

Rouhani expects US to resume commitments under nuke deal

Tehran wants Washington to return to 2015 nuclear deal and lift sanctions

TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani yesterday voiced confidence that President-elect Joe Biden will resume US commitments under the nuclear deal which Donald Trump pulled out of. Tensions between Tehran and Washington soared during Trump's presidency, especially after 2018 when he withdrew Washington from the landmark nuclear deal and reimposed punishing unilateral sanctions on Iran.

Biden, who defeated Trump at the ballot box in November, has signaled a willingness to return to diplomacy with Iran. And Rouhani's government has repeatedly signaled its openness to the incoming US administration and called on Washington to return to the 2015 nuclear deal and lift sanctions.

"I have no doubt that the perseverance of the Iranian people during these past three years will force the new US government to succumb and resume its commitments," Rouhani said in televised remarks.

"The sanctions will be broken," he added. His comments come a day after Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that Iran should bolster itself to "nullify" the effects of the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, but should "not delay" in case they can be lifted.

Rouhani echoed Khamenei, saying time should not be wasted. "We must act in order to nullify the effects of the sanctions... as the supreme leader has said."

"We should not wait, not even one hour, for the lifting of the sanctions. The government must do everything in its power to break the sanctions," Rouhani added. He said Iran will do "everything possible to achieve" what he described as a "very important instruction" made by Khamenei.

Biden, who takes office January 20, has signalled Washington would rejoin the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that was abandoned by the administration of outgoing President Donald Trump. Senior EU foreign affairs official Helga Schmid issued a brief statement following the talks she chaired.

"Participants discussed... how to ensure the full and effective implementation of the agreement by all sides in light of existing challenges," it said. While she did not say what those challenges were, the deal has unravelled steadily since 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



This handout picture provided by the office of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei shows Iranian Armed Forces Chief of Staff Major General Mohammad Bagheri (center left) decorating the wife (center right) of assassinated nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (pictured) with a badge of merit during a ceremony held in the capital Tehran. — AFP

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". —AFP

Saudi Arabia kicks off coronavirus vaccination drive

RIYADH: Saudi Arabia kicked off a three-phase COVID-19 vaccination program yesterday, with the health minister among those inoculated after the first shipment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in the kingdom. Along with Health Minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah, a woman in a wheelchair and another man were among the first to be administered the vaccine at a center in Riyadh, an AFP photographer reported.

"This is the beginning of the end of the crisis," Rabiah told reporters. People aged over 65 as well as those with chronic ailments or at a high risk of infection will receive the vaccine in the

first stage, and those aged over 50 in the second, the health ministry said this week.

Everyone else will be vaccinated in the third stage, the ministry said, without specifying the dates for each phase or how long the mass campaign would take. The Gulf kingdom has a population of more than 34 million, according to official figures.

More than 100,000 people have registered so far through an online application called "Sehaty", the ministry said, adding that the vaccine would be "free for all citizens and residents". Last week, the kingdom approved the use of the vaccine developed by US pharmaceuticals giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, becoming the second Gulf country to do so after Bahrain. Britain, Canada and the United States have also approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and have already launched mass inoculation campaigns. Neighbouring Jordan green-lighted the drug on Monday. —AFP

HRW accuses Egypt of 'collective punishment' of inmates

BEIRUT: Human Rights Watch accused Egypt yesterday of imposing punitive conditions on hundreds of inmates at one of its most notorious prisons in collective punishment for a foiled September escape attempt. The New York-based watchdog said evi-

dence including a leaked video and a smuggled letter showed authorities had deliberately exacerbated already poor conditions at Cairo's Scorpion Prison, where many political prisoners are held.

"Egyptian authorities are apparently imposing collective punishment on hundreds of inmates in Scorpion Prison," said HRW's deputy Middle East and North Africa director, Joe Stork. The interior ministry has said that three policemen were killed in September's abortive jail break in which four death row inmates were shot dead. HRW said the new measures imposed since the escape attempt almost completely "deprive inmates of adequate ventilation, electricity, and hot water".

"Because of the absence of sufficient natural light... the lack

of humane sleeping and sanitation arrangements... as well as inadequate floor space, artificial lighting and proper ventilation, the Scorpion Prison inherently violates the basic rights of prisoners," it said.

The prison houses Islamist leaders and other high-profile dissidents. Since 2015, at least 14 inmates have died in its overcrowded cell blocks, human rights groups say. Egypt holds some 60,000 detainees that human rights groups regard as political prisoners. President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who as army chief led the 2013 overthrow of elected Islamist president Mohamed Morsi, has overseen a crackdown on political dissent that has put tens of thousands behind bars. — AFP



This picture taken yesterday shows a view of a flooded street at the Jabalia camp for Palestinian refugees in the northern Gaza Strip following heavy rains. — AFP