

Iran open to UK tanker swap amid hopes for 'progress'

Tehran challenges Trump drone claim, warns of confrontation if Hormuz status changed

TEHRAN: Iran hinted yesterday it is open to a tanker swap with Britain as the owners of a UK-flagged ship seized by the Islamic republic expressed hopes for "positive progress" after speaking to its crew. The seizure of the Stena Impero has been seen as a tit-for-tat move after British authorities detained an Iranian tanker off Gibraltar this month on suspicion it was shipping oil to Syria in breach of EU sanctions. "We don't want tensions with some European countries," Iran's President Hassan Rouhani said in comments to a cabinet meeting posted on his government's website.

In a clear reference to the tense standoff with the British, Rouhani said if they were to "cease the incorrect acts that they have done, including that of Gibraltar, Iran's response would be" appropriate to their actions. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps seized the Stena Impero on Friday, surrounding it with attack boats before troops rappelled onto its deck from a helicopter.

The oil tanker and its 23 crew have since been impounded at the southern port of Bandar Abbas for allegedly breaking "international maritime rules". The owners of the vessel said on Wednesday they had finally been able to speak to the crew of 18 Indians, three Russians, a Latvian and a Filipino. "Stena Bulk can confirm that we have had direct communication with the crew of the Stena Impero since late yesterday (Tuesday)," the Swedish shipping company said in a statement.

It said "everyone was safe with good cooperation

with the Iranian personnel onboard". "We do of course appreciate this step... and that this is a first sign that we will soon see more positive progress from the Iranian authorities," said its chief executive, Erik Hanell.

Duel over drones

Iran's high-seas standoff with Britain comes amid rising hostilities between the Islamic republic and UK ally the United States. The arch-enemies have been locked in a battle of nerves since President Donald Trump withdrew the US from a landmark 2015 deal aimed at limiting Iran's nuclear program and began reimposing sanctions. Since the Trump administration began a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran this year, the situation has worsened with drones downed and tankers mysteriously attacked in sensitive Gulf waters.

The Revolutionary Guards yesterday denied losing a drone and challenged the Americans to prove Trump's claims they could find it at the bottom of the sea after the US military said it downed an unmanned aircraft last week. "I officially declare that none of Islamic Iran's drones have been downed," Guards' Major-General Hossein Salami was quoted as saying on the force's official website. "If our enemies have any claims on downing Iranian drones, they should show their proof," he said.

Iran, which last month shot down a US Global Hawk drone that it said had ventured into its airspace, has repeatedly denied it lost any of its own unmanned aeri-

al vehicles. In reaction to the Iranian denials, Trump insisted on Tuesday that the US downed a drone. "You can see it laying right down on the bottom of that beautiful bed of water," the US president said in remarks posted on the White House website.

Iran's defense minister Brigadier-General Amir Hatami responded to Trump yesterday by saying the Islamic republic had put on display the wreckage of the US drone it shot down. "If anyone claims that they have downed one of our drones they must show its (wreckage)," Hatami said according to the semi-official ISNA news agency.

Sanctions 'ceasefire'

During the cabinet meeting, Rouhani also said Iran would be open to talks should there be a "ceasefire" in US economic sanctions against the Islamic republic. "In this regard some countries are intermediaries, though they themselves say they are not mediators and are just expressing their own views," said Rouhani. "There has been correspondence from both sides on this issue and we are continuing this," the Iranian president added.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Tehran in June for talks aimed at defusing tensions between Iran and the United States. Earlier this month French President Emmanuel Macron sent his top diplomatic adviser, Emmanuel Bonne, to Iran "to piece together a deescalation" strategy. Both Japan and France have denied acting as intermediaries between Iran and the United States.

