

EU defends Iran deal after Trump's call

AFP, Brussels

EU chief Charles Michel yesterday defended the crumbling Iran nuclear deal after US President Donald Trump urged Europe to quit it, but warned Tehran against "irreversible acts" that would sink the accord.

The president of the European Council used a call with Iran's President Hassan Rouhani to call for a de-escalation of tensions after Tehran carried out missile strikes on US military bases in Iraq in retaliation for the assassination of one of its top generals.

A White House statement from Trump calmed fears of all-out war erupting, but the US leader demanded that the other parties to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal follow his lead and withdraw from the pact.

The European parties -- Britain, France and Germany -- have led efforts to save the deal, which has been crumbling since Trump pulled out in 2018



This January 8, 2020, satellite image reportedly shows damage (marked in circles) to the Ain al-Asad US airbase in western Iraq, after being hit by rockets from Iran. Inset, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani and the newly-appointed commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Esmail Qaani (R) react during a mourning ceremony in Tehran for slain top general Qassem Soleimani.

PHOTO: AFP



IRANIAN MISSILE ATTACK ON US

Satellite photos show damage to air base

AGENCIES

Iranian missiles damaged or destroyed seven buildings in the part of Ain al-Asad air base in Iraq that houses US military personnel, satellite photographs appear to show.

Two images provided by commercial satellite company Planet Labs Inc., and reviewed by Reuters, show five missile impact points in that part of the base.

The extent of the damage can be gauged by comparing the photographs, taken after Wednesday's attack, with images from Dec 25 last year.

At least three of the structures appear to be aircraft maintenance hangers. Some of the buildings or structures have completely disappeared. Only parts of the others remain.

"They targeted the American portion of the base. They meant to hit it and they did hit it," said Jeffrey Lewis of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California.

US President Donald Trump said no Americans were harmed in the strikes, which Iranian said it launched in retaliation for the killing last week in Iraq of an Iranian general.

After the strikes, Iran said Wednesday said it respects Iraq's territorial integrity. The early Wednesday strike led Iraq to say it would summon the Iranian ambassador.

In a letter to the United Nations Security Council and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, Iran's ambassador to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, said his country has full respect for "the independence, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of the Republic of Iraq."

UK MPs set to seal Brexit deal

AFP, London

After years of angry arguments that toppled two governments, Britain's parliament yesterday was set to finally approve the terms of Brexit, clearing the divided country's exit from the European Union on January 31.

The House of Commons will rush through a final day of hearings and ratify Prime Minister Boris Johnson's divorce deal with Brussels, drawing a line under an extraordinary period of political chaos.

For much of the time since the 2016 Brexit referendum, lawmakers have been deadlocked over how, when and even if Britain should leave its closest trading partners after nearly 50 years.

Some viewed Brexit with horror, fearing that it stripped them of their European identities and turned Britain into an insular, slightly smaller, and somewhat less important nation.

Others embraced it with fervour, viewing it as a chance to "take back control" from unelected officials in Brussels and see Britain regain some of its past might.

Businesses and governments in Europe, puzzled with Britain's struggles over what they viewed as a self-inflicted wound, hoped that Brexit could still somehow be undone.

But Johnson's comprehensive victory in last month's general election brought an abrupt end to the turmoil, giving his Conservatives a parliamentary majority with which to

push Brexit through.

MPs gave their initial blessing to the EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill before Christmas, and the government set aside just three days this week for detailed scrutiny of the complex text.

But few MPs even bothered to turn up on Tuesday and Wednesday, with both sessions ending early, while the

government easily saw off opposition attempts to amend the text.

In a striking contrast to much of last year, when every Brexit vote risked bringing down the previous government and eventually did, Commons approval is now a done deal.

We "may not win many votes in parliament just now, but we can win the moral argument," Keir Starmer, a potential successor to Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the main opposition Labour party, said yesterday.

The Brexit bill must still be passed by the unelected House of Lords and the European Parliament, but this is expected before January 31.

All eyes are now on another major challenge: the negotiation of a new relationship between Britain and the remaining 27 EU nations, which form the world's largest single market.

The Brexit deal covers separation issues such as EU citizens' rights and Britain's financial settlement, and sets out an 11-month transition period in which to agree a wider partnership.

US lawmakers set vote to curb Trump's war powers

Briefings on Soleimani's killing fail to convince Democrats

REUTERS, Washington

Trump administration officials failed to convince Democratic US lawmakers, and some Republicans, on Wednesday that an imminent threat had justified the killing of a top Iranian military commander, and congressional Democrats scheduled a vote on legislation to rein in the president's ability to wage war.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mark Milley and CIA Director Gina Haspel held classified briefings for all 535 members of Congress to discuss President Donald Trump's decision to order a drone strike that killed Qassem Soleimani in Iraq last week.

Following the sessions, most of Trump's fellow Republicans praised the officials, and Trump, for the strike and the presentation. Senator Jim Risch, Republican chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said it was one of the best briefings he had ever attended and officials had provided

"crystal-clear information."

