

It's not over

US, Iran draw back from brink but new threats show crisis may escalate soon

AGENCIES

Iran yesterday spurned US President Donald Trump's call for a new nuclear pact and a Iranian commander threatened more attacks after both sides appeared to back off from intensified conflict following the US killing of an Iranian general and Tehran's retaliatory missile strikes.

Concern that the Middle East was primed for a wider war eased after Trump gave an address on Wednesday that refrained from ordering more military action. But each side's next move in their protracted shadow war was unclear.

Iran fired 16 missiles on Wednesday at sites in Iraq where US troops were based in retaliation for the killing in a US drone attack of powerful Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad on Jan 3. Tehran's foreign minister said this "concluded" Iran's response to his death.

Gen Soleimani was widely held as being Iran's second most senior official. As head of the Revolutionary Guards' elite Quds Force, he was an architect of Iranian policy in the region.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei described the missile attacks as a "slap

in the face" for the US and called for an end to the American presence in the Middle East. But he said the strikes were not enough to avenge the killing.

The actions followed months of tension that has increased steadily since Washington withdrew in 2018 from Iran's nuclear pact with world powers and reimposed sanctions that have driven down Tehran's oil exports and hammered its economy.

Trump told Americans on Wednesday that he could have hit Iran at will but he refrained because "Iran was standing down."

Trump also said it was time for world powers to replace Tehran's 2015 nuclear accord with a new deal that would allow Iran to "thrive and prosper". And he said he would impose more stringent sanctions on Iran, without specifying what that would involve.

In a letter to the UN Security Council, US Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft, while defending Soleimani's killing as 'self-defense', said the US was ready to negotiate "with the goal of preventing further endangerment of international peace and security or escalation by the Iranian regime".

But Iran's UN Ambassador Majid

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina handing BGMEA President Rubana Huq a crest for her extraordinary contribution to the country's garment sector during an event yesterday at the capital's Bangabandhu International Conference Center. Story on B1.

PHOTO: BSS

Little clarity

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on Monday, encountered a technical problem shortly after take-off and started to head toward a nearby airport before it crashed. The report said there was no radio communication from the pilot and that the aircraft disappeared from radar at 8,000 feet (2,440 m).

It is so far unclear if any technical issue could be related to a maintenance fault or defective part.

The disaster puts a renewed spotlight on Boeing, which faces a safety crisis over a different type of 737, though the plane that crashed in Iran does not have the feature thought to have caused crashes of the grounded 737 MAX.

The Iranian report referred to the crash as an accident.

Investigations into airliner crashes are complex, requiring regulators, experts and companies across several international jurisdictions to work together. It can take months to fully determine the cause and issuing an initial report within 24 hours is rare.

A Canadian security source told Reuters there was evidence one of the engines had overheated. The crash happened hours after Iran launched missile attacks on US-led forces in Iraq, leading some to speculate that the plane may have been hit.

The initial assessment of Western intelligence agencies was that the plane had suffered a technical malfunction and had not been brought down by a missile, five security sources -- three Americans, one European and the Canadian -- who asked not to be named, told Reuters.

Ukraine Security Council Secretary Oleksiy Danylov said the country's investigators wanted to search for possible Russian missile debris after seeing information on the internet.

He referred to an unverified image circulated on Iranian social media purportedly showing the debris of a Russian-made Tor-M1 surface-to-air missile of the kind used by the Iranian military.

Ukrainian investigators into the crash include experts who participated in the investigation into the 2014 shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17, Danylov said.

The Malaysian airliner was shot down on July 17, 2014, over territory held by pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine as it was flying from

Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing all 298 people on board.

In a televised statement, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy earlier asked people to refrain from speculation, conspiracy theories and hasty evaluations regarding the crash. He declared Thursday a day of national mourning.

Zelenskyy said he would speak by telephone with the Iranian president to step up cooperation in investigating the crash.

Ukraine is looking at various possible causes, including a missile attack, a collision, an engine explosion or terrorism.

Countries recognised under a UN-administered convention as participants should nominate who they wish to be involved in the Iran-led investigation, the Iranian report said.

As the country where the plane was designed and built, the United States would usually be allowed to be accredited but neither side has said whether US investigators will be dispatched to Iran.

Iran's aviation body could not be reached for comment to clarify its position.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have risen with the United States' killing of a top Iranian general on Friday. Tehran retaliated with a missile strike on US targets in Iraq.

The Ukrainian airliner took off at 6:12 am local time and was given permission to climb to 26,000 feet, the report said. It crashed six minutes later near the town of Sabashahr.

Bodies and body parts recovered from the site of the crash have been taken to the coroner's office for identification, the report said.

Smouldering debris, including shoes and clothes, was strewn across a field where the plane crashed on Wednesday. Rescue workers in face masks laid out scores of body bags.

