

'I won't survive'

Iranians fear worse to come as they reel from sanctions

Seventy-year-old Heidar Fekri has been selling industrial equipment from his small store in a Tehran bazaar since before the revolution, but for the first time he is not sure he can survive. He means it literally: "My shelves are empty, my warehouses are empty and soon I will have to close the doors. This has been my entire life -- I won't survive long after the doors close."

Iran's economy had plenty of problems even before US President Donald Trump decided in May to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal and reimpose "crippling" sanctions. But that move exacerbated a record drop in Iran's currency, down 70 percent in the past year, and prompted an exodus of foreign firms.

Anticipation of the return of the oil embargo -- due to kick in today -- has already plunged the country into recession and will see the economy shrink by 3.6 percent next year, says the International Monetary Fund.

For Fekri, who has been bringing in industrial pumps and drills from Europe for 47 years, the uncertainty means he has not imported anything for more than a year.

"Sales have dropped 90 percent compared with six months ago. The whole bazaar is suffering," he told AFP.

Almost all products in Iran -- from medicines to aircraft spares to plastic bottles -- is tied into the global supply chain, so the currency collapse and renewed isolation threatens every corner of society.

The government has been forced to provide food baskets to around half Iran's households as inflation soars.

For the middle class, perhaps the biggest blow is psychological, as the burst of hope that accompanied the nuclear deal in 2015 -- the promise of the country finally shedding its pariah status -- has evaporated.

"No one knows what the Americans actually want. We did



On the eve of renewed sanctions by Washington, Iranian protesters carry placards that mock President Donald Trump, Saudi Arabia's King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during a demonstration outside the former US embassy in the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday, marking the anniversary of its storming by student protesters that triggered a hostage crisis in 1979. Thousands joined rallies in Tehran and other Iranian cities.



everything they wanted and it wasn't enough. It feels like bullying," said Sam Cordier, head of PGT Advertising, which represents foreign clients such as British Airways and Nestle in Tehran.

Washington says the sanctions are designed to curtail Iran's "destabilising" activity in the Middle East, but many see them as an attempt to trigger a revolution.

"It's not fair for the Americans to incite violence. If this continues, all the professional businessmen with something to share through knowledge and investment will leave," said Cordier.

He was forced to sack six of his 30 staff and reduce salaries for the rest as, one by one, his foreign clients packed their bags.

There is plenty of hatred towards the Trump administration, but a surprising number of Iranians pin the blame on their own government for not better protecting them.

"Yes, America is doing bad things but they are looking out for their interests. If our state had looked out for Iran's interests, we wouldn't have the situation we have now," said Erfan Yusufi, 30, whose hip new coffee shop is struggling to cope with rising prices and falling demand.

CRIPPLING SANCTIONS

N Korea warns of returning to 'byungjin' nuke policy

North Korea has warned the United States it will "seriously" consider returning to a state policy aimed at building nuclear weapons if Washington does not end tough economic sanctions against the impoverished regime.

For years, the North had pursued a "byungjin" policy of simultaneously developing its nuclear capabilities alongside the economy.

In April, citing a "fresh climate of detente and peace" on the peninsula, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un declared the nuclear quest complete and said his country would focus on "socialist economic construction".

But a statement issued by the North's foreign ministry said Pyongyang could revert to its former policy if the US did not change its stance over sanctions.

"The word 'byungjin' may appear again and the change of the line could be seriously reconsidered," said the statement carried by the official KCNA news agency late Friday.

At a historic summit in Singapore in June, US President Donald Trump and Kim signed a vaguely-worded statement on denuclearisation.

But little progress has been made since then, with Washington pushing to maintain sanctions against the North until its "final, fully verified denuclearisation" and Pyongyang condemning US demands as "gangster-like".

"The improvement of relations and sanctions are incompatible," said the statement, released under the name of the director of the foreign ministry's Institute for American Studies.

"What remains to be done is the US corresponding reply," it added.

In an interview with Fox News on Friday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reiterated that sanctions will remain until Pyongyang carries out denuclearisation commitments made in Singapore, adding he will meet with his North Korean counterpart next week.

Yemen 'living hell' for children: UN

53 rebels killed in latest air strikes

Conflict-ravaged Yemen has become a "living hell" for children with thousands dying every year from malnutrition and easily preventable diseases, a top UN official said yesterday.

