with coal that is helping wage war on our own country,' Blanch said.

Critically endangered species, including the southern corroboree frog and mountain pygmy-possum, could be wiped out as fires ravage crucial habitat in Victoria's Alpine National Park and New South Wales's neighboring Kosciuszko National Park.

Koalas have lost more than 30% of their key habitat in New South

AUSTRALIA BUSHFIRES

- Active fires: More than 200, many of them out of control
Burnt areas: More than 10.3 million hectares
Death toll: 25 people and some 1 billion wildlife
Homes destroyed: Over 2,000
Firefighters: Thousands of volunteers, 3000 reservists
National recovery fund: \$1.4 billion

Wales and may have lost a third of their population in that region, said government source last month.

The University of Sydney's animal loss estimates also exclude livestock, which federal agriculture minister Bridget McKenzie expects will exceed 100,000 animals.

The fires across Australia have killed 25 people, destroyed or damaged more than 2,000 homes and burned nearly 31,000 square miles -- an area about the size of Austria.

We are in 'desperate need' for ways to improve ties

Says South Korea leader, seeks talks with North's leader

REUTERS, Seoul

There is a 'desperate need' for practical ways to improve ties with North Korea, the South's President Moon Jae-in said yesterday, adding that he was ready to meet with the reclusive leader in Pyongyang repeatedly if necessary.

Moon, sidelined from his leading role in the diplomatic effort with North Korea in 2018, said he regretted the past year's lack of progress in negotiations.

In an annual New Year's speech in Seoul, Moon called for new talks with Kim Jong Un, and vowed to keep up work to facilitate US-North Korea communication.

'In a time of deadlock in US-North Korea talks - and where we are even concerned about a step backward in inter-Korean relations - we are in desperate need of practical ways to improve inter-Korean cooperation,' he said.

He also said he would continue to push for restarting the Kaesong Industrial Complex and tours to Mt Kumgang, and mentioned border cooperation without elaborating. He added the

joint 2032 Olympics bid would be a unifying event, as would completing the inter-Korean railroad.

'We want to make an era where separation is no longer a roadblock for peace and prosperity for South and North Korea,' he said.

North Korea has been unresponsive to other recent overtures from Seoul, and cooperation projects between the neighbours have stalled in the face of international sanctions that bar most business with the North.

Pyongyang has expressed frustration at what it calls Washington's lack of flexibility, while US officials say it must take more concrete steps to dismantle its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes before sanctions are eased.

'The momentum for U.S.-North Korea talks must continue,' Moon said. 'Provocations and threats are not helpful for anyone.'

Over the New Year, Kim said he planned to further develop nuclear programmes and introduce a 'new strategic weapon' in the near future, though he signalled there was still room for dialogue with the United States.



TRUMP IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

Bolton 'to testify'

AFP, Washington

Former White House national security advisor John Bolton, in a surprise announcement, said Monday that he is willing to testify if subpoenaed in the Senate impeachment trial of President Donald Trump.

Democrats believe Bolton has direct knowledge supporting charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress by the president.

But Bolton, a veteran Washington insider who was fired by Trump in September, has not publicly disclosed whether his testimony would be damaging or helpful to the president.

Republican Senate chief Mitch McConnell said Monday that a decision to call witnesses in the trial, expected to begin this month, should be made only after it has begun.

Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives, has declined to send the articles of impeachment passed by the House to the Senate until the ground rules have been established for the trial.

'Based on careful consideration and study,' Bolton said in a statement, 'I have concluded that, if the Senate issues a subpoena for my testimony, I am prepared to testify.'

The House of Representatives has accused Trump of using military aid and other incentives as leverage to get Ukraine to investigate Democrat Joe Biden, his potential November presidential opponent.

US warns citizens in China over mystery virus

Americans travelling in China should avoid animals and contact with sick people as the country grapples with a mystery pneumonia outbreak, the US embassy in China said yesterday. The viral illness was first reported last week in Wuhan, a central Chinese city with a population of over 11 million, and has since grown to at least 59 cases. Chinese health officials have ruled out a resurgence of the highly contagious SARS virus, which killed hundreds more than a decade ago, after fears spread online that it had made a comeback. The mystery disease has prompted concerns in Taiwan, Hong Kong. So far, none of the 59 patients infected with pneumonia have died though seven are seriously ill, according to Wuhan's health commission.

India suffers hottest decade on record

The last decade was India's hottest on record with the national weather office calling the impact of global warming 'unmistakable' and extreme weather killing more than 1,500 people last year. India, home to 1.3 billion people, is at the forefront of climate change suffering devastating floods, dire water shortages and baking temperatures. The southern city of Chennai last year declared 'day zero' as taps ran dry. Temperatures between 2010 and 2019 were 0.36 degrees Celsius (0.65 degrees Fahrenheit) above the long-term average, the hottest decade since records began in 1901, the Indian Meteorological Department said on Monday. India's five warmest years on record all fell in the last decade, with 2016 the hottest.

Harvey Weinstein hit with new sex crimes charges



Harvey Weinstein was hit with new sex crimes charges in Los Angeles on Monday just as his high-profile trial in a separate case opened in New York, kicking off proceedings key to the #MeToo movement. The case in California stems from a two-year investigation into allegations from several women that the disgraced Hollywood mogul assaulted them in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills. According to the charge sheet, Weinstein allegedly went to a Los Angeles area hotel on February 18, 2013 and raped a woman after pushing his way into her room. The woman alleges she did not immediately disclose the assault as Weinstein threatened her life if she did so. The next day, he allegedly assaulted a woman at a hotel suite in Beverly Hills after she unwittingly followed him into the bathroom. Neither woman has been identified.

SOURCE: AFP