

Israel air strikes hit Iran targets in Syria

10 killed; Tehran to return to nuke deal if sanctions lifted

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli warplanes struck Syria yesterday, hitting Iranian targets and killing 10 Syrian and foreign fighters in what the Israeli army called a retaliatory attack after explosive devices were found near one of its bases on the occupied Golan Heights.

The air strikes came hours before US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was to land in Israel for talks including on Iran, in what was likely to be his last visit to the staunch American ally before President Donald Trump leaves office.

An Israeli army statement said its fighter jets had overnight hit eight "military targets belonging to the Iranian Quds Force and the Syrian armed forces". The elite Quds Force is the main foreign operations arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

The targets included "storage facilities, headquarters and military compounds" as well as "Syrian surface-to-air missile batteries," it said.

Syrian state news agency SANA said the strikes had killed three of its soldiers and wounded another. The monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 10 people were killed, including foreign fighters as well as Syrian soldiers.

Israel has carried out hundreds of air and missile strikes on Syria since civil war broke out there in 2011, targeting Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces as well as government troops.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday said it would "automatically" return to its nuclear commitments if US President-elect Joe Biden lifts sanctions imposed over the past two years.

Tehran's return to its commitments "can be done automatically and needs no conditions or even negotiations," Mohammad Javad Zarif said in comments published in the state-run Iran daily.



A general view of a protest against the government's coronavirus disease (Covid-19) restrictions, while police use water cannons, near the Reichstag, the seat of Germany's lower house of parliament Bundestag, in Berlin, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Trump lost because of 'rigged' polls

Say half of Republicans

REUTERS

About half of all Republicans believe President Donald Trump "rightfully won" the US election but that it was stolen from him by widespread voter fraud that favored Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, according to a new Reuters/Ipsos opinion poll.

The Nov 13-17 opinion poll showed that Trump's open defiance of Biden's victory appears to be affecting the public's confidence in American democracy, especially among Republicans. Altogether, 73% of those polled agreed that Biden won the election while 5% thought Trump won. But when asked specifically whether Biden had "rightfully won," Republicans showed they were suspicious about how Biden won. Fifty-two percent of Republicans said that Trump "rightfully won," while only 29% said that Biden had rightfully won.

68% of Republicans said they were concerned that the election was "rigged."

NEWS IN BRIEF

Palestinian Authority to restoring Israel coordination

The Palestinian Authority said Tuesday it will restore coordination with Israel, ending a six-month suspension. Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas had announced a halt to coordination with Israel, including US-backed security cooperation, in May in response to Israeli plans to annex parts of the West Bank. "In the light of Mahmoud Abbas's international contacts... and given the written and verbal commitments we have received from the Israelis, we will resume relations where they were before May 19, 2020," Hussein al-Sheikh, the PA's civil affairs minister, said late Tuesday. But Hamas, the Islamist group which runs the Gaza Strip, condemned the PA's lifting of the suspension. It said the move was a "stab in the back" for reconciliation efforts between the group and Abbas' West Bank-based administration, adding that Biden "would not" end Israel's half-century-old occupation of Palestinian territory.

Iraq, Saudi reopen border crossing after 30 years

Iraq and Saudi Arabia yesterday reopened their Arar desert crossing, a long-awaited sign of closer trade ties after 30 years of sealed land borders between the two countries. Top officials including Iraq's interior minister and the head of its border commission travelled from Baghdad to formally open Arar, where a line of cargo trucks stood waiting. The Saudi ambassador to Iraq was also in attendance and a delegation from Riyadh was to open the Saudi side of the border. Arar will be open to both goods and people for the first time since Riyadh cut off its diplomatic relationship with Baghdad in 1990, following Iraqi ex-dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

Ethiopia civil war: Both sides claim big wins

Both sides in Ethiopia's raging internal conflict claimed military successes yesterday, creating a muddled picture of fighting even as the government promised it would soon be over. Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, announced the military campaign in Tigray on November 4, saying it was in response to Tigray region's local forces' attacks on federal military camps. Tigrayan leader Debretsion Gebremichael said his forces are battering the federal forces, while Ethiopia army chief Berhanu Jula said in a statement that army was "winning on all fronts". "The TPLF's plan to drag Ethiopia into civil war and tear it apart has failed," Berhanu said. Abiy has resisted international pressure to bring about a cessation of hostilities.

SOURCE: AFP, REUTERS

US to slash troop levels in Iraq, Afghanistan

AFP, Washington

The US will slash troop levels in Afghanistan and Iraq to their lowest levels in nearly 20 years of war after President Donald Trump pledged to end conflicts abroad, the Pentagon announced Tuesday.

Rejecting concerns that precipitous drawdowns could give up all the US has fought for, Acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller said around 2,000 troops would be pulled from Afghanistan by January 15.

Five hundred more would come back from Iraq by the same date, leaving 2,500 in each country.

The moves reflect Trump's policy "to bring the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to a successful and responsible conclusion and to bring our brave service members home," Miller said.

Miller said the US had met its goals, set in 2001 after the al-Qaeda attacks on the United States, to defeat Islamist extremists and to help "local partners and allies to take the lead in the fight."

"With the blessings of providence in the coming year, we will finish this generational war and bring our men and women home," he said.

The moves took the United States closer to disengaging from conflicts that have blazed and smoldered through three presidencies with no end in sight since 2001.

But critics said they risk appearing like a humiliating defeat, leaving the original threat of Islamic extremist attacks intact.

The announcement came just weeks before Trump cedes the White House in the wake of his November 3 reelection loss to Democrat Joe Biden.

Amid criticism that Trump was acting abruptly since his defeat, White House National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien said the troop cuts have been in the works for some time.

