



Trump action may bring war closer to Europe

Warns Germany as world leaders rally behind Iran deal

REUTERS, Berlin
If the United States terminates the Iran nuclear deal or reimposes sanctions on Tehran it could result in Iran developing nuclear weapons and raise the danger of war close to Europe, Germany's foreign minister said yesterday.

US President Donald Trump refused on Friday to formally certify that Tehran was complying with the 2015 accord even though international inspectors say it is. He warned he might ultimately terminate the agreement.

German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel told Deutschlandfunk radio that Trump had sent a "difficult and dangerous signal" when the US administration was also dealing with the North Korea nuclear crisis.

He said if the United States terminated the deal or if sanctions were reimposed on Tehran, it would give Iranian hardliners, who are against negotiations with the West, the upper hand.

"Then they might revert to developing nuclear weapons," Gabriel said, adding Israel would not tolerate that and "then we will be

back where we were 10, 12 years ago with the danger of war relatively close to Europe".

He urged the United States not to endanger the security of its allies and its own people for domestic policy reasons.

Hailed by Trump's predecessor Barack Obama as key to stopping Iran from building a nuclear bomb, the deal was also signed by China, France, Russia, Britain, Germany and the European Union.

European allies have warned of a split with Washington over the nuclear agreement and say that putting it in limbo undermines US credibility abroad.

"We encourage the US Administration and Congress to consider the implications to the security of the US and its allies before taking any steps that might undermine the JCPOA, such as re-imposing sanctions on Iran lifted under the agreement," French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and British Prime Minister Theresa May said in a joint statement.

In Brussels, Federica Mogherini, the EU foreign policy chief, said the Iran deal is an international agreement and "it is not up to any single country to terminate it."

Iranians mock Trump speech

AFP, Tehran

Iranians responded with anger and mockery on Saturday to the bellicose criticism of their government by US President Donald Trump who threatened to tear up the landmark nuclear deal.

Trump's use of the phrase "Arabian Gulf" rather than "Persian Gulf" particularly hit a nerve in a country with a fierce nationalistic streak.

"Everyone knew Trump's friendship was for sale to the highest bidder. We now know that his geography is too," wrote Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif on Twitter, referring to the US alliance with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia.

Despite pressure from the Arab Gulf monarchies, most international bodies still use "Persian Gulf" as the conventional name for the region's waterway, and many Iranians shared photos of US veterans' medals and graves referring to the "Persian Gulf conflict" of the 1990s.

In his White House speech on Friday, Trump reeled off a list of grievances committed by the "Iranian dictatorship, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its continuing aggression in the Middle East and all around the world."

He threatened to "terminate" the 2015 nuclear deal signed between Iran and six world powers unless Congress passed stringent new sanctions.

But as Iranians headed to their offices yesterday--the first day of the work week in Iran--the reaction was often one of bemusement.

"Trump's statements are so ridiculous that it actually works in Iran's favour. Speaking about the 'Arabian Gulf' is

taken very badly by people here," said Abbas, a 40-year-old banker who only gave his first name.

"The reaction of the Europeans shows that the United States is isolated, and only Saudi Arabia and Israel have supported Trump," he added.

Trump's efforts to reach out to ordinary Iranians, who he referred to as the "longest-suffering victims" of the Islamic regime, also appeared to have fallen on deaf ears, with many recalling the travel ban he slapped on them earlier this year.

His Instagram page was inundated by more than a million comments, mostly from jeering Iranians.

Trump's threats have brought a new solidarity among Iran's often fractious institutions.

"We have dissatisfactions, for example there are economic problems," said Bahram Siavoshi, 36, as he walked to work at a private finance firm in Tehran.

"But if it comes to it, we will stand together to the end, and will defend even the Revolutionary Guards. Their efforts cannot be ignored. If it

wasn't for them we would be like Syria or Yemen."

Rouhani took to the airwaves shortly after Trump's speech on Friday night, dismissing it as "nothing but the repetition of baseless accusations and swear words".

"If the Congress goes ahead with new sanctions, then the deal is dead and Iran will restart its nuclear programme and move forward full-steam ahead in all fields," Mohammad Marandi, a professor at the University of Tehran, told AFP.

"Iran will probably invest even more than before in order to show the Americans that they can't get away with destroying the agreement."



Trump era 'feels like the 1930s'

AFP, Frankfurt Am Main

Award-winning novelist Margaret Atwood yesterday said Donald Trump's America reminded her of Europe in the 1930s, and warned that the world was "at a moment of change and disruption".

