

International

Downed US drone was in Iranian airspace: Moscow

Iran silence on US talks offer 'deafening,' Bolton says

MOSCOW: The US drone shot down by Tehran last week was in Iranian airspace, the head of Russia's Security Council said yesterday, despite US claims to the contrary. "I have information from the defense ministry of the Russian Federation that this drone was in Iranian airspace," Russian news agencies quoted Nikolai Patrushev as telling reporters in Jerusalem.

Patrushev was in Jerusalem for talks with US and Israeli officials, as tensions run high after Iran shot down the US spy drone on June 19 and US President Donald Trump considered, then cancelled, a retaliatory strike. Iran insists the drone violated Iranian airspace near the Strait of Hormuz, but the Pentagon denies it entered Iranian territory.

Iran silence 'deafening'

Meanwhile, US National Security Advisor John Bolton yesterday described as "deafening" Iran's apparent silence on an offer to negotiate with Washington. "The president has held the door open to real negotiations," Bolton told journalists in Jerusalem. "In response, Iran's silence has been deafening," he added. Bolton is in Jerusalem for what Israel described as unprecedented talks with his Russian and Israeli counterparts, along with meeting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Speaking alongside the US advisor, Netanyahu said there was "a wider basis for cooperation between the three of us than many believe." Bolton's comments come a day after the United States imposed sanctions on top officials of Israel's archfoe Iran. The measures against supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and others have led to a "permanent closure of the path to diplomacy" according to Iran's foreign ministry.

Tensions are running high after Iran shot down a US spy drone last week and Trump considered, then cancelled, a retaliatory strike. Bolton said Tehran has carried out "attacks upon American personnel and assets in the Middle East" and accused the Islamic republic of seeking nuclear weapons. Tehran denies it is seeking nuclear weapons and says its program is for civilian use only.

But more than a year after Washington pulled out of a landmark deal between Tehran and world powers, which sought to limit Iran's nuclear activities, Bolton said the US remains open to negotiations. "All that Iran needs to do is to walk through that open door," he said. Iran's president said Washington's decision to impose sanctions on its top diplomat and other senior officials proved the US was "lying" about talks. "At the same time as you call for negotiations you seek to sanction the foreign minister? It's obvious that you're lying," President Hassan Rouhani said in a meeting with ministers broadcast live on TV.

Iranians mock Trump

In another development, US President Donald Trump was mocked by Iranians yesterday after mixing up the country's current supreme leader with his predecessor who died 30 years ago. "The assets of Ayatollah Khomeini and his office will not be spared by these sanctions," Trump said Monday as he announced new measures against Iran's supreme leader and top officials. But the Islamic republic's founder and revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini died in 1989, and the country has since been led by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"Trump doesn't know that Ayatollah Khomeini has passed away and that Ayatollah Khamenei is the leader of Iran," tweeted Sara Masoumi, diplomatic correspondent



This undated US Air Force file photo shows a photo of a RQ-4 Global Hawk unmanned surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft. The United States launched cyber attacks against Iranian missile control systems and a spy network after Tehran downed an American surveillance drone. — AFP

for the reformist daily Etemad. "Has this narcissist been waiting for (a dead man) to call him?" wrote another Twitter user, after Trump last month said he would like Iran to phone him. One social media user suggested "Trump

took revenge" for Khamenei reportedly mispronouncing the president's name as Ronald. But one Twitter user suggested there was a plot in the White House to make the US president "look like a lunatic!" — Agencies

Mauritania opposition rejects election results

NOUAKCHOTT: Mauritania's opposition parties Monday rejected the provisional results of the presidential election, won by a former general and ally of the outgoing head of state. Saturday's election had been billed as an historic event for the conservative Saharan desert nation, marking the first democratic transition in its coup-strewn history.

But opposition parties said flaws in the vote had strengthened their fears of a power grab by the military. "We are trying to organize protest demonstrations, it's our constitutional right," Mohamed Ould Moloud, who joined three other losing candidates, told a press conference late Sunday after the CENI electoral commission published the results.

The ruling party's candidate, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, won the presidency outright with 52 percent of the vote in the first round of voting, according to the

results which must still be confirmed by the country's constitutional council. Ghazouani easily beat main opposition opponents Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, an anti-slavery activist credited with 18.58 percent of the vote, followed by Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar, a former prime minister, with 17.87 percent, according to the official figures. Journalist Baba Hamidou Kane and political newcomer Mohamed Lemine El-Mourteji El-Wavi, each garnered under three percent.

