



ECONOMIC WOES

Iranian MPs summon president

REUTERS, London

Iranian lawmakers have given President Hassan Rouhani one month to appear before parliament to answer questions on his government's handling of Iran's economic struggles, state media reported yesterday.

It is the first time parliament has summoned Rouhani, who is under pressure from hardline rivals to change his cabinet following a deterioration in relations with the United States and Iran's growing economic difficulties.

Lawmakers want to question Rouhani on topics including the rial's decline, which has lost more than half its value since April, weak economic growth and rising unemployment, according to semi-official ISNA news agency.

Rouhani, a pragmatist who reduced tensions with the West by striking a nuclear deal in 2015, is facing a growing backlash since US President Donald Trump pulled out from the pact in May and said he will reimpose sanctions that seek to throttle Iran's economy, including its lifeline oil exports.

ISNA said lawmakers also want to Rouhani to explain why, more than two years after the landmark deal, Iranian banks still have only limited access to global financial services.

Rouhani's summon coincides with further shows of public discontent. A number of protests have broken out in Iran since the beginning of the year over high prices, water shortage, power cuts, and alleged corruption in the Islamic Republic.



Firefighters try to control a back burn as the Carr fire continues to spread towards the towns of Douglas City and Lewiston near Redding, California on Tuesday. Two firefighters were killed fighting the blaze and three people, a 70 year old woman and her two great-grandchildren age four and five, perished when their Redding home was rapidly swallowed up by flames.

PHOTO: AFP

'Victory is near'
Syria president tells troops

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad yesterday told his troops they were close to winning the country's seven-year civil war after inflicting a succession of defeats on rebels.

Early last year, government forces held just 17 percent of national territory but a series of blistering offensives has since forced the rebels out of many of their strongholds, putting Assad's government in control of nearly two-thirds of the country.

"Our date with victory is near," Assad wrote in an open letter to the rank and file.

"They (the rebels) were ultimately forced to leave -- humiliated, rolled back, their tails between their legs -- after you gave them a taste of bitter defeat."

Much of the territory was recaptured without any ground fighting as the rebels reluctantly agreed to leave their bombed-out enclaves in Russian-protected convoys.

The army has been bolstered in its offensives by Russian air strikes, Iranian military advisers and militiamen from Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Government troops are now mopping up the remaining pockets of rebel and jihadist territory in the south, where the uprising against Assad first broke out in 2011.

Last week, Assad promised a similar offensive against the rebels' sole remaining major stronghold -- Idlib province in the northwest. But his ally Moscow has ruled out any large-scale assault on the province in the near future.

Idlib is the last of four "de-escalation" zones agreed by world powers in 2017 where the rebels still have a major presence.



Threats won't work, try respect

Iran slams US 'PR stunts' after Trump predicts talks 'soon'

AFP, Tehran

Iran waved away US President Donald Trump's claims that talks with the country's leaders were imminent, saying "threats, sanctions and PR stunts won't work".

With Washington pulling out of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal and set to reimpose full sanctions on Iran from August 6, Tehran has responded coolly to Trump's offer on Monday to talk "any time" without preconditions.

"Threats, sanctions & PR stunts won't work. Try respect: for Iranians & for (international) commitments," tweeted Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

The Revolutionary Guards also made their opposition to talks clear.

"The Iranian people do not authorise officials to meet the Great Satan... Mr Trump, Iran is not North Korea," said General Mohammad Ali Jafari, commander of the Guards, in an open letter published in local media.

Trump told a rally in Tampa, Florida earlier on Tuesday: "I have a feeling they'll be talking to us pretty soon... And maybe not, and that's OK too."

He used the occasion to again blast the "horrible, one-sided" 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers which he abandoned in May.

"It's a horror show," Trump said. "I hope it works out well with Iran. They are having a lot of difficulty right now."

There was not yet an official response from the top leadership, but supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said a fortnight ago that talks with Trump would be "useless."

Scepticism is indeed rife in Tehran over Trump's latest tactic, with one high-profile lawmaker saying negotiations would be a "humiliation."

Despite the rejection, many Iranians are deeply concerned that sanctions could tip the country into a major crisis.

