

US condemns latest missile attack on Iraqi airbase

4 local troops hurt

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Sunday he was "outraged" by another missile attack on an Iraqi airbase where US forces have been stationed, as neighbouring Iran signalled a wish to de-escalate tensions.

"Outraged by reports of another rocket attack on an Iraqi airbase," Pompeo tweeted. "These continued violations of Iraq's sovereignty by groups not loyal to the Iraqi government must end."

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for Sunday's rocket attacks, in which the Iraqi military said eight missiles wounded two Iraqi officers and two airmen.

The US has previously blamed such attacks on Iran-backed groups in Iraq.

The Al-Balad base had held a small US Air Force contingent as well as American contractors, but most were evacuated following a sharp rise in friction between the US and Iran over the past two weeks, military sources told AFP.

Al-Balad is the main airbase for Iraq's F-16s, which it bought from the US.

Military bases hosting US troops have been subject in recent months to rocket and mortar attacks that have mostly wounded Iraqi forces, but also killed one American contractor last month.

That death set off a series of dramatic developments, with the US carrying out deadly strikes against a pro-Iran paramilitary group in Iraq as well as a convoy carrying top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani outside the Baghdad airport.

Pro-Iran factions in Iraq have vowed revenge for those raids, even as Iran said it had already responded in "proportion" by striking another western airbase where US soldiers are located.



Mourners console each other as they gather at a memorial service for the victims of Ukrainian Airlines flight PS752 crash in Iran at the Saville Community Sports Centre in Edmonton, Canada on Sunday night.

PHOTO: AFP

Canada grieves for victims

PM promises justice and accountability at Toronto memorial

AFP, Toronto

Thousands of people attended vigils on Sunday night in Canada for the 57 Canadian victims of the Ukrainian airliner crash in Iran, most of them from the Iranian community.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told a memorial event in Edmonton that "this tragedy struck our Iranian-Canadian community, leaving cities like Edmonton reeling, but this was truly a Canadian tragedy."

"This tragedy should have never occurred, and I want to assure you that you have my full support during this extraordinarily difficult time ... you give us purpose to pursue justice and accountability for you," said Trudeau, who has demanded Canada take part in the crash probe.

"We will not rest until there are answers."

Six university students were killed when the Ukraine International Airlines flight crashed on January 8, shortly after takeoff from Tehran's airport.

All 176 people aboard were killed, 57 of whom were Canadian, many of them dual Iranian nationals.

Iran has since admitted the airliner

was mistakenly shot down by Iranian missiles.

At a ceremony at the University of Toronto, many of those who had been close to the victims expressed their grief and anger.

"It's a story that resonates with the people, these immigrants with a lot

IRAN PLANE DOWNING

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of hopes and dreams. They worked super hard, they were high achievers and they get here only to be shot down in the middle of the air," said Ali Esnaashani.

"I'm angry, I'm sad," the 30-year-old told AFP. "But I also feel inspired to see the community come together like this."

On stage, Mehrdad Arianejad, head of the Canadian-Iranian cultural dialogue nonprofit Tirgan, began to cry during his speech.

"Shock has given way to grief and increasingly anger," he said.

"We must demand justice from the Islamic Republic authorities and demand answers and compensation for the negligence and lack of regard for human life that has led to this tragedy."

Canada is home to a major Iranian diaspora. In 2016, 210,000 Canadians claimed Iranian origins, according to official figures.

Half of them live in Toronto, which has one of the most significant Iranian communities in North America after Los Angeles.

Hola, 50, who knew one of the victims, could not hold back her tears. "I'm happy that the Canadian government promised to follow through and find justice for these people, for the families and loved ones," she said.

"Nothing will ever replace these brilliant lives that have been cut short," said Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland in Toronto. "We will always bear these scars."

'I'm spending all my money to get rid of Trump'

Says Bloomberg, denies trying to buy US election

REUTERS, San Antonio

US presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg told Reuters he is ready to spend much of his vast fortune to oust Republican President Donald Trump from the White House in 2020, rejecting criticism from rivals for the Democratic nomination that the billionaire is trying to buy the US election.

Ranked by Forbes as the eighth-richest American, Bloomberg has flooded US airwaves and social media feeds with messages that he stands the best chance to beat Trump, spending more on campaign ads since he launched his campaign in November than his main Democratic rivals have over the last year.