'Multiple irregularities'

Mauritania's outgoing President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, a general, came to power in a coup in 2008, and Ghazouani was his chief of staff for a decade. "Multiple irregularities... have eliminated any credibility" in the elections, said Boubacar. "We reject the results of the election and we consider that they in no way express the will of the Mauritanian people." He vowed the opposition would use "every legal means" to challenge the outcome. However, the four losing candidates called off a planned protest at the electoral commission headquarters on Monday.

Ethiopia mourns murdered army chief and others

ADDIS ABABA: Ethiopian military and religious leaders yesterday condemned the assassinations of the army chief and other top officials at an emotional funeral service at which Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed wept openly throughout. Abiy, facing a monumental challenge to his leadership and reformist agenda, dried his eyes with a white handkerchief as mourners wailed around him but he did not speak at the service.

"The crime was not committed by foreign forces but by our own people, and this makes it very painful," Patriarch Abune Mathias of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church said during the ceremony for army chief Seare Mekonnen and a retired general who was killed alongside him. The crowd of well over 1,000 people was composed primarily of soldiers in military fatigues, while relatives of the dead and government officials were mostly all black.

Ethiopia has been left reeling after apparently co-ordinated attacks went after top leaders in what officials said was an "attempted coup" in northern Amhara state. On Saturday, what the government described as a "hit squad" entered a meeting of top Amhara officials and opened fire, killing regional president Ambachew Mekonnen, his top adviser and the state's attorney general.

A few hours later in Addis Ababa, some 500 kilometers away, army chief Seare was shot dead by his bodyguard. The visiting general was also killed. Analysts have said that while the details are murky, the incidents highlight the political crisis in the

country, with Abiy's democratic reforms having unleashed ethnic violence and turmoil as different groups jockey for resources and power.

Lost forever

At the Addis ceremony, mourners began wailing and crying out long before proceedings began. "They have sacrificed a lot for this country," one woman shouted in Amharic. "We love them, but now we have lost them forever." The entire hall stood as the coffins of the two men were carried in by generals and draped in the Ethiopian flag. The wailing grew louder when a screen showed Abiy, wearing all black and sitting next to Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde, sobbing and bowing his head in prayer.

Soldiers strained to hold back tears as speakers recounted the dead military leaders' long careers and battlefield triumphs. Delivering a eulogy for Seare, a military commander described him as a fearsome fighter who "knew how to win." "He was very courageous and mentored many soldiers after him," the general said.

"It would be one thing if he were killed in battle or because of some dispute. But what did he do to deserve this?" said deputy chief of staff General Birhanu Jula. "We will continue the struggle that he started." A son of the retired general drew applause when he said: "They are heroes and heroes never die."

At the end of the ceremony, Abiy walked up to the two coffins and saluted them. As a brass band played, the coffins were placed in a black van that took them to Bole International Airport. The men are being flown to Mekelle in their native Tigray region to be buried. Ethiopian authorities have said the attacks were masterminded by Amhara security chief Asaminew Tsige, who was gunned down by police while on the run on Monday. — AFP



TEHRAN: An Iranian woman walks past a mural painting depicting the late founder of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (right) and Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in the Iranian capital yesterday. — AFP

Souring Iran-US ties and tension

TEHRAN: Relations between Tehran and Washington have gone from bad to worse since the United States unilaterally withdrew from the international deal on Iran's nuclear program in May 2018. Here are key developments in the bitter standoff.

US quits

On May 8, 2018, President Donald Trump announces the US withdrawal from the 2015 pact, saying "we cannot prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement". The move heralds the reinstatement of US sanctions. The US warns other countries to end trade and investment in Iran and to stop buying its oil or face punitive measures. But US allies Britain, France, Germany - who were also parties to the deal alongside Russia and China - insist Iran has abided by its commitments and say they are determined to save the agreement.

Twelve conditions

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani says Tehran would be within its rights to scrap the curbs it agreed in the deal. But he calls on the remaining parties to save it. On May 21, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo outlines 12 tough conditions from Washington for any "new deal". They include not only new nuclear commitments but also a complete scaling back of Iran's regional role.

Sanctions

On August 7, Washington reimposes a

"We have decided to postpone the marche that was to have taken place today, perhaps until Thursday," Kane said. The four are demanding that CENI publish a breakdown of the vote according to each polling station, so that they can compare the figures with their own data. CENI said voter turnout was 62.66 percent. The 62-year-old Ghazouani, who is also former head of the domestic security service, had already declared himself the winner in the early hours of Sunday in the presence of Abdel Aziz.