Onboard were 146 Iranians, 10 Afghans, 11 Ukrainians, five Canadians and four Swedes, the report said, but said some may have held citizenship of other countries.

Ukrainian authorities have said those on board included 82 Iranians, 63 Canadians, and 11 Ukrainians.

The Tehran-Toronto via Kiev route was a popular for Canadians of Iranian descent visiting Iran in the absence of direct flights.

Guilty verdict overturned in S Korea #MeToo case

AFP, Seoul

A former prosecutor who was tried following groping allegations that fuelled South Korea's #MeToo movement walked free on Thursday after his conviction was quashed by the country's top court.

Ahn Tae-geun, 53, was jailed for two years for abuse of power in January last year after being accused of repeatedly groping a female junior colleague at a funeral in 2015.

After Seo Ji-hyun filed a formal complaint, Ahn allegedly had her transferred to a provincial post, significantly impacting her career.

Seo went public with a tearful live television interview in 2018, which triggered a flood of similar accusations against powerful men in fields ranging from art to politics that grew into a South Korean #MeToo movement.

Despite its economic and technological advances the South remains a patriarchal society, and has one of the world's thickest glass ceilings for women.

Ahn -- who was separately fired for corruption in 2017 -- could not be charged with sex abuse because the one-year statute of limitations had expired.

Instead he was indicted for abuse of power, accused of using his position

to pressure senior prosecutors to reassign Seo to a junior position in revenge.

An appellate court had upheld the original ruling in July, but the Supreme Court on Thursday quashed the decision and ordered a retrial, saying it was difficult to conclude one of Ahn's actions -- asking a prosecutor to write a document related to Seo's transfer to a provincial post -- was a form of abuse of power.

The initial trial ruling "misunderstood legal principles on the crime of abuse of official authority", the Supreme Court said in a statement.

"The original verdict is quashed and the case is sent back for re-review and a new decision."

The victim's lawyer Seo Gi-ho said he "cannot possibly comprehend" the Supreme Court's decision, adding it had interpreted the definition of abuse of authority "too narrowly" in reaching its ruling.

Jung Ha Kyung-ju, a women's rights activist in Seoul, said the situation was "very concerning", particularly as the decision had been made by the South's highest court.

"This says a lot about how this country has been treating women and the power abuse they experience at work," she told AFP.

Singapore faces first legal challenge over misinfo law

AFP, Singapore

A Singapore opposition party has mounted the first legal challenge against an online misinformation law that activists say is being used to silence criticism of the government ahead of elections.

The controversial legislation gives authorities the power to order corrections be placed next to posts they deem false.

Since the law came into force in

October, several opposition figures and activists have been ordered to place a banner next to online posts stating that they contain false information.

The Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), one of a handful of small opposition groups in the city-state, has now asked the courts to overturn a government order for it to correct two Facebook posts and an article on its website.

The Facebook posts said many

Singaporeans had been displaced from white-collar jobs by foreigners -- claims the government said were "false and misleading".

"We undertake this legal action because, as difficult as it may be, we must stand up for our fellow Singaporeans and fight for what little space we have left in Singapore to uphold our democratic freedoms," the party said on its website late Wednesday.

Helpful yet not much known

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five said they heard about the toll-free 24/7 helpline 109 introduced in 2012, but none of them ever used it in reporting incidents of violence against them.

"I've heard about 999 but never heard of any other helpline or app for women and children. If the government has such platforms for helping women, there must be enough promotion of those. Otherwise, what's the use of introducing such smart technologies?" asked Sadia Islam, project officer at a non-government organisation.

The app was funded by ICT Division under its "Access to Information" (a2i) project and developed by the women and children affairs ministry under its "Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women".

If a victim presses the emergency button on the app in case of sexual harassment, child marriage or any other forms of violence or threat, her GPS location, audio recording of her surroundings and picture will go directly to the 109 helpline, said Sabina Sultana, senior programme officer of the project.

"Apart from that, a text message will automatically be dispatched to the nearest police station, the deputy police commissioner of the metropolitan area, the SP of the district level and three FNF numbers," she added.

"One can find the app by typing Joy 109 on the Google Play Store. Women can also file a written complaint by attaching photos or videos," she added.

Seeking anonymity, a domestic violence victim said the android application offered her instant help when she was in crisis.

"I was once beaten up by my husband badly. He threw me out of his home and I was restricted from keeping my baby with me," she said, narrating the incident.

"Without even knowing the outcomes, I pressed the emergency button of the Joy app, which I installed in my phone previously, while I was still waiting right outside the door of his home.

"They contacted me immediately and took action. Within 35 minutes they sent local police to rescue my child. And with their help I managed to leave the place with my baby."