The biggest sign of the crisis so far has been the collapse of the currency,

which has lost two-thirds of its value since the start of the year, including a near-20-percent drop on Sunday and Monday alone.

The rial rallied slightly after Trump's offer of talks, but still stood at 109,000 to the dollar on Wednesday morning -- a figure that would have seemed incredible even a few months ago.

Several Iranian public figures said it was impossible to imagine negotiations with Washington after all the hostility of recent months.

"Iran & US had 2 yrs of talks. With EU/E3+Russia+China, we produced a unique multilateral accord -- the JCPOA (nuclear deal). It's been working. US can only blame itself for pulling out & leaving the table," Zarif wrote on Twitter.

The Trump administration says its "maximum pressure campaign" is designed to force Iran into a new deal that goes beyond limiting its nuclear program and includes curbs to its regional behaviour and missile program.

Brexit no-deal warnings aren't scare tactics: UK

REUTERS, Vienna

British foreign minister Jeremy Hunt yesterday denied that warnings about fallout from a disorderly exit from the European Union were an attempt to scare opponents of the government's preferred Brexit plan into supporting it.

With less than eight months until Britain leaves the EU, the government has yet to agree an exit deal with Brussels and has begun talking more publicly about the prospect of leaving the bloc without any formal agreement on what happens next.

That has spooked businesses, which warn of chaotic disruption to supply chains and for consumers.

Ministers will begin publishing advice later this month on how to cope with a 'No Deal' Brexit - prompting accusations of scaremongering from those who say leaving the EU will benefit Britain.

"This is not project fear, this is project reality," Hunt told a news conference in Vienna, when asked whether Britain was

using scare tactics.

"We have to make a decision on Britain's future relationship with the EU by the end of this year and we have to be very honest with ourselves about the choices that we face."

In the run-up to the referendum in mid-2016 when Britons voted by 52 to 48 percent

to exit the EU, the government's predictions of dire economic consequences in the event of a 'leave' vote - which have not materialised - were criticised as 'Project Fear'.

Prime Minister Theresa May's ministers have fanned out across Europe during the summer break from parliament, trying to win support for a Brexit plan that would see Britain maintain closer ties with the bloc than some had anticipated.

Parts of May's plan have been rejected by Brussels, and it has split opinion in her government, her party, and among voters. That leaves May with an uphill struggle to maintain unity while steering Britain through its most significant upheaval in decades.



Don't let it pass

India's indigenous women reject bill discouraging marriage outside tribe

REUTERS, Bangkok

Indigenous women in northeastern India are calling on the Meghalaya state government to block a bill that would deny them rights, including the ability to inherit land, if they marry outside their tribe.

Khasi women are the latest to join a growing movement in the country challenging discriminatory legislation and practices.

The bill was passed last month by the tribe's governing body, which said it is a measure to protect the group's indigenous identity.

If approved by the state governor, it would deny women their tribal status and rights if they marry a non-Khasi man. Their children would also not be seen as Khasi.

"Khasi people have inter-married since time immemorial. This bill targets women and smacks of patriarchy," said Patricia Mukhim, a Khasi woman and activist yesterday.

"It is sexist and unconstitutional. We are asking the state government to stop its passage," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Khasis, along with two other tribes in Meghalaya, are among the few matrilineal societies in India. Children take their mother's name, and daughters inherit property from their mothers.

But Khasi women lack the power to make important decisions - including on the sale or transfer of land - and the new law would weaken their rights further, and ostracise them from their community, according to campaigners and analysts.



International Navy ships sail off the coast of Hawaii during the Rim of Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) 2018 in the Pacific Ocean. Twenty-six nations, more than 45 ships and submarines, about 200 aircraft, and 25,000 personnel are participating in RIMPAC, world's largest international maritime exercise, from June 27 to August 2, 2018 in and around the Hawaiian Islands and Southern California. RIMPAC 2018 is the 26th exercise in the series that began in 1971.

PHOTO: AFP

PLANE CRASH IN MEXICO

All 103 on board survives

AFP, Durango

An Aeromexico flight crashed on takeoff during a heavy hail storm in northern Mexico, engulfing the plane in flames and injuring 97 people, officials said Tuesday.

