



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif gives a speech during the Munich Security Conference yesterday. — AFP

Netanyahu warns Iran; Zarif mocks...

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Zarif responded by calling Netanyahu's speech a "cartoonish circus" which "does not even deserve the dignity of a response". "What has happened in the past several days is the so-called invincibility (of Israel) has crumbled," Zarif, who addressed the conference hours after Netanyahu, said, referring to the downing of the Israeli F-16, which crashed in northern Israel after a strike on Syrian air defenses. "Once the Syrians have the guts to down one of its planes it's as if a disaster has happened," Zarif said, accusing Israel of using "aggression as a policy against its neighbors" by regularly carrying out incursions into Syria and Lebanon.

The clash came as Netanyahu again slammed the 2015 nuclear deal signed by Iran and world powers, which is under threat by opposition from the administration of US President Donald Trump. Netanyahu compared the deal to the "appeasement" of the 1938 Munich Agreement that only emboldened Hitler, and said it allowed Iran to hide its continued efforts to build an atomic bomb. "The sanctions relief that the deal provided has not moderated Iran... In fact it has unleashed a dangerous Iranian tiger in our region and beyond. Once armed with nuclear weapons, Iran's aggression will be unchecked, and it will encompass the entire world," Netanyahu claimed.

Those accusations were dismissed by Zarif. "We will not be the first ones to violate an agreement which all of us tried, in spite of Netanyahu's attempts, to achieve," he said. Israel has said it downed the drone on Feb 10 after it entered the country from Syria, and responded with a raid on what it said was the Iranian control systems for the craft in Syria. It marked the first time Israel publicly acknowledged hitting Iranian targets in Syria since the 2011 start of the civil war there.

During the strikes, one of Israel's F-16 fighter jets

was shot down, believed to be the first loss of an Israeli plane in combat since 1982. Tensions between the two countries had already been building in recent months, with Israel fearing that Tehran is trying to establish a permanent presence in Syria as part of an effort to become a greater regional power in the Middle East. The clashes this month have stoked fears of an escalated conflict between the two countries, even though both sides appear to want to avoid an open war for now, analysts say.

Lebanon's Defense Minister, Yacoub Riad Sarraf, who spoke after Netanyahu, warned against any intervention: "Watch out, we will defend ourselves ... we also have friends." Russian senator Alexei Pushkov, also addressing the Munich conference shortly after Netanyahu spoke, said: "OK, you bomb Iran, and then you do what, what happens next?" while saying the Iranian issue requires acting with "responsibility". It was not the first time Netanyahu, who is under pressure at home over a corruption inquiry, has made a dramatic show. In 2012, speaking at the UN, he notably showed a simplistic drawing of a bomb with a lit fuse, supposedly indicating how close Tehran was to becoming a nuclear threat.

The Israeli military has claimed the drone was a copy of a US model captured by Iran in 2011, based on an analysis of the drone's debris. Netanyahu reiterated yesterday that Israel would not let Iran obtain a permanent foothold in its northern neighbor. "Through its proxies - Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza - Iran is devouring huge swathes of the Middle East," he said. "Israel will not allow Iran's regime to put a noose of terror around our neck," he added. "We will act without hesitation to defend ourselves. And we will act if necessary not just against Iran's proxies that are attacking us, but against Iran itself."

But he stressed that Israel was not the enemy of the Iranian people, and offered his condolences to the families of the people killed in an Iranian plane crash yesterday. "We have no quarrel with the people of Iran, only with the regime that torments them," Netanyahu said. — Agencies

Saudi women can start own business...

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seeking to restructure debt with creditors since the 2009 global financial crisis and, more recently, the dip in oil prices.

The kingdom is embarking on an intensive drive to overhaul its economy - including updating outdated laws - as it seeks to create an investor-friendly climate to push through a multibillion dollar pipeline of asset sales such as the initial public offering of Saudi Aramco, expected to be the world's largest public share sale. "The timing is excellent," said Bader Al-Busaies, managing partner at Al Suwaiket and Al Busaies law firm. "Lots of companies are facing financial difficulties. Before it was either liquidation or stakeholders had to inject money. The new law is an alternative solution - the international practice has proven that insolvency law offers a good solution for companies."