Second-placed Abeid told the opposition news conference: "We are launching an appeal to the Mauritanian people... to resist, within the bounds of the law, this unpremeditated coup d'etat against the will of the people." Incidents broke out between protesters and police following Ghazouani's declaration in the capital and in northwest Nouadhibou.

The opposition is seeking the release of dozens of supporters arrested during clashes between police and protesters on Sunday. The interior ministry also called for restraint and warned that any unauthorized assembly could lead to criminal sanctions. — AFP

Khashoggi fiancee calls for international probe

GENEVA: The Turkish fiancee of murdered Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi yesterday appealed for an international investigation into his "premeditated" killing amid evidence of high-level Saudi involvement. Khashoggi, a Washington Post contributor and US resident, was killed last October by Saudi agents while at Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul to obtain paperwork ahead of his wedding to Hatice Cengiz. "There is an urgent need for an international investigation of this murder," Cengiz said at an event on the sidelines of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, speaking through a translator.

Her comments came after the UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, released a damning report that found "credible evidence" linking Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the killing. The independent rights expert, who does not speak for the United Nations but reports her findings to it, called on UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to initiate an international criminal investigation into the case.

"I don't think the world can afford to turn a blind eye or to turn the page on a killing such as that of Mr. Khashoggi," Callamard, who also took part in yesterday's event, said. Riyadh initially said it had no knowledge of Khashoggi's fate, but later blamed the murder on rogue agents, and Saudi prosecutors have absolved the crown prince of responsibility. But Callamard's report said probes by Saudi Arabia and Turkey "failed to meet international standards regarding the investigation into unlawful deaths".

'Political murder'

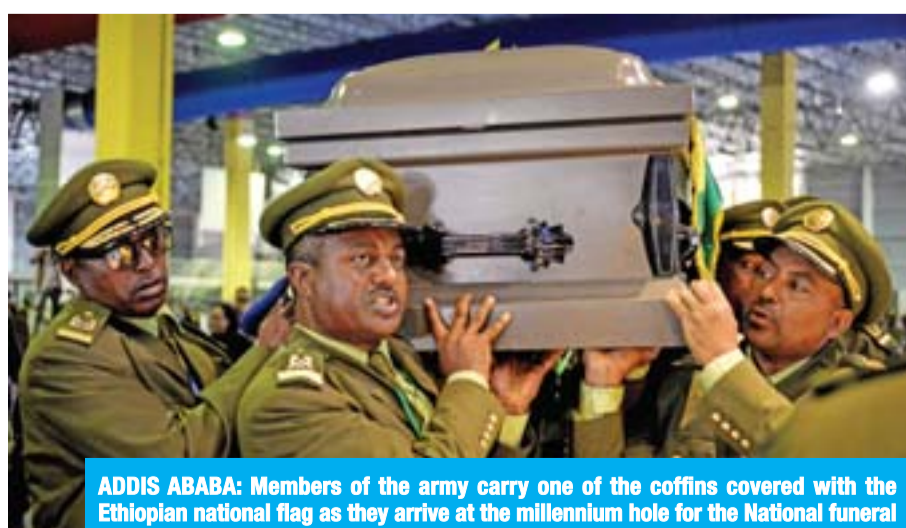
The report said there was evidence of the crime scene being "thoroughly, even forensically, cleaned" by the Saudis, in what "may amount to obstructing justice". "The investigation that is run in Saudi Arabia is not legitimate," Cengiz said, hailing Callamard's report as "significant" and helped avoid the case being "swept under the carpet". "A country is accused of a murder... It is really a huge scandal," she said.

Cengiz, who was standing outside the consulate on October 2, 2018, waiting for her fiancee as he was being murdered inside, lamented that she had "been a witness of horrendous murder, political murder." She said that she had yet to recover from the experience, pointing out that Khashoggi's body, which is known to have been dismembered, has not been found. "Since I couldn't see his body, I still had a hope, like, is he really constrained somewhere... is he alive?" she said.

But she insisted that her fiancee's murder was far more than a personal trauma. "We are not talking about a personal matter. We are talking about a massacre, we are talking about an assassination and premeditated murder" with international implications, she said. "I don't want this incident to remain on a piece of paper," she said, referring to Callamard's report. Initiating an international criminal investigation into the case would be "the reconfirmation of the legitimacy of the United Nations", she said. — AFP



GENEVA: Turkish writer and fiancee of the murdered Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi Hatice Cengiz attends a side event during the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva yesterday. — AFP



ADDIS ABABA: Members of the army carry one of the coffins covered with the Ethiopian national flag as they arrive at the millennium hole for the National funeral service of Chief of Staff of the Ethiopian defense forces Seare Mekonnen and of Major-General Geza'e Abera. — AFP