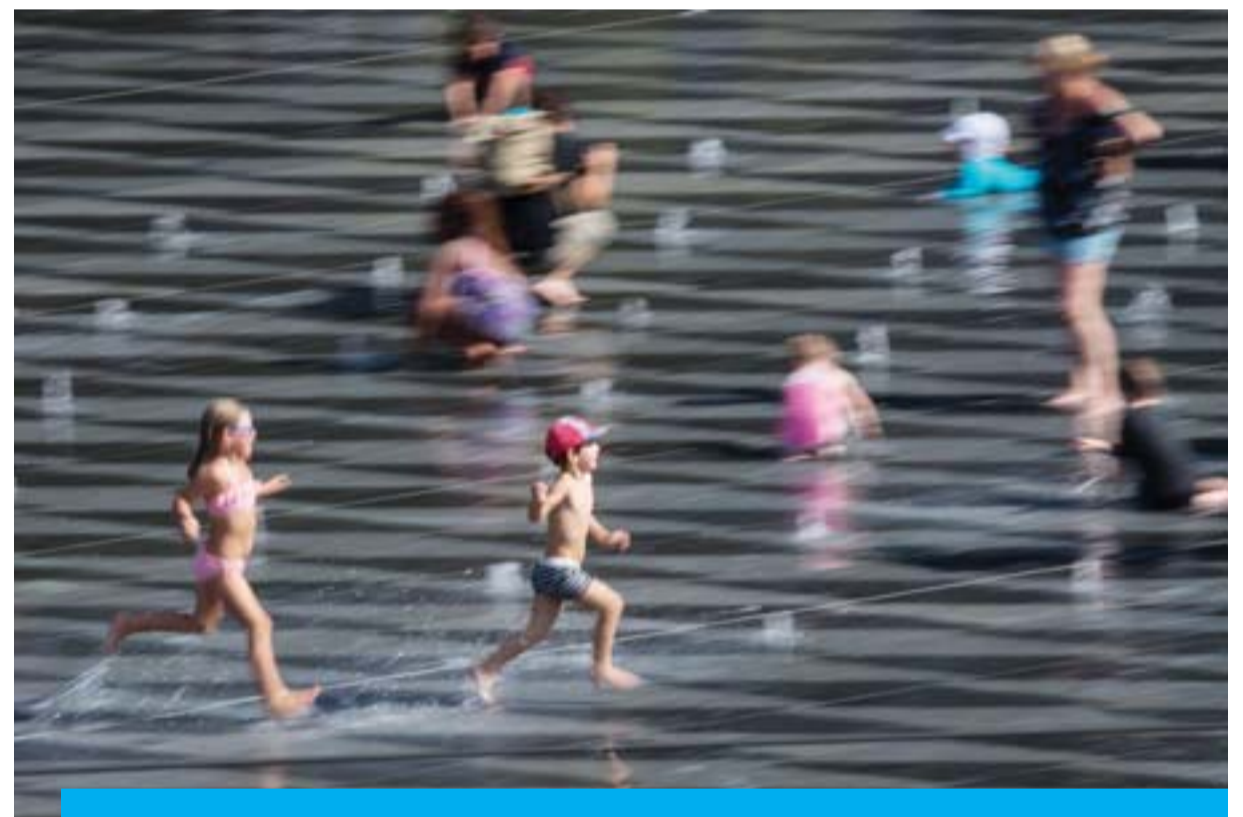
Meanwhile, the military adviser to Iran's supreme leader was quoted yesterday as saying that any change in the status of the Strait of Hormuz, which Tehran says it protects, would open the door to a dangerous confrontation. In a series of news flashes, Al Jazeera TV quoted Hossein Dehghan, a commander of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards, as also telling the channel that Tehran would not negotiate with the US administration under any circumstances and that if Washington decided to go to war then all American bases in the region would be targeted.

It later aired excerpts of the interview which had an Arabic-language voice over. Britain has called for a European-led naval mission to ensure safe shipping through the world's most important oil artery after Iran seized a British tanker last week. The United States, which has imposed economic sanctions on Iran aimed at halting its exports of oil, is trying to rally support for a global coalition to secure Gulf waters.

