

Gulf tension escalates

White House reviews plan that would send up to 120,000 US troops to Middle East

AGENCIES

Drone attacks claimed by Iran-aligned Yemen rebels shut down one of Saudi Arabia's main oil pipelines yesterday, further ratcheting up Gulf tensions after the mysterious sabotage of several tankers.

Days after the United States deployed bombers and an assault ship to bolster an aircraft carrier in the region, the world's largest crude exporter said two pumping stations had been targeted early yesterday.

Saudi shuts main oil pipeline after Huthi drone attacks

Attack follows sabotage of Saudi oil tankers off UAE coast

Iran too 'great' to be intimidated: Rouhani

They lie on the East West Pipeline, able to pump five million barrels of oil a day from the oil-rich eastern province to a Red Sea export terminal.

Meanwhile, acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan presented a military plan at a meeting of top national security officials last week that would



send as many as 120,000 US troops to the Middle East in the event that Iran strikes American forces in the region or speeds up its development of nuclear weapons, The New York Times reported Monday.

The Times said the plan, which does not call for a land invasion of Iran, was ordered in part by national security adviser John Bolton.

Citing administration officials, the Times said it is unknown whether President Donald Trump has been briefed on the plan, including the number of troops. The Times said the meeting occurred days after the Trump administration cited "specific and credible" intelligence last week that suggested Iranian forces and proxies were targeting US forces in Syria, Iraq

and at sea.

The meeting included Bolton, Gen. Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CIA Director Gina Haspel and Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats, according to the Times.

The announcement came hours after Yemen's Iran-backed Huthi rebels said they had targeted vital installations in Saudi Arabia, which leads a military coalition against them.

The 1,200-kilometre (750-mile) pipeline reportedly hit yesterday serves as an alternative for Saudi crude exports if the strategically vital Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf were to be closed.

Iran has repeatedly threatened to

close the strait in case of a military confrontation with the United States.

The reported pipeline attacks came after the UAE said four ships belonging to Saudi Arabia were damaged in "sabotage attacks" off the emirate of Fujairah, close to the Hormuz.

Washington and its Gulf allies stopped short of blaming Riyadh's regional arch-rival Tehran for the sabotage, but US President Donald Trump warned Iran against doing anything to harm US interests.

"If they (Iran) do anything, it would be a very bad mistake," Trump warned at the White House.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani hit back, saying the Islamic republic was "too great to be intimidated by anyone".

The attacks came after the United States deployed the USS Abraham Lincoln carrier group, an amphibious assault vessel, a Patriot missile battery and B-52 bombers, triggering fears of a possible military confrontation.

"In an environment of rising regional tensions, limited Iranian operations against the UAE and Saudi Arabia might be designed to dissuade Abu Dhabi and Riyadh and signal that war with Iran will not be limited to Iranian soil," said Alex Vatanka, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.



The Moon is shrinking

The Moon is steadily shrinking, causing wrinkling on its surface and quakes, according to an analysis of imagery captured by NASA's Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter (LRO) published Monday. A survey of more than 12,000 images revealed that lunar basin Mare Frigoris near the Moon's north pole -- one of many vast basins long assumed to be dead sites from a geological point of view -- has been cracking and shifting. Unlike our planet, the Moon doesn't have tectonic plates; instead, its tectonic activity occurs as it slowly loses heat from when it was formed 4.5 billion years ago. This in turn causes its surface to wrinkle, similar to a grape that shrivels into a raisin. Since the moon's crust is brittle, these forces cause its surface to break as the interior shrinks, resulting in so-called thrust faults, where one section of crust is pushed up over an adjacent section. As a result, the Moon has become about 150 feet (50 meters) "skinnier" over the past several hundred million years.

NY mayor takes climate protest to Trump Tower

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio, seen as a potential Democratic presidential hopeful in 2020, on Monday organised a protest inside Trump Tower, charging that President Donald Trump's buildings are among the city's worst polluters. De Blasio led about 70 demonstrators chanting "our planet is not your profit," and charged that former developer Trump's buildings emitted as many greenhouse gases as 5,800 cars each year. Three weeks after the adopting a law that requires buildings of more than 2,300 m2 to reduce their carbon dioxide emissions by 40 percent by 2030, De Blasio looked to be positioning himself at the head of the fight against global warming. De Blasio said Trump Tower, where the president lived before moving to the White House, could be fined up to \$500,000 a year if it does not respect the new law.



Thai king endorses junta-appointed senators

Scores of junta loyalists were endorsed as members of Thailand's 250-strong senate yesterday, packing the upper house with allies likely to vote for coup leader Prayut Chan-O-Cha's return as civilian premier after a highly disputed poll. The 250 members will vote alongside 500 elected lower house MPs to select the prime minister after parliament convenes in the coming weeks. With the senate in hand, junta-backed Palang Pracharat will need only 126 votes in the lower house for Prayut to sail to the top position. Anti-junta parties would require 376 votes to gain a majority in the 750-seat parliament and override the senate advantage. So far, the coalition led by junta rival Pheu Thai holds 245 seats. Horsetrading a for the remaining seats are under way.

4 killed in Somalia suicide bombing

AFP, Mogadishu

A suicide bomber killed at least four people and injured several others yesterday after detonating a car packed with explosives in Mogadishu, Somali security forces said. The district mayor, who was in the building at the time, escaped unharmed, administrative and security sources said. Although the attack was not immediately claimed, the Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab has a history of targeting government buildings in the Somali capital.

Clashes in Syria kill 42 fighters

AFP, Beirut

Clashes on the edge of a jihadist bastion in northwestern Syria have killed at least 42 fighters in 24 hours, a monitor said Monday, after regime bombardment on the region devastated health services. The northwestern region, controlled by jihadists, has come under increasing fire by the regime and its ally Russia in recent weeks, despite a months-old buffer zone deal intended to shield it from any government offensive.

Four cops killed in Pakistan bombing

AFP, Quetta

Four police were killed and nine other people wounded when militants detonated a bomb hidden under a motorbike in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, police said on Monday. The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility. The bike was parked outside a mosque where police personnel were posted in Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province. The attack came two days after Baloch separatists attacked a luxury hotel in the province's second city, Gwadar killing 5 people.



Kashmiri college students through stones during clashes with Indian government forces in Srinagar, yesterday. Police in Indian-administered Kashmir fired tear gas yesterday as thousands of students protested for a second day over the alleged rape of a three-year-old child. On Monday more than 70 people were injured, at least 50 of them from the security forces, as demonstrations raged across the restive northern territory.

Gunmen kill 4 at Catholic parade in Burkina Faso

AFP, Ouagadougou

Gunmen killed four Catholics in a religious procession in north Burkina Faso a day after a priest and five parishioners were murdered at mass, church officials said yesterday.

The parade with a statue of the Virgin Mary was moving through the town of Ouahigouya on Monday when "a group of terrorists intercepted the procession, killing four worshippers and burning the statue," said a spokesman for the Ouagadougou Cathedral.

The killings came a day after a group of 20-30 armed men, according to witnesses, burst into the Catholic church in Dablo, also in the Nord Region of Burkina Faso, shooting dead five parishioners and their priest.

Snap financial ties with Myanmar armed forces

Say UN investigators, call for trials of top generals

REUTERS, Yangon

The world must cut off financial and other support for Myanmar's armed forces, a UN fact-finding mission said yesterday, repeating a call for top generals to be prosecuted for abuses against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

Myanmar security forces are accused of killings, gang rape and arson during a crackdown that drove more than 730,000 people to flee western Rakhine state for neighbouring Bangladesh after attacks on police posts by Rohingya insurgents in August 2017.

Myanmar has rejected most of the accusations and dismissed a report last September by the UN-appointed panel, which said military officers carried out the campaign against the Rohingya with "genocidal intent" and should stand trial. Australian human rights lawyer and panel member Christopher Sidoti said it had seen no evidence Myanmar was trying to resolve

the crisis or ease the safe return of refugees. Myanmar has barred the experts from visiting the country, but they visited the region, including refugee camps in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district, beginning early this month.

"Due to the gravity of the past and continuing violations, attention must be given to the political, economic and financial ties of the Myanmar military, to identify who and what should be targeted," Sidoti said.

That would aid efforts to cut off the money supply, as a means of boosting pressure and reducing violence, he added.

The statement did not identify specific nations. Myanmar rejected the fact-finding mission when it was formed at the Human Rights Council in Geneva in March 2017, with a mandate to investigate military abuses against the Rohingya and in other conflicts with ethnic armed groups in Myanmar.

ROHINGYA CRISIS
UN panel found no evidence Myanmar was trying to ease safe return of refugees

CO2 levels hit historic high

AFP, Paris

Scientists in the United States have detected the highest levels of planet-warming carbon dioxide in Earth's atmosphere since records began, sounding new alarm over the relentless rise of man-made greenhouse gas emissions.

The Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii, which has tracked atmospheric CO2 levels since the late 1950s, on Saturday morning detected 415.26 parts per million (ppm).

It was also the first time on record that the observatory measured a daily baseline above 415 ppm.

The last time Earth's atmosphere contained this much CO2 was more than three million years ago, when global sea levels were several metres higher and parts of Antarctica were blanketed in forest.

"It shows that we are not on track with protecting the climate at all. The number keeps rising and it's getting higher year after year," Wolfgang Lucht, from the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), told AFP.

"This number needs to stabilise."

But far from stabilising, levels of CO2 -- one of a trinity of greenhouse gases produced when fossil fuels are burnt -- are climbing ever more rapidly.

Ralph Keeling, director of Scripps Institution of Oceanography's CO2 Programme, said the trend would probably continue throughout 2019 -- likely to be an El Nino year in which temperatures rise due to warmer ocean currents.

WhatsApp urges users to upgrade app after attack

AFP, San Francisco

WhatsApp yesterday encouraged its users to upgrade the app to plug a security breach that allowed sophisticated attackers to sneak spyware into phones, in the latest trouble for its parent Facebook.

The vulnerability -- first reported by the Financial Times, and fixed in the latest WhatsApp update -- allowed hackers to insert malicious software on phones by calling the target using the app, which is used by 1.5 billion people around the world.

"WhatsApp encourages people to upgrade to the latest version of our app, as well as keep their mobile operating system up to date, to protect against potential targeted exploits designed to compromise information stored on mobile devices," a spokesperson said in a statement to AFP.

The FT cited a spyware dealer as saying the tool was developed by a shadowy Israel-based firm called the NSO Group, which has been accused of helping governments from the Middle East to Mexico snoop on

activists and journalists. And security researchers said the malicious code bore similarities to other tech developed by the firm, according to The New York Times.

The latest exploit -- which impacts Android devices and Apple's iPhones, among others -- was discovered earlier this month and WhatsApp scrambled to fix it, rolling out an update in less than 10 days.

The firm did not comment on the number of users affected or who targeted them, and said it had reported the matter to US authorities.

It also informed authorities in Ireland about the "serious security vulnerability," according to a statement by the country's Data Protection Commission (DPC).

"The DPC is actively engaging with WhatsApp Ireland to determine if and to what extent any WhatsApp EU user data has been affected," it said.

It echoed WhatsApp in encouraging users to update the app, as "the possibility remains that EU users were affected".



Put aside years of mistrust

Russian FM tells Pompeo ahead of Putin meet

REUTERS, Sochi

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday told US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo it was time for Moscow and Washington to put aside years of mistrust and find a way to work together constructively.

Pompeo is in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi for talks with his Russian counterpart, and was also set to hold consultations with Russian President Vladimir Putin later yesterday.

Ties between the two countries have been poisoned by allegations - denied by Moscow - that Russia tried to influence the results of the 2016 US presidential election, and by differences over Venezuela, Iran, Syria and Ukraine.

"We see that there are suspicions and prejudices," Lavrov told Pompeo at the start of their talks.

"We are ready to do that if our US colleagues are ready to reciprocate. ...Let's try, and see what happens."

Pompeo's visit represents the first high-level contact between Moscow and Washington since US Special Counsel Robert Muller submitted a report

matrix for our relations," Lavrov said.

examining the nature of Russia's role in the 2016 US presidential election. His inquiry had cast a pall over US-Russian relations, and Russian officials had expressed hope that Washington would have more scope to build friendlier relations with Moscow once

it was out of the way. Responding to Lavrov's opening remarks, Pompeo said: "I'm here today because President Trump is committed to improving this relationship. We have differences and each country will protect its own interests, look out for its own interests of its people."

"But it's not destined that we're adversaries on all issues and I hope that we can find places where we have a set of overlapping interests and continue to build out strong relationships, at least on those particular issues," Pompeo said.

Pompeo identified counter-terrorism and combatting nuclear proliferation as two areas where Moscow and Washington could find common ground.

Ahead of the negotiations Putin toured a top military flight test centre in southern Russia and inspected a new nuclear-capable hypersonic missile dubbed Kinzhal (Dagger).



United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (C) pauses after laying a floral tribute to the victims to the twin mosque attacks at the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, yesterday. Guterres warned hate speech was spreading online "like wildfire" at a meeting with victims of the Christchurch mosque shootings yesterday, vowing the world body will lead efforts to extinguish the problem.