

Clouds hover over accord

Rouhani slams renegotiation; Khamenei rules Trump warning

REUTERS, AP
Iran's President Hassan Rouhani yesterday said its nuclear accord with world powers cannot be renegotiated, after the Trump administration warned it was weighing whether the deal signed by its predecessor served US security interests.

"They were told clearly and definitively (by us) that the nuclear deal cannot be renegotiated," Rouhani told a press conference in Tehran broadcast live on state television after his return from the UN General Assembly.

Washington and Tehran's top diplomats confronted each other for the first time Wednesday as envoys scrambled to save the Iran nuclear deal from a skeptical Donald Trump.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif met as signatories to the 2015 accord at an EU-hosted event on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Tillerson said the discussion had been a political one and that even if Iran is in "technical" compliance with the pact, "significant differences" remain.

Trump has denounced the agreement as an "embarrassment" to the United States and has accused Iran of "breaking it in spirit" by naming militant groups and destabilizing the Middle East.



IRAN NUCLEAR DEAL

France says deal has scope to improve, EU disagrees

Democrats in Congress brace for new fight

In particular, he objects to the "sunset clause" that would see Iran resume some centrifuges in 2025.

Tillerson argued that the preamble to the agreement implied that it would lead to a more stable Middle East and said Iran remains a source of instability.

European diplomats, while sharing those concerns, are becoming exasperated by the argument - insisting the accord is for Iran getting the bomb.

"There is no need to renegotiate parts of the agreement because the agreement is concerning a nuclear program and as such is delivering," EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said.

There was some sympathy for the US position from France, where President Emmanuel Macron said the deal could be expanded to ban missile tests and cut the sunset clause. But even he insisted that the core deal was intact and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action that the deal signatories implemented last year must stay in place.

Trump is due to report to the US Congress on October 15 on whether or not he believes that Iran is in compliance with the nuclear deal. If, as now appears increasingly likely, he decides that it is not, it could open the way for renewed US sanctions and perhaps the collapse of the agreement.



7.1 MEXICO EARTHQUAKE

Rescue workers search through the rubble for victims at Enrique Rebsamen school after an earthquake in Mexico City, Mexico. Inset, Relatives react as they wait for news of their loved ones near a collapsed building. Pictures were taken on Wednesday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Mexicans spooked by repeat quake

REUTERS, Mexico City

When a devastating earthquake rocked Mexico City on Tuesday, 32 years to the day after another deadly tremor, the city's traumatized inhabitants struggled to understand why disaster had struck just two hours after a city-wide seismic drill to mark the earlier tragedy, Mexico City was shaken by a magnitude 7.1 quake, its second major tremor in less than two weeks, which killed at least 100 people in the capital and 230 nationwide.

The annual drill is a legacy of the 1985 quake, a harrowing disaster prompted on the national psyche after claiming over 5,000 lives in Mexico City.

In a country with a long history of supernatural beliefs, the timing of the quakes triggered conspiracy theories and reopened old wounds.

Situated at the intersection of three tectonic plates, Mexico is one of the world's most earthquake-prone countries, and the capital is particularly vulnerable due to its location on top of an ancient lakebed.

The 1985 quake striking on Tuesday's anniversary appeared to be purely coincidental, said Jana Puryk, a geophysicist with the United States Geological Survey, noting that the epicenters were hundreds of kilometers apart.

But for some Mexico City residents, the timing may have made lingering anxieties more acute, said Elizabeth Willemas, a local psychologist who has treated patients coping with post-traumatic stress disorder from the 1985 disaster.

In an phenomenon known as the "anniversary effect," distress levels can spike as the date of a traumatic event approaches, Willemas said. The repetition of the event would have compounded the stress, she added.

Hope fades for survivors

Rescuers in race against time to save victims as disaster toll rises to 237

REUTERS, Mexico City

Rescuers labored against the odds as dawn broke yesterday to save a 12-year-old schoolgirl and other possible survivors trapped beneath crumpled buildings in central Mexico following the country's deadliest earthquake in 32 years.

More than 50 survivors have been plucked from several disaster sites in Mexico City since Tuesday afternoon's 7.1-magnitude quake, leading to impassioned choruses of "Yes we can!" from the first responders, volunteers and spectators gathered around the ruins.

At least 237 others have died and 1,900 were injured.

As the chance of survival diminished with each passing hour, officials vowed to continue with search-and-rescue efforts such as the one at a

collapsed school in the south of the capital. At the site, Navy-led rescuers have communicated with the 12-year-old girl, but were still unable to dig her free.

Eleven other children were rescued from the Enrique Rebsamen School, where students are aged roughly six to 15. Twenty-one children and four adults there were killed.

Rescuers had earlier seen a hand protruding from the debris and the girl wiggled her fingers when asked if she was still alive, according to broadcaster Televisa.

But some 15 hours into the effort, Admiral Jose Luis Vergara said rescuers could not pinpoint the location of the girl, identified only as Frida Sofia. Rescuers periodically demanded that people bystanders to allow them to hear any calls for help.

As with other disaster sites throughout central Mexico, officials have not employed heavy-lifting equipment for fear of crushing survivors. Some 52 buildings collapsed in Mexico City alone and more in the surrounding states.

Throughout the capital, crews were joined by volunteers and bystanders who used dogs, cameras, motion detectors and heat-seeking equipment to detect victims who may still be alive.

Thousands of people have donated food, water, medicine, blankets and other basic items to help relief efforts. Companies provided free services and restaurants delivered food to shelters where thousands of people have sought refuge after their homes were damaged.