Underscoring the deep partisan divide in the Capitol, Democrats - and at least two Republicans - said flatly the officials had not provided evidence to back up assertions by Trump and military commanders that Soleimani had posed an "imminent threat" to the United States.

They disputed the administration's argument that the killing of a foreign leader in a third country was legally justified.

US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi said shortly afterward that the Democratic-controlled chamber would vote on a war powers resolution as soon as Thursday.

The war powers resolution directs Trump to terminate the use of the US military in or against Iran, unless Congress has declared war or passed an authorization for the use of force against it.

The resolution is expected to easily pass the House, but would face a more difficult time in the Senate, which is controlled by Trump's fellow Republicans.



and reimposed sanctions, and Michel insisted it remained vital.

"The JCPOA agreement was an important achievement after 10 years of intense international negotiations and remains an important tool for regional stability," Michel's office said in its readout of his call with Rouhani.

The statement said Michel had insisted "the EU has its own interests and its vision" -- implicitly distancing EU capitals from Washington.

But Michel, who heads the European Council grouping the 28 member states, also told Rouhani that Iran must "avoid posing irreversible acts".

Big 'split' in UK Royals

Harry, Meghan quit front-line roles, seek to become 'financially independent'

AFP, London

Prince Harry and his celebrity wife Meghan's bombshell resignation from front-line royal duties rocked the British monarchy yesterday, with reports suggesting Queen Elizabeth II had not been informed in advance.

The couple said they would now "balance" their time between Britain and North America and rip up long-established relations with the press, in a surprise statement Wednesday that appeared to catch Buckingham Palace off guard.

In a short, terse response a short time later, a palace statement said discussions with Harry and Meghan were "at an early stage".

"We understand their desire to take a different approach, but these are complicated issues that will take time to work through," the palace said.

Media reports said the couple made their shock statement -- released on their Instagram account, own website and through Buckingham Palace's email communications system -- without notifying either Harry's grandmother, the monarch, or father, the future

king Prince Charles.

The mood in the palace was understood to be one of disappointment and even "hurt", according to the BBC, while Thursday's newspapers were full of reports of a family "split" and the queen's "dismay".

The decision follows a turbulent year for the pair, who have admitted to struggling in the spotlight and growing apart from Harry's brother Prince William. They have also complained of negative news coverage and taken several papers to court, another unusual move.

"We intend to step back as 'senior' members of the royal family and work to become financially independent, while continuing to fully support Her Majesty The Queen," they said.

Harry, 35, and Meghan, 38, are among the most senior, core members of the royal family, and along with William and his wife Kate, seen as embodying the monarchy's future. Rumours that all was not well with the Sussexes surfaced in October when Harry, sixth in line to the throne, admitted that he and William were "on different paths" and had good and bad days in their relationship.



Lebanon bans Ghosn from foreign travel

AFP, Beirut

Lebanon banned former auto tycoon Carlos Ghosn from travelling yesterday after questioning him over an Interpol "red notice" of charges of financial misconduct in Japan, judicial sources said.

The 65-year-old businessman fled while awaiting trial on charges including allegedly under-reporting his compensation to the tune of \$85 million.

His shock arrival in his native Lebanon last month was the latest twist in a story worthy of a Hollywood plot and prompted outrage from the Japanese government.

A "red notice" is a request to police across the world to provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender or similar legal action. It is not an arrest warrant.

Houthis not behind Saudi Aramco attacks: UN monitors

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

A report by United Nations sanctions monitors has said Yemen's Houthi rebels did not carry out an attack in September that set ablaze two major Saudi oil facilities, Reuters news agency reported.

The United States, European countries and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of being behind the attack on Saudi Aramco oil plants in Abqaiq and Khurais that was claimed by the Houthis. Iran has denied any involvement.

According to the report seen by Reuters on Wednesday, the independent UN experts to the Security Council Yemen sanctions committee said: "That despite their claims to the contrary, the Houthi forces did not launch the attacks on Abqaiq and Khurais on 14 September 2019."

Riyadh, which is backing Yemen's internationally recognised government in its fight against the Houthis, has long accused Iran of supplying the rebels with weapons. Tehran says it supports the rebels diplomatically and politically but has repeatedly denied providing them with any military aid.

The reported findings by the UN monitors come amid escalating tensions

in the region after the US assassinated top Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq last week and Tehran retaliated on Wednesday by firing missiles at Iraqi bases housing US troops.

The UN investigators said they doubted that the drones and land-attack cruise missiles used in the September 14 attack "have a sufficient range to have been launched from Yemeni territory under the control of the Houthis."

"The panel notes that Abqaiq and Khurais were approached respectively from a north/northwestern and north/northeastern direction, rather than from the south, as one would expect in the case of a launch from Yemeni territory," the report said, according to Reuters.

The investigators, who monitor sanctions on Yemen, also said they do not believe that "those comparatively sophisticated weapons were developed and manufactured in Yemen." They were not tasked with identifying who was responsible for the Saudi attack.

The attacks that targeted the Abqaiq and Khurais oil plants caused an increase in oil prices and shut down more than 5 percent of global oil supply. Saudi Arabia said on October 3 that it had fully restored oil output.

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