According to the ministry, only 135 emergency complaints have been received through this app so far. Only 4,275 users have installed it on their android mobile devices since December 2019 though the number of mobile internet users crossed 9.37 crore by June 2019.

The ministry spent around Tk 45,00,000 on developing the app but sadly, it can only be installed on android 4.0.3 and updated version.

Needless to say, it is completely unable to provide any support for women having no smartphones. But they can call 109.

According to the 2019 Mobile Gender Gap Report of GSMA, the global association of mobile operators, 58 percent of adult women in Bangladesh, own mobile phones while only 13 percent use the internet.

According to Sabina Sultana of "Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women",

they have taken various initiatives to promote the app on social media and created TVC, billboards, stickers, festoons, brochures, sent letters to districts and upazilas. However, she admits that a large number of women are not aware of the app.

"Wherever I go, I tell people about these and I know women are not aware of this. But I think the media can be a great help in this regard," she said.

On the other hand, the 109 helpline was launched on June 19, 2012, after it was developed at the cost of Tk 1,25,00,000, funded jointly by Bangladesh and Danish governments. The helpline is also linked to 999 and the government service information helpline 333.

The 109 service is aimed at receiving complaints against domestic violence, child marriage, sexual harassment, physical abuse, dowry, detention, child custody, and many other forms of violence and abuse against women and children.

For example, if a woman faces any sort of violence or harassment in any place (be it her workplace, educational institutions, public places or her own home), she can call the helpline.

The person who attends the call at first tracks her location and contacts the local police station to send a force to rescue her. The operator would then continue following up with the woman in every five to 10 minutes, depending on the seriousness of her problems.

One very important aspect of the helpline is someone can also send text messages to the number mentioning her situation, as it happens most of the time that women become unable to make a phone call in front of the perpetrator or sometimes they need to be tactful in seeking help.

Raisul Islam, programme coordinator of 109 service, said last year they attended 18,14,991 calls from people mostly seeking information and advice on what to do in a violent situation, how to file a case in police station, what to do if a husband doesn't provide alimony to his wife and much more.



Screenshots of the app Joy 109 on an android device.

Bangabandhu's

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Homecoming Day will be more significant as the nation is going to celebrate the great leader's year-long birth centenary programmes from March 17.

The government has already declared 'Mujib Year' from March 17, 2020 to March 17, 2021.

The countdown for the birth centenary celebration will begin today.

PM Hasina will inaugurate the countdown for the yearlong birth centenary celebration at the National Parade Ground in the capital's Tejgaon.

To mark the day, the ruling Awami League, its associate bodies, other political parties and socio-cultural-professional organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes.

On the night of March 25, 1971, Pakistan army arrested Bangabandhu from his Dhanmondi residence and sent him to a West Pakistani jail the following day.

Bangabandhu was subjected to inhuman torture in the Pakistan jail where he had been counting moments for the execution of his death sentence that was pronounced in a farcical trial. Earlier on March 26 in 1971, Bangabandhu proclaimed the independence of Bangladesh and urged people from all walks of life to participate wholeheartedly in the nation's War of Liberation.

Immediately after the proclamation of independence, Bangabandhu was arrested by Pakistani military junta and then flown to West Pakistan to keep him in prison there.

Though the final victory in the nine-month-long bloody War of Liberation was achieved defeating Pakistani occupation forces on December 16 in 1971, the nation's expectations were fulfilled and the people got the real taste of victory with the homecoming of Bangabandhu on January 10, 1972.

On reaching Dhaka (Tejgaon) airport in the afternoon on January 10, Bangabandhu was greeted by tens of thousands of jubilant people who had been eagerly waiting to see the beloved leader.

Khulna, Cumilla

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0.506), a win today may not be enough.

They now not only have to beat Khulna convincingly but will also have to hope that Dhaka Platoon thrash Khulna in the final game of the league stage tomorrow so that Khulna's net run-rate dips below Cumilla's, who will then steal into the play-offs.

The three teams already through to the play-offs are table-toppers Chattogram Challengers, Dhaka and Rajshahi Royals.

However, before Cumilla fight for their survival, Dhaka will bid to regain top spot by beating Rangpur Rangers and increase their chances of finishing in the top two. The top two teams can afford to lose a game in the play-offs as they will get a second chance to qualify for the final, while the bottom two qualifiers will have to win all games in order to bag the title.

4 Turkish soldiers killed in car bombing in Syria

AFP, Ankara

Four Turkish soldiers were killed Wednesday in a car bombing in northeastern Syria, Turkey's defence ministry said.

The soldiers were conducting road patrols when the attack happened in the region captured by Turkish forces after the latest operation against a Kurdish militia last year.

The ministry did not provide further information on exactly where the bomb exploded or who was to blame for the attack.