Geert Cappelaere, regional director for the Middle East and North Africa at UN children's agency Unicef, called on the warring parties to join proposed peace talks later this month and agree to a ceasefire.

"Yemen is today a living hell -- not for 50 to 60 percent of the children -- it is a living hell for every boy and girl in Yemen," he told a news conference in the Jordanian capital.

According to Unicef, 1.8 million Yemeni children under the age of five suffer from acute malnutrition.

"We call on all parties to get together later this month under the leadership of the UN special envoy... and agree on a ceasefire and a road to peace for Yemen," Cappelaere added.

The appeal came as dozens of Yemeni rebels have been killed in battles and air strikes in Hodeida, medics said yesterday, as pro-government forces advanced in the insurgent-held Red Sea port city.

Fifty-three Huthi rebels were killed and dozens were injured over the past 24 hours, medical sources in Hodeida told AFP.

UK, EU close to deal over Irish border

Says report

Britain would remain in a temporary customs union with the EU, avoiding a hard Irish border, as part of a new deal being thrashed out between London and Brussels, according to a Sunday Times report.

Senior sources told the newspaper that Prime Minister Theresa May has secured concessions from Brussels, with the EU agreeing to write an "all-UK" custom union into the divorce deal.

This would avoid the EU's "backstop" solution that would have treated Northern Ireland differently from the rest of Britain.

There will also be an "exit clause" from the customs union in a bid to convince Brexiters that it is not a permanent arrangement as May looks to secure enough votes to get the deal through parliament, it added.

Downing Street refused to confirm the report, telling AFP it was "all speculation", but that negotiations were "going well".

The Irish border has proved the biggest obstacle to a deal, with both sides vowing not to reinstate a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland for fear of destabilising the peace accord that ended decades of deadly sectarian violence.

Under the reported deal, the EU accepts that regulatory checks on goods can be carried out in factories and shops rather than at the border, the Sunday Times said.

BITS OF HISTORY (NOVEMBER 4)

- 1921 - Japanese Prime Minister Takashi Hara was assassinated by a rightist fanatic.
- 1979 - Iranian militants seized the US embassy in Tehran and captured 90 hostages.
- 1980 - The Republican Ronald Reagan was elected US president, defeating the incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter.
- 1995 - Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated.
- 2008 - Democrat Barack Obama elected US president beating Republican John McCain.



QATAR SPY CASE

Opposition chief gets life in jail in Bahrain

Bahrain sentenced the head of the country's Shia opposition movement to life in prison yesterday for spying for rival Gulf state Qatar in a ruling rights groups have called a travesty.

Sheikh Ali Salman, who headed the now-banned Al-Wefaq movement, and two of his aides had been acquitted by the high criminal court in June, a verdict the public prosecution appealed.

The public prosecutor said in a statement that the three had been unanimously sentenced by the appeals court for "acts of hostility" against Bahrain and "communicating with Qatari officials... to overthrow constitutional order".

Yesterday's verdict against the charismatic Shia cleric can still be appealed.

Ruled for more than two centuries by the Sunni Al-Khalifa dynasty, Bahrain has been hit by waves of unrest since 2011, when security forces crushed Shia-led protests demanding a constitutional monarchy and an elected prime minister.

Opposition movements, both religious and secular, have been outlawed since 2011 and hundreds of dissidents imprisoned -- many of them stripped of their citizenship in the process.

Amnesty and HRW categorise Salman and other jailed opposition leaders prisoners of conscience.

BLASPHEMY CASE IN PAKISTAN

Asia Bibi's husband pleads for asylum

The husband of a Pakistani Christian woman at the centre of a divisive blasphemy case has pleaded for international help to leave the country, saying he feared for his family's safety.

