



Bangladesh protests against secular killing

12 KILLED AS AL-SHEBAB ATTACK SOMALIA HOTEL

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KHAMENEI: FRESH ELECTIONS NEEDED IN SYRIA

TEHRAN: Iran's supreme leader dismissed yesterday the chances of foreign countries bartering a deal over Syria's future, suggesting they should focus on securing a halt to fighting that allows fresh elections. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also repeated his ban on direct talks with the United States about turmoil in the Middle East, saying US objectives in the region were utterly at odds with Iranian policy.

The comments, to Iran's ambassadors and other top diplomats, were Khamenei's first since his country joined international negotiations on the four-year Syrian conflict. He said Syria's people must choose who their leader would be, rather than the US and other foreign powers trying to decide for them.

"The Americans seek to impose their own interests, not solve problems. They want to impose 60, 70 percent of their will," he said, alluding to the peace talks which took place Friday in Vienna. "So what's the point of negotiations?" he said, insisting that military and financial support given to rebels fighting President Bashar Al-Assad, principally from Gulf States and the US, must stop if the Syria conflict is to end.

Top diplomats from 17 countries, as well as the United Nations and the European Union, had gathered in Austria, seeking to narrow divisions over Syria's civil war, which has killed more than 250,000. For the first time, the meeting brought together the entire main outside players in the crisis, including Russia and Iran, key allies of Assad's government.

The Syrian regime and the opposition were not represented. Iran and the US held direct negotiations for almost two years which led to a deal over the Islamic republic's nuclear program on July 14, but afterwards Khamenei banned bilateral talks on other issues. The meeting in Vienna only reiterated the international split over Assad's fate but the talks will resume in two weeks.

The United States, Saudi Arabia, Britain and France say the Syrian leader has lost all legitimacy and must step down, even if not immediately. Iran and Russia, however, have increased their support for Assad, with President Vladimir Putin ordering air strikes on regime targets while Tehran has upped its count of military advisers on the ground.

Alluding again to hopes of a peace settlement generated in Vienna, Khamenei appeared to suggest the debate over Assad was unhelpful, reiterating that the eventual solution is a ballot. "There's no point in other countries getting together and deciding about a system of government and the head of that state," the supreme leader said. "This is a dangerous innovation which no government in the world would accept being imposed on itself. The solution to Syria's problem is elections," he added.

Taking aim at US

A halt to support for rebels could ensure "Syrian people elect whoever they want in a safe and peaceful environment," Khamenei said, without mentioning Iran's support for Assad. Khamenei also took aim at wider US policy in the Middle East.

IS SEIZES CENTRAL SYRIAN TOWN

BEIRUT: The Islamic State militant group has expanded its presence in central Syria, seizing control of a town that lies near a highway leading to the capital, Damascus, activists and the group said yesterday. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said after intensive clashes with government troops, IS forces captured Mahin in the central province of Homs yesterday and were now pushing their way northwest toward the majority-Christian town of Sadad. The town is home to Syria's Assyrian Christian minority and the ancient language of Aramaic is still spoken there.

Mahin is 25 kilometers east of the highway that links the central province to Damascus. The town also houses a large military complex and arms depots - and was scene of intense clashes between government troops and Al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria in 2013 before the government recaptured it. The capture of Mahin, and the push toward Sadad, marks a new advance of the Islamic State group in central Syria. The group's strongholds lie in northern and eastern Syria; but the group has, as recently as May, established a presence in Homs, seizing the ancient city of Palmyra and then another village to the west.

New expansion

The new IS expansion comes despite concerted Russian airstrikes in Syria, which Moscow says target IS and other terrorist groups. For the most part, the Russian airstrikes, in their fifth week, have targeted Western-backed rebel groups and other Islamist groups. IS militants have also made recent gains in Aleppo, seizing villages from other rebel groups and controlling a section of a strategic highway that serves as a supply route into government-controlled areas of Aleppo. The Islamic State internet radio broadcast, Al-Bayan, said the group took control of large arms depots in Mahin after a suicide bomber blew himself up at a government checkpoint outside the town, opening the way for its fighters to advance.

The Observatory reported airstrikes on Mahin, following IS control of the town. Also yesterday, Syria's foreign minister said "important" points were made during international talks seeking to revive a moribund political process and end his country's civil war, now in its fifth year. But Walid Al-Moallem said negotiators failed to convince his government's foes to curb their support for "terrorism." Al-Moallem's comments came after his meeting with UN special envoy Staffan de Mistura, who arrived in Damascus yesterday to brief him on the details of the international talks in Vienna. — AP

"America is the main part of the problem in the region, not part of the solution," he said, citing US support for "the Zionist regime" in Israel. "These policies differ 180 degrees with the policies of the Islamic republic," he added, also criticizing Saudi Arabia for its "double standards" of conducting an air war in Yemen. "They have intervened in this

country upon a request by a resigned and fugitive Yemeni president," Khamenei said.

"But on Syria they are not prepared to stop supporting the armed opposition upon a request by the legal president." Meanwhile, a top Iranian official criticized remarks made by Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir, who said

Saturday he hoped Tehran would use money unfrozen by the nuclear deal to improve its economy rather than for "aggressive policies". Iran's deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian told the official IRNA news agency: "We warn Adel Al-Jubeir not to test the Islamic Republic of Iran's patience." —AFP

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