

UKRAINE JET DOWNING

Condolence fails to calm Iranians

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran's statement yesterday that a Ukrainian passenger plane was downed by a missile fired unintentionally followed growing pressure from abroad but also at home, and for some Iranians, the authorities' expressions of condolence were not enough.

Expressions of condolence over the incident from Supreme Leader and President Hassan Rouhani failed to calm angry Iranians, who used social media to express their outrage against the establishment for concealing the truth.

"It is a national tragedy. The way it was handled and it was announced by the authorities was even more tragic," said Ali Ansari, a moderate cleric, according to Iran's semi-official ILNA news agency.

Many Iranians asked why authorities did not close down Tehran's airport and the country's airspace at a time when they would have been on alert for retaliation after the missile strikes.

"They were so careful not to kill any American in their revenge for Soleimani. But they did not close the airport? This shows how much this regime cares for Iranians," said Mira Sedaghati in Tehran by telephone.

An Iranian military statement carried by state media said the Ukrainian plane, which was headed for Kiev, was mistaken for a "hostile target" after it turned toward a sensitive military base of the elite Revolutionary Guards near Tehran, adding that it was a "human error and unintentional".

"Unintentionally? What does it mean? They concealed this huge tragic news for days just to mourn for Soleimani. Shame on you," said Reza Ghadyani, in Tabriz city.

Some Iranians called for resignation of officials, dismissing their apologies.



Panicked residents run following an air strike by pro-regime forces in the northwestern Syrian city of Idlib yesterday. *Inset*, an injured Syrian child is carried by a White Helmets rescue worker. At least 18 civilians were killed in the air strike, a war monitor said, one day before a planned ceasefire is due to take effect.

PHOTO: AFP

Trump ups Iran accusations

Says 4 US embassies targeted but still gives few specifics

AFP, Washington

The United States piled new sanctions on Iran's already crippled economy Friday and defended the killing of a top Iranian leader, saying he had been planning an "imminent" attack on four US embassies.

The sanctions, announced at the White House, marked the latest salvo in a US-Iranian confrontation that risked sliding into war a week ago with the deadly US drone attack on general Qasem Soleimani, by some measures the second most influential person in Iran.

In response, Iran fired volleys of ballistic missiles at Iraqi bases housing US troops, without causing casualties.

While President Donald Trump said he would not respond further militarily, Washington is intent on maintaining pressure.

The sanctions mean "we will cut off billions of dollars of support to the Iranian regime," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told reporters at the White House.

The measures targeting Iran's steel industry and eight state officials came on top of massive sanctions already aimed at bringing the country's economy to its knees.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters that sanctions so far "have deprived the regime of billions in revenue."

Among the senior Iranian officials targeted in the new

measures were Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, the Iranian armed forces deputy chief of staff and Gholamreza Soleimani, the head of the Basij militia, a volunteer force loyal to the regime.

Seventeen Iranian metals producers and mining companies were listed.

Critics are questioning why Trump -- who has been impeached and faces a Senate trial in the coming days -- ordered Soleimani's killing last week.

The administration has pushed back against accusations that Trump acted recklessly, insisting that longtime US foe Soleimani was on the brink of launching an attack and had to be stopped.

On Thursday, Trump said that Soleimani had been planning to blow up the US embassy in Baghdad. However, officials did not

back up that scenario.

On Friday, Trump shifted, saying "probably it was going to be the embassy in Baghdad."

"I can reveal that I believe it would have been four embassies," Trump added in an excerpt of an interview aired on Fox News. Earlier, Pompeo said the US had "specific information" on "imminent" attacks "against American facilities, including American embassies, military bases."

But "we don't know exactly which day it would've been executed," he said.

US piles on sanctions
pain against Iran

Sanctions so far have
deprived the regime
of billions in revenue



Climate at mercy of politics in 2020, experts warn

AFP, Paris

2020 is the most crucial year yet for humanity's plan to dodge the bullet of catastrophic global warming, experts said yesterday, warning that the narrow path to safety was riddled with pitfalls, from the US election to Brexit.

When nations struck the 2015 Paris agreement, which aims to limit temperature rises under 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 Fahrenheit), they agreed on five-year periods in which climate action could be implemented, assessed and boosted.

2020 is the year the landmark deal goes into effect, yet almost three decades of diplomatic wrangling has fallen far short of what science says is needed to avert disastrous climate change.

A crucial UN summit at which leaders will finalise their action plans to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is set to open in Glasgow on November 9 -- just six days after a US general election that could see President Donald Trump win a second term.