King Salman endorsed the bankruptcy law after the cabinet approved it, the sources said, citing a document dated last week. The ministry of commerce and investment did not immediately respond to a request for comment, and it was not clear when the law would be promulgated and take effect. Saudi Arabia's Shura Council, a top advisory body to the government, in December approved a draft of the law which consisted of 231 articles in 17 chapters. It regulated bankruptcy procedures such as settlements and liquidation, for individuals as well as local and foreign companies, according to a government statement at the time.

No details of the framework of the law have yet been released but an earlier draft version created a provision whereby approval of a debt restructuring deal could be achieved if at least two-thirds of creditors approved the plan. That might help to resolve existing distressed debt disputes such as one faced by Ahmad Hamad Algosaihi and Brothers (AHAB), a local conglomerate which currently has two-thirds of creditors' support for its debt proposal. AHAB and another company, Saad Group, defaulted in 2009 in Saudi Arabia's biggest financial meltdown, leaving international and regional banks and other creditors owed about \$22 billion. — Agencies

Amir orders paying debts of Kuwaiti...

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After lengthy deliberations and hearings defense lawyers' arguments, the court decided to suspend a ruling by the appeals court sending the activists to jail pending the final verdict of the court. The court also set March 4 as the date for the next hearing in the case that has attracted a lot of attention.

Prisoners, their relatives and supporters celebrated the decision in jubilant scenes in the jam-packed courtroom at the Palace of Justice. The large crowd sang the national anthem outside the courtroom as policemen tried peacefully to calm the crowds. Among those released were MPs Jamaan Al-Harbash and Waleed Al-Tablabaie, who spent three months in jail, and MP Mohammad Al-Mutair, who arrived in Kuwait two days ago and gave himself up. They also included former MP and opposition leader Musallam Al-Barrak and leading former MP's Faisal Al-Muslim, Mubarak Al-Waalan, Salem Al-Namlan and Fahd Al-Khannah, among others.

In all, 70 opposition activists were tried for breaking

into the National Assembly building in Nov 2011 following a protest against corruption and against a former prime minister, who resigned two weeks later. The criminal court acquitted all the defendants, saying they all had no criminal intention and that they were protesting against corruption. But the court of appeals - in a surprising ruling - convicted all the men of entering a public property and handed them harsh jail terms ranging from one to nine years.

Barrak yesterday described the ruling as "oppressive", because it did not hear the defense of the accused. The public prosecution told the court of cassation earlier this month that the appeals court ruling was incorrect.

Meanwhile, former MP Kamel Al-Awadhi yesterday lashed out at Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte for his inflammatory statements against Kuwait regarding the treatment of Filipino workers in the country. Awadhi, who served for years as the director general of the immigration department before becoming a lawmaker, said that the whole affair should have been resolved through diplomatic channels and not in public, especially since the alleged mistreatment concerns a number of individual cases only. He said Duterte should have visited Kuwait and personally seen the situation of Filipino workers before he issued strong statements to the media. Awadhi added statements about the abuse of a handful of workers are highly exaggerated.

65 'killed' in Iran plane crash; Amir...

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As night approached, bad weather prevented helicopters searching the probable crash site but emergency workers were scouring the mountainous area by land, the television said. "It is getting colder and darker and still no sign of the plane," said a television reporter accompanying rescue teams searching snow-covered areas in Mount Dena which has more than 40 peaks higher than 4,000 m.

Media reports said the plane disappeared from radar screens 50 minutes after taking off from Mehrabad airport in the southwest of the capital. It mainly handles domestic flights. Worried relatives of passengers gathered at Yasuj airport. "I kept telephoning all morning but they (the relative) wouldn't answer. So I called my brother and he said they will get here, it (the plane) is not behind schedule yet," a young woman told a reporter for state television. "I told him it is raining here. He said no (meaning, don't worry). He called later and said the plane had crashed."