Thai protesters rally after violent clashes

AFP, Bangkok

Thousands of democracy activists marched on Thailand's police headquarters in downtown Bangkok yesterday, a day after six people were shot during violent clashes.

The kingdom has been rocked by months of protests demanding changes to the constitution, the removal of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-O-Cha -- and even changes to the untouchable monarchy.

Protesters -- numbering more than 10,000 according to an AFP estimate -- packed the Ratchaprasong intersection in the heart of Bangkok's shopping and commercial district, after their leaders vowed to step up the movement.

After daubing anti-royal slogans on walls and the ground they marched on the heavily-defended national police headquarters.

Some protesters threw glass bottles and paint bombs over the walls of police HQ, which was barricaded with dumper trucks, concrete blocks and razor wire, while others used water pistols to hurl paint inside the compound.

Wednesday's protest came a day after the most violent confrontations since the democracy movement began in July, as police used tear gas and irritant-laced water cannon on protesters trying to reach parliament, and democracy activists clashed with royalists. More than 50 people were injured, six of them with gunshot wounds, according to medical officials, though it is not clear who was responsible for the shooting.



Demonstrators show the three-fingered salute during a rally in Bangkok, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK to ban petrol, diesel cars from 2030

AFP, London

Britain will ban petrol and diesel vehicle sales from 2030 as part of a 10-point plan for a "green industrial revolution" to be unveiled yesterday by Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The British premier has earmarked £12 billion (13.4 billion euros, \$15.9 billion) for the wide-ranging plans, which he hopes will secure up to 250,000 jobs and help meet a target for the UK to become carbon neutral by 2050.

The proposals include quadrupling offshore wind power within a decade while scaling up hydrogen production capacity for industry, transport, power and homes.

Investment will also be made in zero-emission public transport, alongside research into zero-emission planes and ships, and in making cycling and walking "more attractive".

The plans contain broader aims

to make Britain a "world-leader" in carbon capture technology and the City of London a "global centre of green finance".

The 2030 ban on petrol and diesel cars and vans follows what



Downing Street called "extensive consultation with car manufacturers and sellers".

Johnson had said in February his government would aim to end such sales by 2035, but will now only allow the sale of hybrid vehicles until that year.

Under the new plans, it will invest £1.3 billion on expanding electric vehicle chargepoints in

homes and streets across England, and make £582 million available in grants for people to buy zero or ultra-low emission vehicles.

Meanwhile nearly £500 million will be spent in the next four years on the development and production of electric vehicle batteries.

Under proposals to reduce carbon-emitting gas usage, another £500 million is earmarked to trial using hydrogen in homes for heating and cooking.

The government is aiming to build a so-called "Hydrogen Neighbourhood" within three years, a "Hydrogen Village" by 2025, and a town of tens of thousands of homes using the gas by the end of the decade.

It is also set to invest £1 billion in a grant scheme launched in September, and now to be extended for a year, to make homes and public buildings more energy efficient.

4b overweight people by 2050!

AFP, Paris

More than four billion people could be overweight by 2050, with 1.5 billion of them obese, if the current global dietary trend towards processed foods continues, a first-of-its-kind study predicted yesterday.

Warning of a health and environmental crisis of "mind-blowing magnitude", experts from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) said that global food demand would leap 50 percent by mid-century, pushing past Earth's capacity to sustain nature.

Food production already hovers up three-quarters of the world's fresh water and one-third of its land -- and accounts for up to a third of greenhouse gas emissions.

Providing a long-term overview of changing global eating habits between 1965 and 2100, the researchers used an open-source model to forecast how food demand would respond to a variety of factors such as population growth, ageing, growing body masses, declining physical activity and increased food waste.

They found that "business as usual" -- a continuation of current trends -- will likely see more than four billion people, or 45 percent of the world's population,

overweight by 2050.

The model predicted that 16 percent would be obese, compared with nine percent currently among the 29 percent of the population who are overweight.

"The increasing waste of food and the rising consumption of animal protein mean that the environmental impact of our agricultural system will spiral out of control," said Benjamin Bodirsky, lead author of the study published in Nature Scientific Reports.

"Whether greenhouse gasses, nitrogen pollution or deforestation: we are pushing the limits of our planet -- and exceeding them."

The study found that as a result of increasing inequality along with food waste and loss -- food that is produced but not consumed due to lack of storage or overbuying -- around half a billion people will still be undernourished by mid-century.

"There is enough food in the world -- the problem is that the poorest people on our planet have simply not the income to purchase it," said co-author Prajal Pradhan. "And in rich countries, people don't feel the economic and environmental consequences of wasting food."

Biden speaks to Netanyahu, Modi

AFP, Washington

US President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday held his first talks since his victory with the prime ministers of Israel and India, allies of Donald Trump who has not conceded defeat.

Biden told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had a notoriously rocky relationship with the last Democratic president, Barack Obama, that he was determined "to ensure that the US-Israel relationship is strengthened and enjoys strong bipartisan support."

Biden "reiterated his steadfast support for Israel's security and its future as a Jewish and democratic state," the president-elect's office said in a statement.

The office of Netanyahu, who had vigorously challenged the 2009-2017 Obama-Biden administration over its diplomacy with Iran and push for Palestinian rights, said he had a "warm" conversation with the president-elect.

Biden separately voiced optimism about working with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had heaped praise on Trump.

India enjoys support across party lines in Washington but Democratic lawmakers have increasingly voiced concern about human rights under the Hindu nationalist Modi, including his championing of a controversial citizenship law and revocation of autonomy in Muslim-majority Kashmir.

Biden said he hoped to cooperate with Modi on common challenges including the Covid pandemic, regional security, climate change and, in a delicate choice of words, on "strengthening democracy at home and abroad."