"I think it's a moment of turmoil everywhere," the 77-year-old author said at the Frankfurt book fair.

"This feels like the 1930s," she told a press conference, referring to the rise of populist leaders and fascism that ultimately led to World War II.

"And what's surprising to many people in Europe is that this is also happening in the United States" which was long seen as "a beacon of democracy", Atwood added.

George Orwell's "1984" and her own 1985 book "The Handmaid's Tale", about a totalitarian regime where fertile women live in sexual servitude, were resonating right now because those worlds no longer seemed so far-fetched.

"People suddenly feel that it's a possible reality for them," said Atwood, a prolific Canadian author and poet famed for her cautionary tales.

"The Handmaid's Tale" is now a major television show, and the story's trademark red cloaks and white bonnets have been donned as symbols of protest at US demonstrations against threats to women's healthcare under Trump.

"There's a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction and resistance, but no leading figure has appeared yet," Atwood said.

The US Republican party is "in disarray", she said, while the Democrats had yet to formulate a response.

Atwood was in Frankfurt to receive the German book trade's annual "Peace Prize" for her prescient body of work.



A French Gendarmerie officer urges people to stay away after a cargo plane crashed in the sea yesterday near the international airport in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. Four Moldovan nationals were killed when the transport plane, ten people on board, chartered by the French army crashed, firefighters said. Another six people were injured. PHOTO: REUTERS

Nobel peace winner denounces US move

AFP, Geneva

The nuclear weapons disarmament campaigners awarded this year's Nobel Peace Prize denounced US President Donald Trump's decision on Friday to decertify the Iran nuclear deal, saying it makes proliferation more likely.

"President Trump's rejection of the JCPOA is an incitement to proliferation, makes achieving further agreements to rein in the nuclear threat more difficult, and increases global risk of nuclear use," the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) said in a statement.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has curbed Iran's nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief.

"The JCPOA is a demonstration of how well diplomacy can work, and like the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, it reflects the urgent global imperative to eliminate nuclear weapons and the grave threat they pose," commented Beatrice Fihn, Executive Director of ICAN.

"President Trump's attempt to disrupt the Iran deal despite the fact that the IAEA has repeatedly certified that Iran is complying with its terms, is a jarring reminder of the immense nuclear danger now facing the world and the urgent need for all states to prohibit and eliminate these weapons" Fihn said.

"If ever there were a moment for nations to declare their unequivocal opposition to nuclear weapons, that moment is now," she added.

Pullback before Sunday dawn

Baghdad gives ultimatum to Kurds in Kirkuk as US offers mediation

AFP, Maryam Beik

Thousands of Iraqi troops were locked in an armed standoff with Kurdish forces in the disputed oil province of Kirkuk yesterday as Washington scrambled to avert fighting between the key allies in the war against the Islamic State group.

The clock was ticking down to a 2:00am Sunday (2300 GMT Saturday) deadline that the Kurds say Baghdad has set for their forces to surrender positions they took during the fightback against the jihadists over the past three years.

Armoured cars of the Iraqi army bearing the national flag were posted on the bank of a river on the southern outskirts of the city of Kirkuk, an AFP photographer reported.

On the opposite bank, Kurdish peshmerga fighters were visible behind an earthen embankment topped with concrete blocks painted with the red, white green and yellow of the Kurdish flag.

The two sides have been at loggerheads since the Kurds voted overwhelmingly for independence in a September 25

referendum that Baghdad rejected as illegal.

Polling was held not only in the three provinces of the autonomous Kurdish region but also in adjacent Kurdish-held areas, including Kirkuk.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has said there can be no further discussion of the Kurds' longstanding demands to incorporate Kirkuk and other historically Kurdish-majority areas in their autonomous region until the independence vote is annulled.

He insisted on Thursday that he was "not going... to make war on our Kurdish citizens".

But thousands of heavily armed troops and members of the Popular Mobilisation Force (PMF) -- paramilitary units largely made up of Iran-trained

Shia militias -- have massed around Kirkuk.

They have already retaken a string of positions to the south of the city after Kurdish forces withdrew.

The Kurds have deployed thousands of peshmerga fighters to the area around Kirkuk itself and have vowed to defend the city "at any cost."



WAR ON IS IN SYRIA

Raqa liberation nears

Evacuation deal reached as dozens of jihadists surrender

AFP, Kobane

A convoy will leave Syria's Raqa yesterday under an evacuation deal agreed as a US-backed force battles to seize the Islamic State group's last positions in the city.