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani issued messages of condolences. The president asked the transport minister to lead an investi-

gation into the crash. Families of the passengers also gathered at a mosque near Mehrabad airport. "I can't bring myself to believe it," said a woman whose husband was on board. The man who missed the doomed flight told reporters of his mixed emotions. "God has been really kind to me but I am so sad from the bottom of my heart for all those dear ones who lost their lives," the unnamed man told the Tabnak news website, which showed a picture of his unused ticket.

Iran has suffered several plane crashes in the past few decades. Tehran says U.S. sanctions have long prevented it from buying new aircraft or spare parts from the West. The crashed ATR was 25 years old, officials said. A deal with world powers on Iran's nuclear program has lifted some of those sanctions, opening the way for Iranian airlines to update their creaking fleets. Aseman signed a deal last year to buy at least 30 Boeing 737 MAX jets. National carrier IranAir has ordered 80 planes from Boeing and 100 from Airbus.

Based in the southern French city of Toulouse, ATR is a joint venture between Airbus and Italy's Leonardo. Earlier air disasters include the crash of a Boeing 727 passenger plane in 2011 which killed 78 people in the northwest of Iran, and the 2009 crash of a Caspian Airlines Tupolev aircraft bound for Armenia which killed all 168 people on board. One of Iran's worst air accidents happened in Feb 2003 when an Iranian Ilyushin-76 troop carrier crashed in southeast Iran, killing all 276 Revolutionary Guard soldiers and crew. — Agencies

Many Filipino returnees still...

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sharp focus with the death of Joanna Demafelis, whose body was found stuffed in a freezer. A visibly angry President Rodrigo Duterte has alleged that employers routinely rape their Filipina workers, force them to work 21 hours a day and feed them scraps.

Some 252,000 Filipinos work in Kuwait, many as maids, with reports of widespread abuse and exploitation. "When will this inhuman treatment of these Filipino workers end?" Duterte said this month. He has banned the deployment of new workers to Kuwait as his cabinet members seek additional legal protection for those already there.

Domestic helpers who want to leave are being flown home for free. One of them returning over the weekend was Michelle Obdenacio, 34, who said she also suffered at the hands of her employer. After two years she ran away and worked illegally in a beauty salon, where she was treated better - even if she had to dodge the police. Despite the hardships and risks overseas, she is willing to give it another chance.

"If there is no stable job here (in the Philippines), and if there is someone who will take me, I would go back. I have three kids in school, the oldest in college," Obdenacio told AFP after six years abroad. "My husband has no job so I really must make an effort to go out (of the Philippines): if

not in Kuwait, someplace else."

About 1,700 workers have come home under Duterte's repatriation program so far, the government said. Some have been persuaded to leave by a Kuwaiti government amnesty for illegal workers, which allows them to depart without penalty until Feb 22. But those headed home may have little to show for their labor. Many of the returning women who spoke to AFP over the weekend in Manila said they had no personal savings.

The money they earned over the years had already been sent back home. Some said they had only been getting about KD 80 (\$267) a month, which went to pay household expenses and school tuition in the Philippines. Filipino workers are attracted overseas by salaries unavailable at home, where even skilled workers like computer engineers earn only about 49,300 pesos (\$960) a month, according to government figures.

Overseas workers are widely hailed as national heroes for their contribution to the economy, and reports of their mistreatment abroad often become a political issue domestically. Loreza Tagle, 37, said she had been overworked and underpaid by her employer. She labored illegally in a restaurant for five years to support her four children and her poorly-paid husband back home. But as she pondered an uncertain fate after leaving Kuwait, tears welled up in her eyes.

"It is frightening to come back to the Philippines with no guarantee of finding a job," she said through sobs. "Over there, no matter what, even if you are in fear of getting caught by the police, somehow you can find a job... over here, you may not be afraid but you won't have a job." — AFP

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