

Unite against US

Khamenei urges Muslim nations, says won't accept any changes to nuke deal

Iran's supreme leader called on Muslim nations to unite against the United States, saying Tehran would never yield to "bullying," state television reported yesterday.

"The Iranian nation has successfully resisted bullying attempts by America and other arrogant powers and we will continue to resist... All Muslim nations should stand united against America and other enemies," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said.

Iran's top authority criticised Trump for saying on Tuesday some countries in the Middle East "wouldn't last a week" without US protection.

"Such remarks are humiliation for Muslims... Unfortunately there is war in our region between Muslim countries. The backward governments of some Muslim countries are fighting with other countries," Khamenei said.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been locked in a proxy war, competing for regional supremacy from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon to Yemen.

He also said Iran will not accept any change to a nuclear deal with six major powers, a top advisor to Iran's supreme leader said yesterday.

"Any change or amendment to the current deal will not be accepted by Iran... If Trump exits the deal, Iran will surely pull out of it... Iran will not accept a nuclear deal with no benefits for us," said Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior advisor to Iran's highest authority Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

His comment came as French President Emmanuel Macron said on Wednesday that Trump might well pull out of the Iran nuclear deal for domestic political reasons.

Trump -- a fierce opponent of the July 2015 agreement signed by Tehran and international powers -- must declare by May 12 if he will essentially walk away from the existing deal when the renewal deadline arrives on May 12, or stay in.

Trump has branded the Iran deal "insane" and the "worst" in history.

Under Iran's settlement with the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Russia and China, Tehran agreed to curb its nuclear programme to satisfy the powers that it could not be used to develop weapons. In exchange, Iran received relief from sanctions, most of which were lifted in January 2016.

The EU says it is in full agreement with China and Russia over the need to preserve the deal, but has expressed concerns about Iran's missile programme and its role in the Middle East.



People wear masks of South Korea's President Moon Jae-in and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un during a pro-unification rally ahead of today's summit between North and South Korea in Seoul, South Korea.

PHOTO: REUTERS

UK MPs up pressure over post-Brexit customs plans

AFP, London

Lawmakers debated yesterday whether Britain should stay in a customs union with the EU after Brexit, as supporters reported growing parliamentary opposition to the government's plans for future ties with the bloc.

The Conservative government has repeatedly ruled out continued membership of a customs union after Britain leaves the European Union in March 2019, arguing that it would limit their ability to strike trade deals with other countries.

But pro-European MPs report increasing support for the idea, which is backed by Britain's biggest business group the CBI, as a way of preserving trade ties with the bloc and avoiding a hard customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Backbench MPs in the lower House of Commons put forward a motion yesterday calling for "the establishment of an effective customs union" to be included in London's Brexit negotiating objectives.

The government is widely expected to ignore the motion, but it will be an indication of looming battles ahead.

Brussels has indicated it is open to Britain

changing its position even as the clock ticks down on the negotiations, with London aiming for broad agreement on the future trading relationship by October.

And the government is facing a series of parliamentary showdowns on the customs union.

MPs will hold a binding vote next month on an amendment tabled by the unelected upper House of Lords to the EU (Withdrawal) Bill, which sets the legal framework for Brexit, although ministers have played down its significance.

They are more worried about amendments tabled to its long-delayed trade and customs bills, demanding ministers take "all necessary steps" to allow Britain to continue in a customs union.

The main opposition Labour party backs this position with some conditions, while the trade bill amendment is signed by 10 members of May's Conservative party -- with at least another three said to be supportive.

Some MPs believe a show of support for a customs union would also open the door for parliament to back Britain staying in the EU's single market, another thing May has ruled out.

RAPPROCHEMENT EFFORTS BETWEEN KOREAS

Leaders set for historic meet

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korean President Moon Jae-in will greet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un today as the latter crosses a military demarcation line to enter the South for the first summit between the two sides in more than a decade, South Korea said.

South Korean honour guards will then escort the leaders to a welcome ceremony at a plaza in Panmunjom, the border village where the summit is to be held, the South's presidential chief of staff, Im Jong-seok, told a media briefing.

Official dialogue between Kim and Moon will begin at 10:30 am (0130 GMT) at the Peace House in Panmunjom, an hour after Kim is scheduled to cross the border at 9:30am (0030 GMT).

"This summit will focus more on denuclearisation and securing of permanent peace than anything else," Im said yesterday.