Dehghan said all countries should be able to export their oil through the strait or else no one could, Al Jazeera said. It quoted him as accusing Abu Dhabi, the political capital of the United Arab Emirates, of becoming a US center to strike Iran's national security, but added that the Gulf Arab state had sent a delegation to Iran to discuss peace. UAE officials were not immediately available to comment. Jazeera quoted Dehghan as saying Iran would not negotiate its missile program with anyone, dismissing US threats of a war as a ruse. — Agencies



AALBORG, Denmark: People cool off in the fountains at Toldbod Plads yesterday. — AFP



NANTES, France: Children run through water as they enjoy the Water Mirror during a heatwave yesterday. — AFP

Warming 'unmatched' in 2,000 yrs

PARIS: World temperatures rose faster in the late 20th century than at any other time in the last 2,000 years, according to research released yesterday which experts said undermines climate deniers questioning of mankind's role in global warming. As Europe sweltered in a second record-breaking heatwave in a month, the three peer-reviewed papers offered the most detailed overview of regional temperature trends dating back two millennia.

Climate variability — the fluctuation of surface temperatures over time — has long been the subject of

debate. While average global temperatures are currently around one degree Celsius hotter than pre-industrial times, there have been a number of periods of cooling and warming over the centuries. This had led skeptics of manmade global warming to suggest that human activity is not the main driver of climate change.

Researchers used data compiled from nearly 700 temperature indicators, from tree rings, sediment cores, coral reefs and modern thermometer readings, to provide a comprehensive timeline of our planet's recent climate history. The findings are clear: At no point in modern human history did temperatures rise so quickly and so consistently as in the late 20th century — the period where the world's post-war, fossil fuel-powered economy reached unprecedented heights of production and consumption.

The first paper, published in the journal Nature, examined regional temperature trends over time. Scientists have long known of periods of unusual climate activity, such as the Little Ice Age, a centuries-

long epoch where northern Europe experienced colder winters on average than in the start of the 20th century. The study found that temperatures in the Little Ice Age and other anomalous periods did not rise or fall in global lock-step as had long been assumed, and varied regionally for much of the last 2,000 years.

"When we go back in the past these are really regional phenomena, but they are not global," said Nathan Steiger, from Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory. This is in marked contrast to current warming trends. "Whereas in the contemporary warm period it really is global - 98 percent of the globe has this coherent warming after the industrial revolution - and that very much stands out in contrast to the climate variability that's happened before in the past 2,000 years."

"Finally stop climate deniers"

A second paper, in Nature Geoscience, examined rates of surface warming, averaged over sub-periods each a few decades long. They found that pre-industrial

temperature fluctuations were largely driven by volcanic activity. But they also concluded that humans had never witnessed such rapid global warming as in the latter part of the 20th century.

Author Raphael Neukom from the University of Bern, Switzerland, told AFP the finding "highlights the extraordinary character of current climate change". A third study found that global temperatures leading up to the industrial period were cooled by a series of volcanic eruptions, which led to droughts in Africa and weak monsoons.

Commenting on the studies, Mark Maslin, Professor of Climatology at University College London, said their results "should finally stop climate change deniers claiming that the recent observed coherent global warming is part of a natural climate cycle". "This paper shows the truly stark difference between regional and localized changes in climate of the past and the truly global effect of anthropogenic (man-made) greenhouse emissions." — AFP

Boris becomes British premier...

Continued from Page 1

Watched by his girlfriend Carrie Symonds, the former London mayor said "the doubters, the doomsters, the gloomsters are going to get it wrong again".

But he added: "It is of course vital at the same time that we prepare for the remote possibility that Brussels refuses any further to negotiate and we are forced to come out with no-deal." European Council president Donald Tusk was quick to congratulate Johnson, adding: "I look forward to meeting you to discuss - in detail - our cooperation."

Johnson was on Tuesday elected leader of the governing Conservative party by its members, and was confirmed prime minister in a meeting Wednesday with Queen Elizabeth II. His ascent is the culmination of a life-long ambition for the politician who, with his jokes and absurd anecdotes, has enjoyed celebrity status in Britain for decades. But before he even took office, several pro-European ministers quit in protest at his threat of a "no deal" Brexit, fearing the economic consequences.

