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TEHRAN: Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei meets the family of slain Iranian top general Qasem Soleimani yesterday. — AFP

# Rouhani: Iran 'very happy' Trump leaving

## Khamenei says US 'enmities' towards Iran will not end with Trump

TEHRAN: President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday that Iran was "very happy" over the looming departure from office of US counterpart Donald Trump, who led a campaign of "maximum pressure" against the Islamic republic. President-elect Joe Biden, who defeated Trump at the ballot box in November, has signaled a willingness to return to diplomacy with Iran after four tense years under the outgoing president.

"Some say you are overexcited by the advent of Mr Biden. No, we are not, but we are very happy to see Trump leave," he said in televised comments at a cabinet meeting. "Thank God, these are his final days," Rouhani added, calling Trump a "tyrant", "the most unruly, lawless president" and a "terrorist and murderer".

The Electoral College confirmed Biden as the next US president on Monday even as the incumbent continues to refuse to accept defeat. The formal handover of power will take place on Jan 20 when Biden is sworn in. Tensions between Tehran

and Washington soared during Trump's presidency as his administration sought to bring Israel and the Gulf Arab states closer together with a hard line against Iran.

In 2018, Trump pulled Washington out of a landmark nuclear deal with Tehran and reimposed punishing unilateral sanctions. This January, Trump ordered an air strike near Baghdad airport which killed senior Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and drew retaliatory Iranian strikes targeting US troops in Iraq. Trump "creates obstacles for us purchasing (COVID-19) vaccines, (that is) how much this person is bereft of all ethical and human principles," Rouhani said.

Iran is the Middle Eastern country hardest-hit by the coronavirus pandemic with 52,670 deaths from more than 1.1 million cases, according to official figures. Vaccines and other humanitarian goods are supposed to be exempt from US sanctions but in practice few if any banks are willing to risk processing Iranian transactions for fear of incurring

heavy penalties in the US courts.

Since Biden's victory, Rouhani's government has repeatedly signaled its openness to the incoming US administration, although Iran's supreme leader has cautioned against hopes of an opening with the West. Rouhani said the outcome of the US election showed the American people's desire for a "law-abiding" president and called on the Biden administration to live up to the expectation. "If it wants to be on the correct path, it's there, and if it wants the wrong one, it's also there," he said.

Later yesterday, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said US "enmities" towards Iran will not cease with the looming departure from office of Trump. He reiterated his position that Iran should bolster itself to "nullify" sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, but should "not delay" in the event they can be lifted.

"You witnessed what Trump's America and Obama's America did to you," he was quoted as saying on his official website. "Enmities are not lim-

ited to Trump's America and will not end just because he has left office," Khamenei added, addressing the family of Soleimani. "Do not trust the enemy, this is my explicit advice."

Tensions between Tehran and Washington soared during Trump's presidency, especially after 2018, when he pulled Washington out of a landmark nuclear deal and reimposed punishing unilateral sanctions. Khamenei has on previous occasions cautioned against hopes of an opening with the West. Khamenei underlined that if sanctions "can be lifted, we should not delay it for even an hour."

But he warned: "Do not rely on (others') promises to solve the people's problems (and) do not forget enmities. I will support the country's authorities on the condition that they remain true to the nation's goals." Khamenei's meeting with the slain general's family was his first public engagement since an official close to his office moved to squash rumors about his health last week. — AFP

## Erdogan calls US sanctions 'attack on sovereignty'

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan yesterday called US sanctions against Ankara over its purchase of a Russian missile defense system an "open attack" on the NATO member state's sovereignty. The United States made good on months of threats to punish Turkey for buying the S-400 system under a 2017 law known as CAATSA, which aims to limit Russia's military influence and punish it for its behavior abroad.

The sanctions were lighter than feared, but Erdogan noted that they had never before been used against a fellow member of NATO. "Sanctions are imposed on our country, a NATO member. What kind of an alliance is this?" Erdogan asked during a televised speech in Ankara. "This decision is an open attack on our sovereignty," he added. Washington had already punished Ankara in July by barring it from developing parts for and acquiring America's next-generation F-35 fighter jets.

This week's punitive measures included a ban on all US export licenses and loan credits for Turkey's

military procurement agency. Its president Ismail Demir and three other executives were also barred from travel or holding assets in the US. The State Department said the sanctions "are not intended to undermine the military capabilities or combat readiness of Turkey... but rather to impose costs on Russia in response to its wide range of malign activities".

### 'Sanctions trigger'

But in his first public comments about the sanctions, Erdogan called them unjust. He repeated Turkey's claim that Washington would not sell the US equivalent to the S-400, the Patriot, to Ankara. US officials say Turkey was offered the system, but that negotiations broke down after Ankara demanded to also obtain proprietary production and operations data about the Patriots. "The more Turkey grows, the more Turkey inches closer to its goals, the more it stands up for its sovereign rights, the more it is subjected to attacks," Erdogan said. "Because we met our needs somewhere else, they pulled the sanctions trigger."