The Embraer 190 aircraft, which was operating between Durango and Mexico City and crashed around 3:00 pm local time (20:00 GMT), was carrying "88 adults, nine minors, two infants, two pilots and two flight attendants," the airline's director general Andres Conesa told a news conference.

"It is confirmed that there have been no deaths from the flight #AM2431 accident," tweeted Jose Rosas, the governor of Durango state where the crash occurred.

The accident did cause two series injuries: a pilot had to undergo a spinal operation, and a young girl suffered burns on 25 percent of her body, the governor said.

A total of 97 people were admitted for treatment following



the crash, most of them for "very light" injuries, according to Durango civil defense spokesman Alejandro Cardoza.

Cardoza said the plane was caught in a heavy hailstorm and the pilots tried to make an emergency landing, after which the fire broke out.

Conesa thanked the crew "for their professionalism" and said that the aircraft "was perfectly maintained," but did not provide details on the circumstances of the accident.

Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer announced the dispatch of a team to investigate the crash.

Dozens of lightly injured passengers were seen leaving the plane, which was engulfed in gray smoke in a field.

According to Rosas, the passengers helped each other quickly evacuate the aircraft through the openings in the cabin caused by the accident.

In July 1981, an Aeromexico flight crashed on landing in northern Chihuahua due to bad weather, killing 32.

Thieves snatch Swedish crown jewels in daylight heist

AFP, Stockholm

Robbers who nabbed two 17th century royal crowns and an orb from a Swedish cathedral remained at large yesterday, a day after fleeing their daring midday heist by motorboat.

The thieves, who have not been identified, and the jewels are being sought internationally via Interpol, Swedish police spokesman Stefan Dangardt said, noting the objects were a "national treasure" and would likely be "very difficult to sell".

The gold burial crowns from 1611 belonging to King Karl IX and his wife Queen Christina were originally interred with the couple but were later exhumed and had been on display in a locked glass cabinet in Strangnas Cathedral, located 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of Stockholm.

King Karl IX's crown is made of gold and features crystals and pearls, while

Christina's is smaller and made of gold, precious stones and pearls.

"Several people were seen leaving the church by boat or jet ski after the theft. We have spoken to witnesses, but we are interested in further information from anyone that has made any observations," Dangardt said.

The theft occurred just before noon on Tuesday, and police quickly had helicopters, patrols, and search dogs looking for the thieves but their efforts have so far proved fruitless, Dangardt said.

Similar heists have occurred before.

In 2013, King Johan III's burial regalia was stolen from Vasteras Cathedral. It was recovered several days later in a garbage bag left on a countryside road, following an anonymous tip.

The perpetrators of Tuesday's heist risk up to six years in prison for aggravated theft.



France bans smartphones from schools

CNN ONLINE

French children will have to leave their smartphones and smart devices at home or switched off when they are at school starting in September.

The ban on smartphones as well as other kinds of internet-connected devices, such as tablets, applies to schoolchildren between 3 and 15 years of age, and was passed by lawmakers on Monday. French high schools, or lycées, with students 15 and older, will get to choose whether to adopt the phone ban for their pupils.

"We know today that there is a phenomenon of screen addiction, the phenomenon of bad mobile phone use... Our main role is to protect children and adolescents. It is a fundamental role of education, and this law allows it," said Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer on French news channel BFMTV.

Our increasing dependence on smartphones has given rise to the term "nomophobia," or "NO MOBILE PHONE phobia" -- the fear of not being able to use your cell phone or other smart device. One survey from the UK showed that 66% of respondents have some form of nomophobia and 41% of those respondents said they had two or more phones in order to stay connected.

And as rates of smartphone and internet addiction rise, so too do the adverse effects of these activities on our brains.

A study from South Korea conducted on teenagers with internet and smartphone addiction demonstrated that their brains had higher levels of a neurotransmitter that slows down neurons, resulting in reduced levels of control and attention and rendering people more susceptible to distractions.

Another study by the London School of Economics and Political Science showed that banning smartphones in schools caused a clear improvement in students' test scores.