Trump shocked the world in 2017 when

he said the United States -- history's largest emitter -- was withdrawing from the Paris agreement. It is due to leave the deal on November 4.

"Another four years of Trump in the White House would mean that the world's key country in terms of providing global leadership will be sitting the problem out," Michael Oppenheimer, professor of Geosciences and International Affairs at Princeton University, told AFP.

"So that's four years of having a millstone around the neck of the world's efforts to deal with climate change."

After a year of climate-related disasters, from cyclones and flooding in Africa and southeast Asia to devastating wildfires in Australia and California, nations in December failed to make progress during the annual UN Climate Change Conference COP 25.

More than 100 countries have pledged to redouble their efforts to reduce domestic emissions, but the biggest polluters -- China, India, the US and the European Union -- have yet to unveil new plans.



A handout image released yesterday shows a Russian naval ship sails close to the US Navy destroyer USS Farragut during an incident in the northern Arabian Sea on Thursday. The incident is the latest example of a close encounter between US and Russian military forces that American officials have described as unsafe or provocative.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Harry, Meghan believe they are being 'driven out': friend

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex feel they are being "driven out" of the royal family after they were told they would not have major roles in a "slimmed-down monarchy," a friend has claimed.

ITV news anchor Tom Bradby said Prince Harry and Meghan were made aware, while away in Canada for six weeks, that the royal household's focus in the future would be on those at the top of the line of succession.

Buckingham Palace moved quickly to shrug off suggestions it had shown the door to the couple, insisting the Sussexes had been "very much at the heart" of plans for the royal family's future before a shock announcement they were stepping back from public life.

Harry and Meghan's plans were announced in a statement on Wednesday that rocked the royal family and is said to have left the Queen and other senior royals "hurt".

Bradby, who is friends with the couple, told an ITV

news programme: "It had been made clear to them in their absence there was going to be a slimmed-down monarchy and they weren't really a part of it."

He added: "Certainly the rest of the family find Harry and Meghan very difficult and, from Harry and Meghan's point of view, they're just being driven out as they see it."

But The Times reported that palace officials had stressed Harry and Meghan had always been central to the monarchy's plans, with one aide quoted as saying: "It is strongly disputed that the Sussexes are not at the centre of any future slimmed-down monarchy."

The aide added: "I don't think you could point to any evidence of them being forced out, or made to feel unwelcome."

Talks on the Duke and Duchesses' future roles in the royal household began in earnest on Friday at the urging of the Queen -- following reports she had pressed officials to ensure a remedy to the situation was found in days, as opposed to weeks.



TRUMP IMPEACHMENT

Democrats to send articles to Senate next week: Pelosi

AFP, Washington

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Friday she intends to transmit articles of impeachment against Donald Trump to the Senate next week, moving to end a taut standoff with Republicans over terms of the president's trial.

The top Democrat's announcement virtually assures that a historic trial of Trump on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress begins this month, as anticipated.

But she declined to provide a specific timeline for the next steps and did not announce which House Democrats she will ask to spearhead the case in the Senate, saying lawmakers should be ready to vote to appoint the managers some time next week.

"I have asked Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler to be prepared to bring to the floor next week a resolution to appoint managers and transmit articles of impeachment to the Senate," Pelosi said in a letter to her Democratic caucus.

"I will be consulting with you at our

Tuesday House Democratic Caucus meeting on how we proceed further."

Pelosi has withheld the articles since Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives on December 18 over allegations that he improperly pressured Ukraine to investigate his potential 2020 election rival Joe Biden, and that he obstructed the subsequent congressional probe.

The top Democrat in Congress had hoped Senate Leader Mitch McConnell, of Trump's Republican Party, would provide assurances of what she described as a "fair" trial in which Democrats can subpoena witnesses and documents.

But McConnell -- who, like Pelosi, is seen as a wily political strategist -- refused to budge, announcing this week he had sufficient Republican votes to conduct a trial without acceding to Democratic demands.

"There will be no haggling with the House over Senate procedure," he said on Wednesday.

WUHAN PNEUMONIA

China reports first death from outbreak

AFP, Shanghai

China yesterday said a 61-year-old man had become the first person to die from a respiratory illness believed caused by a new virus from the same family as SARS, which claimed hundreds of lives more than a decade ago.

Forty-one people with pneumonia-like symptoms have so far been diagnosed with the new virus in Wuhan, with one of the victims dying on Thursday, the central Chinese city's health commission said on its website.

Seven others remained in serious condition, two were discharged from treatment, and the rest were stable, it added.

The episode has caused alarm due to the spectre of SARS, or Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which in 2002-2003 killed 349 people in mainland China and another 299 in Hong Kong, whose economy was hit hard by the epidemic's devastating impact on tourism.

Chinese scientists investigating the outbreak said last week they believe the pathogen to be a previously unknown type of coronavirus, a broad family ranging from the common cold to more serious illnesses like SARS.

Scientists in Hong Kong's Department of Health said yesterday that genetic sequencing of the virus found in one of the Wuhan patients and published online by a Chinese expert indicated it was 80 percent similar to SARS found in bats.

Speaking at a news conference in Hong Kong, they said it was too early to conclude definitively that it was a SARS strain, adding that the city needed to stay vigilant.

"We will remain alert as we believe the epidemic will continue to develop," said Wong Ka-hing, director of the department's Health Protection Centre.

Australia bushfires ease

Authorities promise to build defences against blazes

REUTERS, Sydney

Bushfire conditions eased in Australia yesterday after a gruelling night for firefighters, with authorities saying they expect at least a week of milder weather in which to step up defences against the huge blazes still burning.

Cooler temperatures and rainfall had eased conditions after Friday's strong southerly wind change that packed gusts of more than 100 kph (60 mph), whipping some fires on the east coast up to the emergency warning level.

The much needed respite was an opportunity to consolidate and try and get the upper hand over the fires, said Shane Fitzsimmons, commissioner of the New South Wales (NSW) Rural Fire Service.

"It would appear that we have got at least a week," Fitzsimmons told a media briefing. "It will probably be the best seven days we have had without a rise of very dangerous fire ratings."

New South Wales police said in a statement that areas not affected by the

bushfires of the South Coast, a popular holiday destination, are in a position to reopen for business, although national parks remain close until February 1.

Officials have been urging foreign tourists to continue visiting Australia, which depends on income from tourism as the industry accounts for 3.1% of the country's gross domestic product.

South Australian fire officials said the situation on Kangaroo Island has stabilised



after more than 200,000 hectares (494,000 acres) had burnt in blazes described as "hell on earth", by the island's mayor, Michael Pengill, on Twitter.

Since October, 27 people have been killed in Australia and thousands subjected to repeat evacuations as huge and unpredictable fires scorched more than 10.3 million hectares (25.5 million acres), an area roughly the size of South Korea.

The Sydney Opera House illuminated its sails yesterday evening with a display of images from the last three months of the fire crisis, honouring those affected and those fighting the flames.

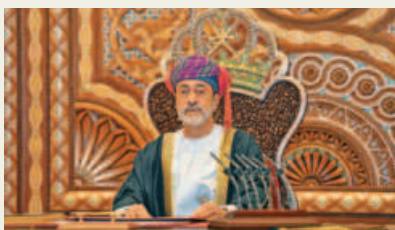
Tunisian parliament rejects government of Habib Jemli

Tunisia's parliament Friday rejected the government proposed by Prime Minister-designate Habib Jemli after months of negotiations between political parties to fill positions. Jemli, an independent, was nominated by the Islamist-inspired Ennahdha party after it came out top in legislative polls in October but failed to win enough seats to form a majority in the 217-seat chamber. Deputies voted 134 to 72 against Jemli's proposed government of independent figures due to "frictions" between the parties over political appointments. President Kais Saied now has 10 days to choose a new prime minister-designate who will attempt to put together a government acceptable to the assembly.

12 dead in migrant boat sinking off Greece

At least 12 people died yesterday when a boat loaded with asylum-seekers sank in the Ionian Sea, the Greek coastguard said. "So far 12 bodies have been recovered. The search and rescue operation continues," they said in a statement, adding that they had rescued more than 20 survivors. "Three of them are being flown by helicopter to (the nearest hospital) for emergency treatment," the statement added. There were no immediate details on the identity of those on board. The boat, which was carrying around 50 people, took on water near the island of Paxi during an apparent attempt to reach Italy. At this point someone on board issued a distress call, the authorities said.

Oman swears in new sultan following death of Qaboos



Oman's new royal ruler yesterday pledged to follow the non-interference policy that made the kingdom a vital regional mediator under his late cousin Sultan Qaboos who reigned for half a century. Haitham bin Tariq, the culture minister, was sworn in shortly after modern Oman's founding father was laid to rest after his death on Friday at the age of 79. "We will follow the path of the late sultan," Haitham, 65, said in his first public speech which was aired live on state television. Qaboos transformed the Arabian Peninsula nation from a backwater into a modern state with a thriving tourism industry.

SOURCE: AFP