Washington says the S-400 system would put the security of US military technology and personnel at risk, as well as providing funds to the Russian defense industry. Erdogan said Turkey offered to resolve the issue through diplomacy and would now redouble its efforts to developing its own arsenal.

(IDEA), 61 percent of countries had by the end of November 2020 implemented measures to curb COVID-19 "that were concerning from a democracy and human rights perspective". "These violated democratic standards because they were either disproportionate, illegal, indefinite or unnecessary in relation to the health threat," it said in a report. IDEA said that while such troubling developments were less common in democracies they were "still quite widespread".

### 'Cover for violations'

UN rights chief Michelle Bachelet has also warned that while many states had adopted justifiable and temporary measures "there have also been deeply worrying cases where governments appear to be using COVID-19 as a cover for human rights violations". Paris-based press freedom group Reporters Without Borders said in a report on 2020 that emergency measures adopted to tackle the pandemic "visibly contributed to a news and information lockdown" and resulted in journalists being detained and sometimes jailed.

According to US NGO Freedom House, "the condition of democracy and human rights has grown worse in 80 countries" since the pandemic began. As an example of global trends it cited Sri



ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan speaks during a televised address yesterday. — AFP

"To make our defense industry independent, we will work twice as hard, we will accelerate our defense industry agency's projects, we will give more support to our defense-related companies," he said.

The sanctions are the latest thorn in US-Turkey relations, with the NATO allies at loggerheads over Syria, Libya and the eastern Mediterranean Sea. But with a month before the swearing in of President-elect Joe Biden, who once described Erdogan as an "autocrat", Ankara's language has generally softened towards Washington. — AFP

Lanka, where the government "accelerated its authoritarian agenda... stepping up efforts to control independent reporting and unfavorable speech by ordering the arrest of anyone who criticizes or contradicts the official line on the coronavirus."

"We've seen in the last few months the President (Gotabaya Rajapaksa) consolidating power," Bhavani Fonseka, senior researcher at the private Centre for Policy Alternatives think-tank in Colombo, told AFP decriing a "weakening of checks and balances". In China, where the virus first emerged but has now largely been held in check, the authorities have adopted extremely coercive measures, with strict lockdowns of very large areas, massive screening and surveillance by drones.

In Egypt, where President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi is accused by activists of leading an authoritarian regime that has locked up tens of thousands of opponents, the pandemic was a chance to further squeeze liberties. The pandemic "merely offered the president a new guise within which to pass and enact oppressive legislation that either further entrenches preexisting practices already or introduces new, harsher conditions upon ordinary citizens," researcher Hafsa Halawa said in a joint report by the US Atlantic Council and Italian ISPI think tanks. — AFP

## Iran nuclear deal parties try to defuse tensions

VIENNA: The remaining parties to the faltering 2015 Iran nuclear accord met yesterday after Tehran announced plans for a new breach of the deal, and as uncertainty reigns ahead of US President-elect Joe Biden's January inauguration. The meeting of the so-called "joint commission" includes China, France, Russia, Iran, Germany and Britain and is chaired by senior EU foreign affairs official Helga Schmid.

The meeting is being held virtually because of the coronavirus pandemic. The 2015 deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has disintegrated steadily since US President Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and went on to impose crippling economic sanctions on Iran.

Tehran has retaliated by progressively abandoning limits on its nuclear activity laid down in the deal, most recently planning to install advanced centrifuges at Iran's main nuclear enrichment plant in Natanz. Last week France, Germany and Britain - collectively known as the "E3" - condemned the plan as "deeply worrying".

Meanwhile, the assassination last month of prominent Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh has heightened tension in the region, with Iran blaming the killing on Israel. In the wake of Fakhrazadeh's death, Iranian MPs passed a bill calling for further expansion to Iran's nuclear program and an end to inspections of nuclear facilities by the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

The Iranian foreign ministry said it did not agree with the bill and President Hassan Rouhani has suggested he will not sign it into law. Rouhani has defied criticism from Iran's ultra-conservatives to state his determination to seize the "opportunity" presented by the change of US president in January.

Rouhani has said Iran is ready to come back into compliance with the deal as soon as other parties fulfill their commitments. President-elect Biden has said he is willing to return to the deal but has revealed little else about forthcoming US strategy on the question. — AFP

## Freedom: Another casualty of COVID

PARIS: Measures imposed by governments to fight the COVID-19 pandemic have squeezed civil liberties worldwide, with authoritarian regimes seeking to exploit the restrictions as a way to shore up their sometimes shaky control on fast-changing societies, rights groups say. Demonstrations have been outlawed, elections postponed, and activists subject to even greater repression in a health emergency the political impact of which will still be felt when the pandemic is over.

In Guinea in west Africa, the government has banned all demonstrations until further notice, citing the fight against COVID. Hungary in central Europe is under a state of emergency until February. In Nigeria, a crackdown on protests against restrictions left several dead. Bolivia postponed its general elections for several months. In France, citizens had to fill out a form before being allowed to leave their homes during two lockdowns that lasted over three months in total.

According to the Sweden-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance