

Rouhani urges Iran military to remain vigilant against 'provocations'

Fri, 2020-04-24 19:58

TEHRAN: Iran's president Hassan Rouhani called on the country's armed forces on Friday to maintain vigilance against "provocative actions by foreigners in the region," state TV reported, as a war of words with the US escalated.

The comment came after the head of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards said on Thursday Tehran would destroy US warships if its security is threatened in the Arabian Gulf.

On Wednesday, US President Donald Trump warned Tehran over "harassment" of US vessels. Trump said he had instructed the US Navy to fire on any Iranian ships that harass it at sea, though said later he was not changing the military's rules of engagement.

"We must carefully follow strategies ensuring the sustainable stability of the region while maintaining vigilance and authoritative presence in the area," state TV quoted Rouhani as telling Defence Minister Brigadier General Amir Hatami by telephone.

In a phone call to Revolutionary Guards commander Major General Hossein Salami, Rouhani "referred to provocative actions by foreigners in the region and the need to maintain vigilance against these moves", state television reported.

Earlier this month, the US military said 11 Revolutionary Guards naval vessels came close to US Navy and Coast Guard ships in the Gulf, calling the moves "dangerous and provocative".

Tehran blamed its longtime adversary for the incident. On Thursday, Iran's Foreign Ministry summoned the Swiss ambassador in Tehran, who represents US interests in the country, over the recent tensions between Tehran and Washington.

Antagonism between Iran and the United States has sharpened since 2018, when Trump withdrew from Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with six world powers and reimposed crippling sanctions.

Animosities spiked in early January when top Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani was killed in a US drone strike in Baghdad. Iran retaliated on Jan. 9 by firing missiles at bases in Iraq where US troops were stationed.

Stoking tension over Tehran's nuclear and missile programmes, Iran's Guards said on Wednesday they had successfully launched the country's first military satellite into orbit. The announcement drew protests from Washington, London and Paris.



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Britain: Iran's ballistic missile launch "of significant concern"

[Lebanon extends coronavirus lockdown as PM rebukes central bank governor](#)

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1587744582146433600

Fri, 2020-04-24 13:12

BEIRUT: Lebanon will extend a coronavirus lockdown by two weeks until May 10 but Prime Minister Hassan Diab said on Friday the economy would be reopened in gradual phases over the coming weeks.

Already hit by a financial crisis that led to a sovereign debt default and a fall in the value of its currency, Lebanon has ordered most businesses to

close, shut Beirut airport and imposed an overnight curfew to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab rebuked central bank governor Riad Salameh on Friday, questioning his performance after a steep fall in the pound currency and calling on him to clearly explain to Lebanese where policy was headed.

Diab said the crisis-hit country had suffered \$7 billion in additional losses since the start of the year and that liquidity in the banking system was running out, with \$5.5 billion in Lebanese deposits exiting in the past three months.

Diab said it was urgent that an economic reform plan, a draft of which emerged earlier this month, be quickly passed to avert further crisis. New infections have largely tapered off in recent weeks. Lebanon has recorded 696 coronavirus cases and 22 deaths so far, with the ministry of health reporting eight new cases on Friday.

"It is time for us to start reopening our country. We all want our normal lives back. People and companies are struggling," Diab said, though warning that caution was still needed to avoid a second wave that could "destroy the country".

Diab said the government had done a risk assessment on what sectors could be slowly relaunched in the coming weeks, without specifying which ones would come first.

Earlier on Friday Lebanon's higher defence council laid out a five-stage timetable for reopening the economy, with the first beginning on April 27 and the last on June 8.



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Lebanon tightens security around refugee camp over virus
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[Pompeo: West Bank annexation plans an 'Israeli decision'](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-04-24 15:34

CHICAGO: The Trump administration has no public comment to make about Israel's plans to push forward with its annexation of the West Bank, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said on Wednesday.

After Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Benny Gantz on Monday formed a coalition government, following the country's third election in a year, they announced that the annexation of major parts of the West Bank will begin on July 1.

Gantz said this would be subject to American support. However, Pompeo on Wednesday said annexation is an Israeli decision that the US will monitor.

"We're happy ... a new government is formed. A fourth election, we think, wouldn't have been in Israel's best interest ... We think it's not in the world's best interest," he added.