Opposition Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn challenged Johnson to call a general election, saying he "has no mandate from the people". While Johnson won a landslide in the contest to become Tory leader, a YouGov survey Wednesday found his approval rating was just 31 percent

among the public. Beloved by many for his apparent refusal to take life too seriously, the former journalist is accused by others of demonising minorities in his articles and incompetence. His appointment was disrupted by climate protesters, who briefly stopped his convoy heading to Buckingham Palace for his meeting with the queen.

Johnson is expected to swiftly announce his new cabinet, and his first appointment proved predictably contentious. He named as a top adviser Dominic Cummings, a combative character who helped lead the victorious "Vote Leave" campaign during the 2016 referendum. A source in Johnson's campaign team said he would build a diverse cabinet with more women and a record number of ethnic minority politicians. Sajid Javid, the son of Pakistani immigrants and currently May's interior minister, was appointed as finance minister.

Brexit is the priority for Johnson after May repeatedly failed to get her divorce plan through parliament, forcing her to twice delay Britain's departure date. In a short speech before tendering her resignation to the queen, May wished Johnson "every good fortune". A heckler shouted "Stop Brexit" as she stood with her husband Philip by her side, to which she retorted: "I think not."

Brexit aside, the most immediate problem facing Johnson is a stand-off with Iran after Tehran seized a UK-flagged tanker in the Gulf last week. Johnson is also expected to seek to repair ties with Washington, after a rift caused by the leak of diplomatic cables criticizing the White House. US President Donald Trump was one of the first to congratulate Johnson on his victory saying he would be "great" and describing him as "Britain Trump". — AFP

Spotlight on suicide pushes...

Continued from Page 1

last year recorded by the parliament's human rights committee. The increase in cases, some of which were broadcast on social media, is forcing political, religious and media institutions to grapple with the problem primarily affecting Iraq's youth.

And the real numbers could be even higher, as relatives of those who try to end their lives often refrain from reporting cases to authorities to avoid public shaming. Suicide is forbidden by Islam - Iraq's official religion - as well as by minority religions in the country. For Ahmad, a 22-year-old from Nasiriyah, south of Baghdad, his family forbidding him to marry the neighborhood girl he loved pushed him to attempt suicide twice using poison. "I had nothing left but suicide, as my parents don't understand marrying for love," he told AFP.

Iraq has been battered by nearly four decades of instability, barely allowing communities to recover from one conflict before being slammed with another. Social pressures and staggering unemployment also play a role. Among Iraqi youth, 17 percent of men and 27 percent of women are out of work, according to the World Bank. "Suicide is increasing among adolescents and young adults because they are the most unhappy demographic when it comes to employment, education, and care," said Amal Kobashi, who heads the Iraqi Women's Network and has followed the issue. "Until now,

there are no real government mechanisms to resolve the reality of this demographic. This could be pushing them to desperation and suicide," she told AFP.

In recent months, gruesome videos have emerged on social media of young Iraqis broadcasting suicide attempts live, including by hanging, jumping off bridges or using firearms. Kobashi said they could be cries for help in a country with few mental health resources and where therapy is still seen as a last resort for people deemed by some as "crazy". "Some resorted to social media to bring attention to their situation so people would empathize," Kobashi said, adding that could ultimately be a "positive" outcome.

An Iraqi mental health specialist, speaking anonymously to discuss sensitive cases, confirmed she was seeing more youth among her patients. She suspected that the current period of relative stability meant Iraqis were finally coming to grips with their trauma. "We spent years just on survival mode, trying to get through terrorism. So now, people are finally starting to pay attention to other social trends," the specialist said.

As more cases come to light, media outlets, including state television, have hosted special programmes on suicide, bringing the issue into mainstream discussion. Government officials have also taken notice and the country's top religious authority for most Shiites, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, has demanded authorities "work on resolving these issues". But there is a lingering "lack of sensitivity" on mental health issues, the specialist warned. "Suicide is being talked about more, but not always in a healthy way. There are clerics who blame it on a lack of faith," she said. "That doesn't help victims or their families." — AFP