"I feel North Korea is sending their key military officials to the summit as they too, believe denuclearisation and peace are important."

Kim will be accompanied by nine officials, among them his sister, Kim Yo Jong, who led the North's delegation to the Winter Olympics in South Korea in February and Kim Yong Nam, the North's nominal head of state.

In addition, there will be Kim Yong Chol, a former intelligence chief and

defence minister Pak Yong Sik, and foreign minister Ri Yong Ho, besides an official spearheading peaceful reunification efforts, Ri Son Gwon.

South Korea's delegation is comprised of seven officials, including the ministers for defence, foreign affairs and unification.

After the end of the first session of talks, Kim Jong Un and Moon will have lunch separately before holding a tree-planting ceremony in the afternoon, Im said.

A pine tree will be planted on the demarcation line to symbolise "peace and prosperity", Im said, using soil from Mount Paektu in North Korea and Mount Halla in South Korea.

Kim and Moon will water the tree with water brought from the Taedong River in the North and the Han River in the South, Im said. Afterwards, Moon and Kim will take a walk together in Panmunjon before beginning the next round of talks.

At the end of the talks, Kim and Moon will sign a pact and make an announcement, Im said. Later, they will have dinner on the South's side and watch a video clip themed 'Spring of One', he added.

Leaders of two sides to meet at 0030 GMT today

It is the first leaders' summit between the two in more than a decade

Kim, Moon to plant symbolic tree at border

Choe Hwi, the chairman of a sports panel.

Also in the delegation are Ri Su Yong, a member of the North's politburo and Ri Myong Su, the chief of the general staff of the Korean People's Army.

Ministers on the trip include

Armenia sets date for polls to defuse crisis

AFP, Yerevan

Armenia's parliament yesterday set May 1 as the date to elect a prime minister in a bid to defuse rapidly escalating tensions as top officials held talks in Moscow.

An end to a deepening political crisis in Armenia was nowhere in sight, with opposition leader Nikol Pashinyan lacking enough votes to get elected and protesters taking to the streets for a fresh day of rallies.

Russia - which has a military base in Armenia -- has pledged it would not intervene but its top officials welcomed counterparts from the South Caucasus nation for talks yesterday.

In Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with his Armenian counterpart Eduard Nalbandyan while Kremlin officials also held talks with the country's acting Vice Premier Armen Gevorgyan.

Eduard Sharmazanov, spokesman for the Republican Party which still has a majority in parliament, said it was "realistic" that a new prime minister would already be elected on May 1.

Armenia is then expected to hold new parliamentary elections.

The country's leader Serzh Sargsian stood down Monday from his new post of prime minister after days of largely peaceful protests in the impoverished country of 2.9 million people.

The opposition had accused 63-year-old Sargsian of wanting to extend his grip on power after serving a decade as president, saying he failed to tackle a litany of problems including poverty and corruption.



A boy shouts slogans during a protest of Houthi supporters against killing of Saleh al-Samad, a senior Houthi official, by a Saudi-led coalition air strike in Hodeidah, in Sanaa, Yemen, yesterday.

Turkey hands jail sentences to journalists

AFP, Siliuri

A Turkish court on Wednesday convicted journalists from the opposition Cumhuriyet daily for helping outlawed "terrorist" organisations but editors remained defiant vowing their "honourable" journalism would not stop.

Cumhuriyet -- which means simply "Republic" -- was set up in 1924 after the Turkish republic was founded in 1923.

The daily has been fiercely critical of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and has run front-page stories that have angered the Turkish head of state.

The court in Siliuri, outside Istanbul, handed out multiple sentences to 13 journalists and executives for "aiding and abetting terror organisations without being a member" but they remain free pending appeal.

"No penalty can stop us from doing journalism. If needed, we will go to the prison again but we will continue to do journalism," editor-in-chief Murat Sabuncu who was among those convicted told AFP after the verdict.

The judge ordered the release of Cumhuriyet chairman Akin Atalay who had been in jail for over 500 days despite his conviction.

Accountant Emre Iper was also convicted on the separate charge of making terror propaganda.

Three others including the paper's books supplement editor Turhan Gunay were acquitted.

They were all charged with supporting, through their coverage, three organisations that Turkey views as terror groups -- the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the ultra-left Revolutionary People's Liberation Party-Front, and the Gulen movement blamed for the 2016 failed coup.

