

Iran complying with nuclear deal: IAEA

AFP, Vienna

Iran remains in compliance with the 2015 nuclear deal, a UN atomic watchdog report showed yesterday, even as growing tensions between Tehran and Washington threaten to torpedo the landmark agreement.

The 2015 accord covered only Iran's nuclear activities and the new International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) quarterly report, seen by AFP, showed that these remained in compliance.

Iran's stock of low-enriched uranium -- used for peaceful purposes, but when further processed for a weapon -- did not exceed the agreed limit of 300 kilograms, the report said.

It added that Iran "has not pursued the construction of the Arak... reactor" -- which could give it weapons-grade plutonium -- and has not enriched uranium above low purity levels.

The number of enrichment centrifuges also remained as agreed.

US President Trump is due in October to certify to Congress whether Iran is sticking to the nuclear deal. In July he told the Wall Street Journal he "would be surprised if they were in compliance".



(From top, anti-clockwise) South Korean F-15K fighter jets and US F-35B stealth jet fighters flying over South Korea during a joint military drill aimed to counter North Korea's latest missile test; a US Air Force B-1B Lancer dropping a bomb at a shooting range in near Seoul; and bombs hitting a mock target during the drill.

PHOTO: AFP

Iraq retakes Tal Afar from IS

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq declared yesterday that its forces had retaken the northern city of Tal Afar and the surrounding region in another major victory over Islamic State group jihadists.

IS, which seized nearly a third of Iraq in 2014 in a stunning defeat for the army, now controls just 10 percent of the country, according to the US-led international coalition against the jihadists.

The fall of Tal Afar, located in the northern province of Nineveh, deprives IS of what was once a key supply hub between its territory in Iraq and neighbouring Syria.

After a 12-day battle by Iraqi forces backed by coalition air strikes and paramilitary fighters, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced that Tal Afar had "regained its place in the national territory".

He vowed to liberate "every inch of Iraqi territory" from the group.

"We say to the criminals of IS: wherever you are, we're coming to liberate it and you have no choice but to die or surrender," Abadi said.

The full recapture of Nineveh province comes weeks after coalition-backed Iraqi forces ousted the jihadists from the provincial capital Mosul, three years after the jihadists declared a self-styled "caliphate" straddling Iraq and war-torn Syria.

IS has lost much of the territory it controlled in the two countries and thousands of its fighters have been killed since late 2014, when the coalition was set up to defeat the group.

But the jihadist group, which is also known as ISIS, continues to claim attacks in the Middle East and Europe.

Brigadier General Andrew A Croft, deputy commander of the coalition, told AFP that Iraqi forces had killed between 600 and 700 IS fighters during the battle for Tal Afar while around 100 more had surrendered.

IS fighters in Iraq now control only the town of Hawija around 300 kilometres north of Baghdad, as well as several areas in the vast western desert province of Anbar along the border with Syria.

Officials have said the capture of Tal Afar would make it even more difficult for the jihadists to transport fighters and weapons between Iraq and Syria.

Word divided as tensions boil Special forces 'being trained to assassinate Kim Jong-Un'

US flies heavy bombers, jets in show of force as Russia, China call for caution

AFP, Seoul

US heavy bombers and stealth jet fighters took part in a joint live fire drill in South Korea yesterday, intended as a show of force against the North after its latest missile launch.

"South Korean and US air forces conducted an air interdiction exercise in order to strongly cope with North Korea's repeated firing of ballistic missiles and development of nuclear weapons," the South's air force said in a statement.

Two B-1B "Lancer" bombers from Guam and four F-35B stealth jet fighters from the Marine Corps' Iwakuni Air Base in Japan conducted the drill, with four South Korean jet fighters also taking part.

B-1B overflights of the peninsula from Guam, a US territory in the Pacific, infuriate the North, which cited them when it announced a plan to fire a salvo of missiles towards the island.