The US-led coalition said the deal for the evacuation would exclude foreign IS fighters, but left unclear whether Syrian jihadists would be able to quit their one-time stronghold.

The agreement, reached by local officials, comes after days of talks on a way for the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces to secure the last parts of the city while avoiding further civilian casualties.

Earlier yesterday, the US-led coalition said around 100 IS fighters had surrendered to the SDF in the past 24 hours, but again stressed that no foreign fighters would be allowed to escape the city.

In neighbouring Deir Ezzor province meanwhile, Syria's army captured the IS stronghold of Mayadeen, in the latest blow

to the jihadists who are seeing their self-styled "caliphate" crumble.

Raqa was once the de facto Syrian capital of the jihadist group's "caliphate" and the city's loss would be a new blow for IS, which has already been driven from its strongholds in Iraq including second city Mosul.

In June, the US-backed SDF, an alliance of Kurdish and Arab fighters, broke into Raqa, and since then they have captured around 90 percent of the city.

In recent days, talks had been under way on a deal to secure the last parts of Raqa while protecting trapped civilians, some of them being used by IS fighters as human shields.

Up to 1,500 civilians have managed to flee the battle-ravaged city in the past week, according to the coalition. The United Nations estimates thousands more may still be trapped inside.

IS captured Raqa in 2014, turning it into a byword for its outrageous abuses as well as a centre for the planning of attacks abroad.

NEWSIN brief

North Korea readies missile launch: report

AFP, Seoul

North Korea is believed to be preparing to launch a ballistic missile ahead of next week's joint naval drill by the US and South Korea, a news report said yesterday. The Donga Ilbo daily, quoting a government source, said satellite pictures show ballistic missiles mounted on launchers being transported out of hangars near Pyongyang and in the North Pyongan Province.

Woman to head Saudi sports federation

AFP, Riyadh

A princess has been named to head a Saudi multi-sports federation, in a first for women in the conservative Muslim kingdom where men dominate all sports, an official said Saturday. The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP that Princess Rima bint Bandar bin Sultan has become "the first woman to lead a federation" covering sporting activities for men and

Reince Priebus grilled in Russia probe

AFP, Washington

Former White House chief of staff Reince Priebus submitted to questioning Friday by investigators looking into Russian meddling in the US presidential campaign and possible collusion by associates of President Donald Trump, US media reported. Politico and the Washington Post quoted Priebus's lawyer William Burk as saying the interview with members of Special Counsel Robert Mueller's team was voluntary.

Hostage tells of Taliban hell

Freed Canadian says they murdered his baby, raped his wife

AFP, Ottawa

Freed Canadian hostage Joshua Boyle accused his kidnappers of murdering his baby daughter and raping his wife during his family's years-long captivity by the Haqqani network, a Taliban-affiliated group operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Boyle leveled the accusations in a terse statement he read on arrival in Toronto late Friday with his American wife, Caitlan Coleman, and three children, who were freed on Wednesday by Pakistani troops.

He condemned the Haqqani network's "stupidity and evil of authorizing the murder of my infant daughter" in "retaliation for my repeated refusal to accept an offer that the miscreant of the Haqqani network had made to me, and the stupidity and evil of the subsequent rape of my wife."

He said the rape was not the action of a lone guard but aided by the captain of the guard and a Haqqani commander he identified as Abu Hajr.

The Haqqani group is headed by

Sirajuddin Haqqani, who is also the Afghan Taliban's deputy leader.

The faction has long been suspected of having links with Pakistan's shadowy military establishment.

Boyle said both incidents had taken place in 2014, some two years after he and Coleman, who was "heavily pregnant" at the time, were kidnapped in a remote Taliban-controlled area of Afghanistan.

The three children who survived the ordeal were all born in captivity.

Before marrying Coleman, Boyle was briefly married in 2009 to Zaynab Khadr, the sister of Canadian-born Omar Khadr, who was captured in battle as a teenager in Afghanistan in 2002 and held for a decade in the US military at Guantanamo Bay.

Boyle was active in the campaign to win Khadr's release from Guantanamo and his transfer to Canada in 2012. He was freed on bail in 2015. On Thursday, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland said Boyle was not a target of any investigation.



People carry the remains of a suspected Kashmiri militant commander who according to the local media was killed during a gunbattle with Indian security forces in Pulwama district, during his funeral in Heff village in Shopian district, yesterday. The killing sparked violent protests resulting in the death of a protester. PHOTO: REUTERS