The quake killed 102 people in

Mexico City and the remaining 135 from five surrounding states, officials said on Wednesday.

At least nine Latin American countries pledged search-and-rescue teams or technical assistance, as did the United States, Spain, Japan and Israel, and crews from Panama and El Salvador were already on the job.

The quake struck around 150 km (90 miles) southeast of Mexico City on Tuesday afternoon, shattering glass, shearing off the sides of buildings and leaving others in dusty piles of destruction. Its epicenter was a mere 31 km beneath the surface, sending major shockwaves through the metropolitan area of some 20 million people. Much of the capital is built on an ancient lake bed that trembles like jelly during a quake.

Maria ravages Puerto Rico

Leaves all of the US territory in darkness; death toll rises to 10

REUTERS, San Juan

Hurricane Maria thrashed parts of the Dominican Republic with heavy rain and high winds as it passed near its east and north coasts yesterday after making a direct hit on Puerto Rico that caused severe flooding and cut power to the entire island.

Maria has killed at least 10 people as it raged through the Caribbean, the second major hurricane to strike this month, and the US National Hurricane Center (NHC) said it was headed toward the Turks and Caicos Islands and the southeastern Bahamas, bringing dangerous storm surges and torrential rain.

It ripped roofs off almost all structures on the island country of



Damaged electrical installations are seen after the area was hit by Hurricane Maria in Guayama, Puerto Rico, on Wednesday.

Dominica, where seven people were confirmed dead. The toll is expected to climb when searches resume at daybreak.

Maria was ranked a Category 4 storm, near the strongest five-step Saffir-Simpson scale, with sustained winds of up to 250 km per hour, when it hit Puerto Rico on

Wednesday as the strongest storm to strike the territory in nearly 90 years.

It ripped apart homes, snapped power lines and turned roadways into torrents laden with debris as it tore through the swath across the island.

The entire island of 3.4 million people was under a flash flood warning early yesterday as the storm is forecast to dump 20 to 30 inches of rain on much of Puerto Rico through today, according to the NHC.

It was classified as a Category 5 storm when it struck Dominica on Monday night with devastating force. Based on an aerial survey, about 95 percent of roofs in

Dominica, one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean, were damaged or destroyed by Maria.

Iraq brings all remaining IS territory under attack

Launches offensive on Hawija near Kirkuk; UN sets up probe of IS atrocities in Iraq

APP, Baghdad

Iraq brought all of its territory still held by the Islamic State group under attack yesterday, throwing jihadists on the defensive across their self-proclaimed "caliphate" extending into neighbouring Syria.

Security forces backed by paramilitary units launched a dawn assault on a besieged IS-held pocket around the northern town of

The territory still held by IS has been dwindling fast since its defeat in Iraq's second city Mosul in July, with stronghold coming under assault from both sides of the border with Syria.

Most of its onetime Syria bastion Raqqa, long a byword for its most gruesome atrocities, is now in the hands of US-backed fighters, while elsewhere in Syria IS has suffered major losses to Russian-backed government forces.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi

predicted that the assault on the Hawija region would swiftly bring a new victory against the crumbling jihadists.

The mainly Sunni Arab enclave, which was bypassed by government forces in their advance north to Mosul last year, has been a bastion of insurgency ever since the first year of the US-led occupation in 2003.

After the defeat of IS in Mosul and the capture of adjacent areas, Hawija and neighbouring towns form the last enclave still held by IS in Iraq apart from a section of the Euphrates Valley downstream from the border with Syria.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council yesterday unanimously decided to set up an investigation team to collect evidence on the massacres of Iraq's Yazidi minority and other atrocities committed by the Islamic State group in Iraq. Britain presented the resolution to help bring perpetrators of IS war crimes to justice.

Air raids kill 22 in Syria in 48 hours

APP, Beirut

At least 22 civilians have been killed in 48 hours of heavy air strikes by Syria's regime and its ally Russia in northwestern Syria, a monitor said yesterday.

The strikes hit areas in the provinces of Idlib and Hama, where an internationally agreed truce zone is meant to be in place, and come in response to an offensive launched Tuesday by jihadists.

Idlib, along with parts of neighbouring Hama and Latakia provinces, forms one of four so-called de-escalation zones agreed last May by regime allies Russia and Iran and rebel backer Turkey.

The agreement has brought relative calm to the regions involved, but the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has reported dozens of raids on Hama and Idlib since Tuesday, when jihadists began attacking government positions.

HIGH LEVEL OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Nations join forces to stop alarming trend

REUTERS, United Nations

World leaders meeting at the United Nations on Wednesday launched a half-billion dollar effort to end violence against women and girls, a crime suffered by one in three in their lifetimes.

The effort will fund anti-violence programs that promote prevention, bolster government policies and provide women and girls with improved access to services, organizers said.

It will take particular aim at human trafficking, femicide and family violence, they said.

A third of all women experience violence at some point in their lives, and that figure is twice as high in some countries, according to the United Nations.

"Gender-based violence is the most dehumanizing form of gender oppres-

sion. It exists in every society, in every country rich and poor, in every religion and in every culture," Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, head of UN Women, said as the United Nations held its annual General Assembly.

"If there was anything that was ever universal, it is gender inequality and the violence that it breeds against women," she said.

In other forms of violence, more than 700 million women worldwide were married before they were 18, and at least 200 million women and girls have undergone female genital mutilation in 30 countries, according to U.N. figures.

The initiative of 500 million Euros (US\$595 million) was launched by the UN and the European Union, which is its main contributor, organizers said.

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