"Number one priority is to get rid of Donald Trump. I'm spending all my money to get rid of Trump," Bloomberg told Reuters aboard his campaign bus on Saturday, during a nearly 300-mile (483-km) drive across Texas, one of the 14 states that will vote on Super Tuesday on March 3.

"Do you want me to spend more or less? End of story."

US Senator Elizabeth Warren, one of the leading Democratic presidential contenders who has vowed to get money out of politics, blasted Bloomberg when he launched his campaign with a \$37-million TV advertising blitz, accusing the former New York City mayor of trying to buy American democracy.

"These are just political things they say, hoping they catch on and they don't like me doing it, because it competes with them, not because it's bad policy," Bloomberg said.

After entering the race late and missing the first six Democratic debates, Bloomberg generally sits fifth in national public opinion polls behind Joe Biden, Bernie Sanders, Warren and Pete Buttigieg.

But not just the two liberal standard-bearers of Warren and Sanders, all of the four are too liberal to beat Trump, Bloomberg said.



CHINA PNEUMONIA OUTBREAK

First case of new virus found in Thailand

AFP, Geneva

A new virus from the same family as the deadly SARS disease has spread beyond China's borders for the first time with a case emerging in Thailand, UN and Thai officials said yesterday.

Thai doctors diagnosed a Chinese traveller with mild pneumonia on January 8 later confirmed to have been caused by the so-called novel coronavirus -- which has already given rise to 41 pneumonia-like cases and one death in China.

The outbreak has caused alarm because of the link with SARS (Sudden Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed 349 people in mainland China and another 299 in Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

The UN health agency (WHO) confirmed that the outbreak in the city of Wuhan was caused by a previously unknown type of corona virus, a broad family ranging from the common cold to more serious illnesses like SARS.

"Laboratory testing subsequently confirmed that the novel coronavirus was the cause," WHO spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told AFP in an email, referring to the case in Thailand.

WHO said it might soon host an emergency meeting on the spread of the new virus.

Thai Health Minister Anutin Charnvirakul stressed to reporters in Bangkok yesterday that a 61-year-old Chinese woman who had travelled from Wuhan "was infected with the virus from outside Thailand".

Philippines on alert

Authorities warn of 'explosive eruption' as volcano spews ash, lava near Manila; 20,000 evacuated; hundreds of flights grounded

AFP, Talisay City

Lava and broad columns of ash illuminated by lightning spewed from a volcano south of the Philippine capital yesterday, grounding hundreds of flights as authorities warned of a possible "explosive eruption".

Fine grit weighed down trees and turned roads into muddy messes across the region surrounding the Taal volcano, which burst to life Sunday and has forced over 20,000 people to seek refuge in evacuation centres, a provincial governor said.

Geologists said the volcano remained active, spurring red-hot lava some 500 metres (1,600 feet) into the air from new cracks that have opened in its northern flank, as accompanying earthquakes rattled the area.

"We are really scared of what might happen to us... that our house might collapse in a strong earthquake and that we'll all be killed by falling debris," said Bienvenido Musa, aged 56.

"Who wouldn't be scared? That's why I decided to send my family to an evacuation

centre."

Taal is a tourist attraction that sits in a picturesque lake, yet is also one of the most active volcanoes in a nation where earthquakes and eruptions are a frightening



and destructive part of life. The Philippines sits on the Pacific "Ring of Fire", where tectonic plates collide deep below the Earth's surface. Schools in the region around Taal, some government offices in Manila and

the Philippine Stock Exchange were closed as authorities issued warnings against breathing the ash.

Stores quickly sold out of dust masks, which health officials said could help protect against potentially harmful effects of the powder-like soot.

"I'll just stay at home and tie a handkerchief around my face. I think that's OK," Manila resident Menchie Claveria said, after attempting to buy a mask.

Limited flight operations resumed at Manila's main international airport yesterday, nearly a day after authorities halted them due to the safety risk volcanic ash poses to planes.

However, travellers booked on over 240 cancelled flights still faced delays at Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

"I'm disappointed because this (delay) means additional expense for me and it's tiring to wait," said stranded traveller Joan Diocaras, a 28-year-old Filipino who works in Taiwan.

"But there's nothing we can do."