"As for the annexation in the West Bank, the Israelis will ultimately make those decisions. That's an Israeli decision, and we'll work closely with them to share with them our views of this in a private setting."

Pompeo was speaking at a press conference that began with him wishing Muslims a happy Ramadan, and during which he mentioned the first anniversary of the killing of hundreds of Christians in Sri Lanka last Easter, and Israel's commemoration of the Holocaust.

He also revealed that the US is sending \$5 million in aid to the Palestinian Authority to help combat coronavirus.

He reiterated that the Trump administration had halted other financial aid because of concerns about where the money would end up.

"The reason we stopped providing assistance previously was that these

resources weren't getting to the place they needed to (go), to the Palestinian people," Pompeo said.

"We hope that this money, this \$5 million, will get where it needs to go to provide real assistance to the Palestinian people, who ... are going to need a lot of help as they move through this."

He said the Trump administration will evaluate whether the aid has been used properly and whether there are any additional resources "that are appropriate or can be delivered in a way that actually gets to the Palestinian people."

The administration began to suspend financial aid to the Palestinians in January 2018 when it halted all funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency, which supports Palestinian refugees displaced by Israel's wars in 1948 and 1967.

The following August, US President Donald Trump ordered further cuts of more than \$200 million to funding for aid programs in the West Bank and Gaza, saying the money would instead be used to fund projects elsewhere.

This was seen by many analysts as an attempt to apply pressure on the Palestinians in an attempt to force them back to the negotiating table with Israel.

In February 2019, the US pushed through legislation that would potentially expose Palestinian aid recipients to lawsuits filed by Jews in America over acts of alleged terrorism in the Middle East.

As a result, the Palestinians asked that the aid they were still receiving from the US, which was provided by the US Agency for International Development, be suspended to avoid exposure to legal action.



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Pompeo offers 'best wishes' to Muslims at start of Ramadan

[Lebanon tightens security around refugee camp over virus](#)

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1587727720265200400

Fri, 2020-04-24 11:01

BAALBEK, Lebanon: Authorities closed all entrances to a Palestinian refugee camp in eastern Lebanon on Friday after four more people tested positive for the coronavirus, heightening concerns the virus could further spread among its overcrowded population.

The four infected with the virus are relatives of a woman who tested positive

earlier this week and are isolating inside their home, according to a statement from the UN agency for Palestinian refugees. It said they were so far not in need of hospitalization

The Palestinian woman who was taken to a hospital in Beirut this week became the first refugee living in a camp in Lebanon to contract the virus, a finding that triggered a spate of testing in the camp. The five confirmed cases are residents of the Wavel camp in the city of Baalbek, known locally as the Jalil, or Galilee camp.

Lebanon, a tiny country of 5 million people, is home to more than 1 million Syrian refugees and other Syrians who are residents. It is also host to tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees and their descendants, most of them living in squalid camps with no access to public services, with limited employment opportunities and no rights to ownership.

On Friday, Palestinian fighters in charge of the camp security wore face masks as they patrolled the narrow streets and alleyways of the camp with an estimated population of up to 3,000. Posters of the late Palestinian President Yassir Arafat were plastered on the camp walls.

Camp residents hunkered down at home after being asked to stay indoors, while paramedics in protective suits sprayed down the few vehicles that were permitted to enter with disinfectant and took people's temperatures.

Lack of testing has stoked fears among millions of displaced people around the world packed into refugee camps and informal settlements.

Most people who become infected experience mild to moderate symptoms. But the virus can cause severe illness and lead to death, particularly among older people and those with underlying health problems. It is highly contagious and can be spread by those who appear healthy.

Health Minister Hamad Hassan told reporters that Lebanese authorities were working together with the UN and other agencies "to avoid an outbreak in the coming days."



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[Kuwait revises curfew hours for Ramadan](#)

Author:

Fri, 2020-04-24 11:25

DUBAI: Kuwait has called on its residents to follow the new curfew hours of 4 p.m to 8 a.m for Ramadan, local daily Arab Times has reported.

The Kuwait Minister of Interior emphasized the importance of following government directives to curb the spread of COVID-19, and said legal actions will be taken against curfew violators.

The move comes as other countries in the Middle East started to ease restrictions among their residents to revive their economies.



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