It was one of the moves that saw tensions spiral this month, along with a new set of UN Security Council sanctions, US President Donald Trump's apocalyptic warning to rain "fire and

fury" on Pyongyang, and culminating with the North firing a missile over Japan on Tuesday.

A frustrated Trump took to Twitter to condemn Pyongyang, saying "the US has been talking to North Korea, and paying them extortion

money, for 25 years. Talking is not the answer!"

With tensions surging, Moscow urged Washington not to use force against North Korea and also said attempts to toughen sanctions would be counterproductive.

TENSION IN KOREAN PENINSULA

- UK, Japan agree to hike 'pace of sanctions' against N Korea
- Pyongyang warns Japan of 'imminent self-destruction'
- Beijing slams calls for new sanctions
- Russia warns US against using force

In a phone call late Wednesday with US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov "underscored... the need to refrain from any military steps that could have unpredictable consequences," the foreign ministry in Moscow said.

China yesterday also condemned "destructive" calls for further sanctions, warning Japan, the US and Britain that diplomacy was needed to avert a crisis.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said sanctions alone "cannot fundamentally resolve the issue", amid reports the three countries were pushing for new restrictions on North Korean oil imports and foreign workers.

On a visit to Japan, British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday said London and Tokyo would work together to pressure North Korea "including by increasing the pace of sanctions" against Pyongyang.

The UN Security Council has already imposed seven sets of sanctions on Pyongyang, the most recent of which were passed earlier this month, but the measures have done little to quell Kim Jong-Un's nuclear missile ambitions.

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South Korea is reportedly training its special forces to track down and assassinate Kim Jong-un and his closest advisers if the North starts a war.

The strategy is part of a raft of measures by Seoul to "switch to an offensive posture" if the rogue state attacks, according to a government document reported in South Korean media.

It also plans to identify and eliminate 1,000 primary targets - including nuclear weapons and missile launch facilities - at the same time, reports say.

South Korean president Moon Jae-in was reportedly briefed by his Defence Ministry over the re-jigged blueprint after he instructed officials to put an offensive military plan into place.

They discussed their revised strategy just a day before Pyongyang fired a ballistic missile over Japan on Tuesday, with Donald Trump

later saying "all options are now on the table".

It comes amid joint military drills this week by both Seoul and Washington that the authorities tout as defensive exercises in the event of a strike by North Korea.

But the so-called defensive exercises, The Ulchi-Freedom Guardian, are described by analysts as "decapitation missions" to target Kim, with some saying they believe that if the leader is assassinated or captured his armed forces could surrender.

The suspected "decapitation plan" to target the dictator and his senior deputies first came to light when Washington and Seoul started their joint training drills in 2015 in exercises named as "Operation Plan 5015".

Research group the Brookings Institute said the plan "envisions limited warfare with an emphasis on preemptive strikes on strategic targets in North Korea and 'decapitation raids' to exterminate North Korean leaders."



20 years on, UK remembers Princess Diana shock death

AFP, London

Fans and friends of Diana, Princess of Wales, were marking 20 years since her death yesterday as the nation looked back on the day when the shocking news broke she had been killed in a late-night Paris car crash.

She was just 36 at the time, with her death triggering an unprecedented outpouring of grief across Britain.

With her was Dodi Fayed, her wealthy Egyptian boyfriend of two months and their driver Henri Paul who was trying to shake off paparazzi photographers, both of whom also died.

Two decades on and the nation has still not forgotten, with well wishers laying flowers and candles outside Kensington Palace in London in the emotive run up to yesterday's anniversary.

A couple in Union Jack clothing were the first to arrive at the gates of the palace where Diana's sons William and Harry had paid tribute a day earlier.

Overnight, a handful of people had braved the rain in Paris to visit the Pont de l'Alma tunnel where her car smashed into a

pillar at 12:23 am on August 31, 1997, ending the life of the world's most famous woman.

Speaking to one group, Harry said his mother's death had affected everyone.

"All of us lost somebody," the 32-year-old said.



Harry's comment made the front page of both the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mirror, while The Sun tabloid ran with: "She's still the people's princess" over a picture of the princess.