EU moves to save Iran nuke pact

Prepares new package to persuade Trump not to scrap the 2015 deal

REUTERS, Washington/brussels

French President Emmanuel Macron called on the United States on Wednesday not to abandon the Iran nuclear deal as Western envoys said Britain, France and Germany were nearing a package that seeks to persuade US President Donald Trump to save the pact.

Trump has described the 2015 accord, under which Iran agreed to curb its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of economic sanctions, as the worst deal ever negotiated and has threatened to wreck it by reimposing US penalties next month unless the three European allies agree to fix its "flaws."

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani accused the United States of seeking to unilaterally change the terms of the multilateral deal and derided Trump as a "tradesman" lacking the background to handle with international affairs.

Russia, China, Germany, Britain and France, which all struck the accord with Iran and US, see the deal as the best way to stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb.

Before heading home, Macron acknowledged he expected Trump to pull out of the deal, based on his long opposition to it. He called for a new deal.

It is not clear what Macron meant by a new, compre-



hensive deal. One possibility is an idea, long under consideration, to seek to negotiate a successor to the JCPOA with Iran. Another might be for Washington and the three European powers to impose additional nuclear constraints on Iran and to threaten it with additional sanctions if it violates those.

Western envoys told Reuters that three months of meetings among Washington and the three European allies were culminating in a package of separate measures that could be taken against Tehran in the hope they would satisfy Trump and keep the deal intact.

"This is about convincing President Trump, it's not a new deal with Iran," a senior European Union diplomat said.

Britain, France and Germany have proposed fresh EU sanctions on Iran over its ballistic missiles and its role in Syria's war.

Trump sees three defects in the 2015 deal: a failure to address Iran's ballistic missile program; the terms under which international inspectors can visit suspect Iranian nuclear sites; and "sunset" clauses under which key limits on the Iranian nuclear program start to expire after 10 years.

Diplomats have cited progress on ballistic missiles and on inspections, but the "sunset" issue remained unresolved.

William to be Harry's best man

AFP, London

Britain's Prince Harry has finally asked Prince William to be his best man at his wedding next month, Kensington Palace confirmed yesterday, reinforcing the brotherly bond between them.

Harry, 33, and 35-year-old William often spoke fun at each other in public.

However, beneath the jocular, the bond between them is strong, forged by the shock death of their mother Diana, princess of Wales in 1997 -- and the support they offer each other is evident.

Even though William hitherto joked about Harry not having asked him, there was little doubt whom he would turn to for his big day.

William spoke about their connection last year -- the 20th anniversary of Diana's death -- telling his wife Kate during an interview as Harry sat with them: "We have been brought closer because of the circumstances.

"We are uniquely bonded because of what we've been through."

Harry performed best man duties at William and Kate's wedding in 2011.

And when it is Harry's turn at the altar, as he marries US former actress Meghan Markle, William will be at his side holding the wedding ring.

The announcement comes three days after the birth of William and Kate's third child on Monday, who joins four-year-old Prince George and Princess Charlotte, aged two, in the Cambridge family.

William and Kate are yet to name the new prince and are giving little away as the public waits to find out what the baby, fifth in line to the throne, will be called.

Markle is still to announce who will be her maid of honour. William now has the responsibility of organising a stag party for his brother, as well as performing the best man's speech.

Bookmakers have Switzerland and the Scottish Highlands as their favourite stag destination. Las Vegas -- where Harry was infamously photographed partying naked in 2012 -- is considered a remote shot.



Tackle fake news by year-end

EU tells US tech giants

AFP, Brussels

The EU yesterday warned US tech giants to crack down on the spread of "fake news" by the end of the year or face regulation in the wake of a scandal involving the illegal harvesting of Facebook users' data.

Brussels called for the creation of a network of "independent fact-checkers" and a code of conduct amid growing concerns over election meddling involving the use of the internet and personal data.

"We are giving social networks and online platforms a chance to resolve the problem once and for all," EU digital commissioner Mariya Gabriel told a news conference.

As a first step, the Bulgarian commissioner called on tech firms to draw up a code of conduct by July, and proposed the creation of a secure online platform to tackle "disinformation".

"We will closely monitor the progress made and may propose further actions by December, including measures of regulatory nature, should the results prove unsatisfactory," she warned.

The EU plans come after a group of 40 media experts including AFP produced a report on the issue earlier this year.