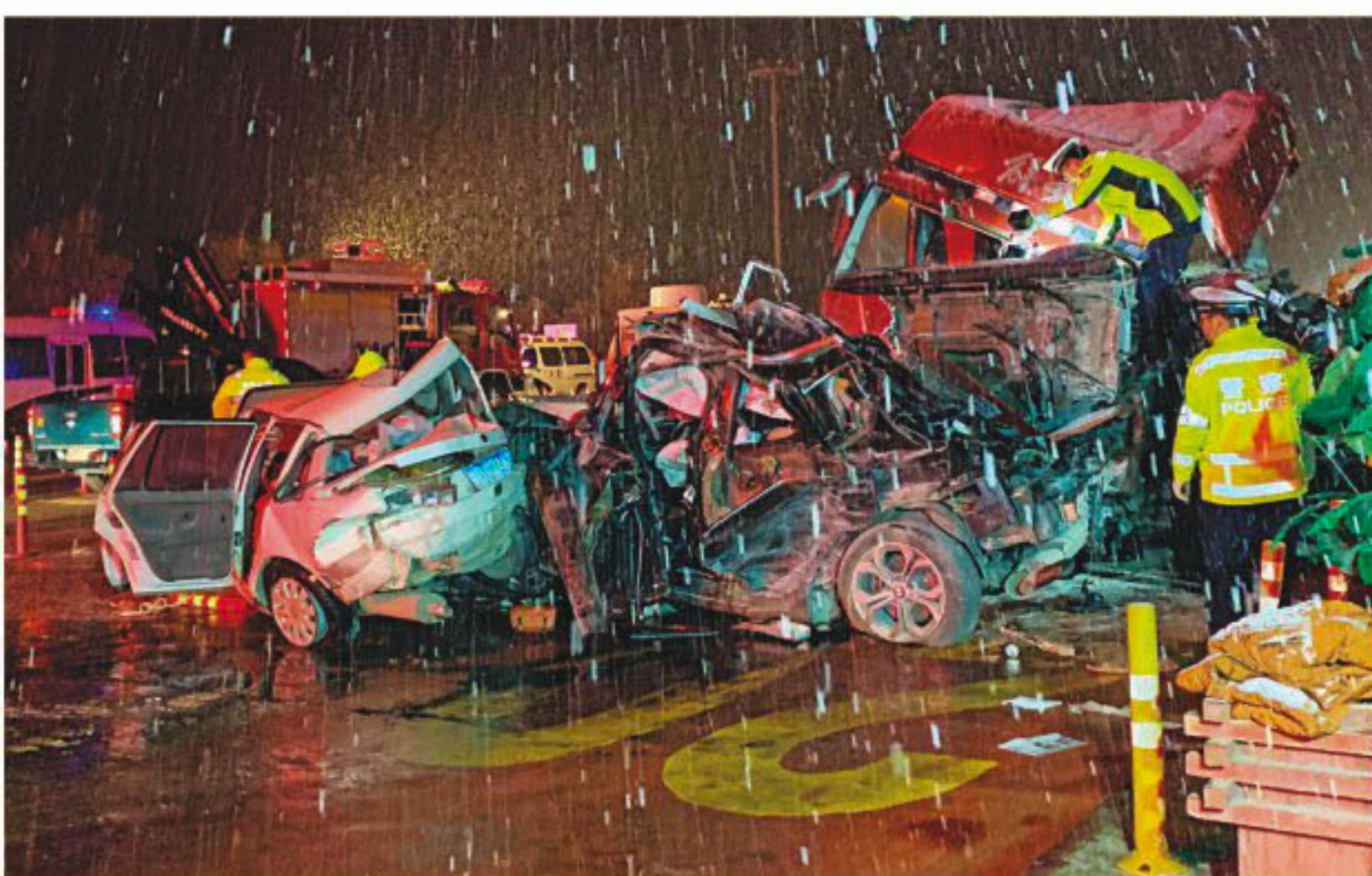
The request by Asia Bibi's husband Ashiq Masih came a day after he criticised a government deal with hardline Islamists that left her in legal limbo, and called on authorities to protect her. Bibi's lawyer fled Pakistan on Saturday, fearing for his life.

Bibi -- who had been on death row since 2010 on blasphemy charges -- was acquitted by the Supreme Court Wednesday, triggering large street protests by ultra-conservative Islamists who paralysed Pakistan for three days, blocking roads and disrupting traffic.

The government reached a deal Friday to end the protests by agreeing to a travel ban preventing Bibi from leaving the country, and saying it would not object to hardline movements appealing the verdict. An appeal has now been filed with the court against Bibi's release.

Masih criticised the government deal, saying it was "wrong".

"I request President Donald Trump to help us to leave (the country), and I request the prime minister of the UK to do their level best to help us, to grant us freedom," said Masih, in a video message, seen by AFP, also requesting help from the Canadian prime minister.