"Our country was so very lucky to have you," read one, while another said: "Diana, a brave princess, your sons have your courage."

Diana married Prince Charles, the heir to the throne, in 1981, but their marriage collapsed under the strains of public duty and their incompatibility.

She was cast out of the royal family after their 1996 divorce which she had inadvertently made inevitable with an explosive tell-all television interview.

But among the public, her star remained undimmed, with her reputation sealed as a fashion icon, charity campaigner, humanitarian and a self-styled "queen of hearts".



People gather to pay tribute outside one of the gates of Kensington Palace in London yesterday to mark the 20th anniversary of the death of Diana.

PHOTO: AFP

TROPICAL STORM HARVEY

Blasts at Texas plant; death toll hits 35

REUTERS, Texas

The remnants of Tropical Storm Harvey drenched northern Louisiana yesterday as it moved inland, leaving behind record flooding that paralysed the US energy hub of Houston, killed at least 35 people and drove tens of thousands from their homes.

Two explosions were reported at a flood-hit chemical plant in Crosby, Texas, 30 miles northeast of Houston, with one sheriff's deputy sent to the hospital after inhaling toxic chemicals. The Arkema SA plant, which local media said was flooded and accessible only by boat, had lost power as a result of the storm, causing organic peroxides stored there to warm to dangerous levels. When the chemicals exploded, toxic gas and smoke were released.

A 1.5-mile radius around the plant had been evacuated and the company urged people to stay away from the area, warning more blasts were likely.

The storm's death toll was rising as bodies were found in receding waters. Some 32,000 people were forced into shelters around the region since Harvey came ashore on Friday near Rockport, Texas, as the most powerful hurricane to hit the state in a half-century.

By Thursday, the storm was downgraded to a tropical depression, located about 15 miles south of Monroe, Louisiana.

Rivers and reservoirs in Texas and Louisiana remained at or near flood level, with officials warning that high water would remain a danger in the region for the next few days.



Residents waded with their belongings through flood waters brought by Tropical Storm Harvey in Northwest Houston, Texas, US. Picture was taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

The president speaks for himself

Top advisers in more displays of disagreement with Trump

REUTERS, Washington

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis openly differed with his commander in chief over North Korea on Wednesday, the latest example of a once-rare public display of disagreement by top US aides that has become more frequent under President Donald Trump.

"We are never out of diplomatic solutions," Mattis told reporters, just hours after Trump said in a tweet that "talking is not the answer" to the standoff over North Korea's nuclear weapons and missile programs.

His public contradiction of Trump's position came a day after the Pentagon chief, a retired four-star Marine general, appeared to delay implementation of Trump's decision to ban transgender people from enlisting in the military.

Mattis was also among the senior aides, including Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and White House economic adviser Gary Cohn, who implicitly

criticised the Republican president's response to violence at a rally organized by white nationalists in Charlottesville, Virginia, earlier this month.

"I haven't seen a modern president with a pattern of this many high officials saying things like that," said Michael Beschloss, a presidential



historian.

Asked in a television interview on Sunday whether Trump's initial comments blaming "many sides" for the violence in Charlottesville instead of focusing on neo-Nazis and white nationalists raised questions about his values, Tillerson said simply: "The

president speaks for himself."

Mattis has repeatedly made clear that diplomacy - backed by a credible military option - is the only way to prevent the North Korea crisis from escalating into a potentially devastating conflict.

When asked about Mattis' comments on Wednesday, chief Pentagon spokesperson Dana White said: "Secretary Mattis provides the President with his best advice. It is the President who makes the ultimate decisions."

Leon Panetta, who served as defense secretary and CIA director under former Democratic President Barack Obama, said the airing of differences inside the Trump administration had its roots in the president's habit of sharing his opinions on Twitter posts.

"I think the problem is that they (advisers) are now dealing with a president who tweets his thoughts to the country," said Panetta, who has said he had his own policy differences with Obama.