Islamic State on rise again: King of Jordan

King Abdullah of Jordan yesterday warned that the Islamic State group was regrouping and was once again on the rise in the Middle East. Months after the ousting of IS last year from their last Syrian holdout, Abdullah said his "major concern is that we have seen over the past year the re-establishment and rise of Isis, not only in southern eastern Syria but also in western Iraq. "We have to deal with the reemergence of Isis," the king added in an interview with TV channel France 24 ahead of talks this week in Brussels, Strasbourg and Paris. He also said many foreign fighters from Syria were now in Libya.

Ex-pope Benedict breaks silence on celibacy debate



Former pope Benedict XVI has publicly urged his successor Pope Francis not to open the Catholic priesthood up to married men, in a plea that Sunday stunned Vatican experts. The ex-pontiff, who retired in 2013, issued the defence of clerical celibacy in a book written with arch-conservative Cardinal Robert Sarah, extracts of which were published in exclusive by France's Le Figaro. "I cannot keep silent!" Benedict wrote in the book, which follows an extraordinary meeting of bishops from the Amazonian at the Vatican last year that recommended the ordination of married men in certain circumstances.

HRW head denied entry to HK ahead of report launch

China yesterday defended barring the head of Human Rights Watch from entering Hong Kong, saying non-governmental organisations were responsible for political unrest in the city and should "pay the proper price". Kenneth Roth was supposed to give a press conference in Hong Kong this week to unveil the New York-based rights group's latest global survey, which accuses China of prosecuting "an intensive attack" on international human rights agencies. The long-time executive director said Sunday that he was turned back by authorities at the city's airport.

SOURCE: AFP

Man survives 3 weeks in frozen wild

AFP, Washington

Haggard and traumatized, a young man has told how he survived for more than three weeks in the snowy wilderness of Alaska after his remote cabin burned down when he mistakenly put cardboard in his stove.

Tyson Steele, who was rescued by helicopter on Thursday, said his cabin -- located 20 miles (30 kilometres) from the nearest neighbour -- was incinerated in mid-December, and his beloved dog Phil died in the blaze.

Steele, 30, dug a snow cave and then built a makeshift shelter, staying warm with just a few sleeping bags and coats, and eating tins of food saved from the fire.

Helicopter footage released by Alaska State Troopers showed Steele waving for help, with SOS marked out in the deep snow, after a rescue effort was launched as he had not called his parents for three weeks.

"The mistake I made, I got hasty and I put a

big piece of cardboard in the stove to start the fire," Steele said. "It sent a spark out through the chimney which landed on the roof."

He awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of melting plastic dripping and rushed outside in minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 26 degrees Celsius) temperatures to find his cabin ablaze.

At first, he thought his six-year-old chocolate Labrador had escaped safely.

"My dog starts howling, right? Inside. And I thought he was not inside... I was hysterical," he said.

"I have no words for that sorrow; it was just a scream... that's all I could express - just scream. (It) felt like I tore my lung out."

Eating a long-awaited McDonald's and still wearing some of the same clothes, Steele gave an interview to the State Troopers unit, which described him as appearing "vaguely reminiscent of actor Tom Hanks' character in the movie 'Cast Away'."



TRUMP IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

Republicans will pay price for denying witnesses: Pelosi

REUTERS, Washington

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said House Democrats will determine today when to send formal impeachment charges against President Donald Trump to the Senate and warned that Republicans will pay a political price for denying a trial with witnesses.

Pelosi, speaking on Sunday on ABC's "This Week" program, said her caucus at a regular meeting this morning would vote on the timing of sending articles of impeachment to the Senate and naming trial managers in the House.

"I have always said I would send them over. So there shouldn't be any mystery to that," Pelosi said.

Pelosi has delayed delivery of the charges for weeks to compel Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to agree to include new

witness testimony and evidence about Trump's pressure on Ukraine to probe former Vice President Joe Biden, a leading Democrat running for the nomination to face Trump in the November election.

Her gambit appeared to fail as McConnell slammed the door on that idea last week, saying he had enough Republican votes to start the trial without a commitment to hear from additional witnesses, including former Trump national security adviser John Bolton.

Bolton has said he would be willing to testify if subpoenaed by the Senate.

Pelosi insisted her delay helped make American voters aware of the need for a "fair trial" with witness testimony and evidence. If McConnell continues to block such proceedings, Republicans would pay a political price.