Chinese police officers and rescuers work at the site of where a truck ploughed into cars at a toll booth in Lanzhou in China's northwestern Gansu province early yesterday. An out-of-control truck ploughed into a 31-car lineup in northwest China killing 15 people and injuring 44, authorities in the city of Lanzhou said.

A rare good news from Gaza

After years in the dark, Gazans' power woes ease

The lights are going back on in the Gaza Strip, in a rare piece of positive news from the blockaded Palestinian enclave.

In recent days, residents say they have received up to 16 hours of mains electricity a day, compared with as little as four previously.

UN humanitarian officials report an average of between nine and 11 hours per day since October 25.

It is the result of a landmark six-month deal, part of efforts to end unrest along the border between Israel and the Gaza Strip that has raised fears of a fourth war since 2008.

The deal emerged amid ongoing indirect negotiations between the strip's Islamist rulers Hamas and Israel, mediated by the UN and Egypt, in hopes of reaching a long-term truce.

The result is rates of power the likes of which some Gazans say they can barely remember.

Coupled with pre-existing electricity delivered from Israel, Gaza now has about 200 megawatts a day, said Mohammed Thabet, spokesman for the Gazan energy company.

It is short of the 400-500 megawatts needed for full power, but enough to see service double or more.

The tentative results are showing in the enclave's beleaguered economy: companies able to work longer, restaurant costs falling, and even an increase in ice cream.

Last month's deal sees Qatar pay \$60 million for fuel delivered to Gaza's sole power station. The deliveries are sent through Israel, which agreed on condition the United Nations monitors them to avoid interference by Hamas, which it accuses of diverting humanitarian aid to make missiles and arms.

The deal was made without the backing of the internationally recognised Palestinian Authority, based in the occupied West Bank and run by president Mahmud Abbas.

On Friday, Gaza saw its calmest Friday protests since demonstrations began in March killing more than 200 protesters.

The electricity deal may yet be a false dawn. Western diplomats say there can be no major rebuilding of Gaza while Hamas remains in control.

But for now residents are taking advantage of the power boost -- with at least one downside. Umm Yusef, who lives in a crumbling house with her five kids in Gaza City, said of her children: "They used to study more. Now you can't even talk to them -- they are watching the TV!"

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New Caledonia votes to stay in France

The Pacific islands of New Caledonia opted to remain part of France yesterday, early results showed, as voters rejected independence in a closely-watched referendum seen as a measure of support for Paris in one of its many strategic outposts.

Some 18,000 kilometres from the French mainland, New Caledonia is home to a quarter of the world's known supplies of nickel -- a vital electronics component -- and is a foothold for France in the Pacific.

With 70 percent of voting slips counted, 59.5 percent of people had rejected the proposition that New Caledonia become independent, the local electoral authority said.

Some 175,000 people were eligible to vote in the remote islands fringed by spectacular beaches, with opinion polls ahead of yesterday's ballot predicting a large majority in favour of staying French.

But there are fears the referendum could inflame tensions between indigenous Kanak people, who tend to favour independence, and the white population which has settled since France annexed the islands in 1853.

These differences caused ethnic strife in the 1980s which claimed more than 70 lives. It led to the 1998 Noumea Accord which paved the way for a steady devolution of powers as well as yesterday's referendum.

NEWS IN brief

Cuban president arrives in N Korea

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel arrived in Pyongyang yesterday, North Korea's state media reported, describing the visit as a "historic event". The visit comes only days after US imposed fresh economic restrictions on Cuba.

Egypt kills 19 jihadist linked to Copt attack

Nineteen suspected jihadists linked to a deadly attack on Coptic Christians in central Egypt have been killed in a shootout with police, officials said yesterday. Those killed in the exchange of fire were part of a cell that left dead 7 Coptic pilgrims in Friday's attack in Minya province, it added.

'2 militants' die after Assam mob attack

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Two suspected militants of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang) were killed when a mob lynched them in Assam's Cachar district on Saturday. The lynching came two days after five Bangla-speaking men were gunned down by suspected Ulfa militants.

Death toll rises to 29 in Italy storms

REUTERS, Milan

At least 12 people have been killed by severe weather on the island of Sicily, bringing the overall death toll from the storms sweeping Italy to 29, officials said yesterday. Torrential rain triggering landslides and flood waters led to the death of 10 people around Palermo, an official said.