



Inner Mongolia seethes as China presses Mandarin at school

Ivory Coast court clears president's third-term bid as fresh violence erupts

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TEL AVIV: Israeli protesters gather during an anti-government demonstration outside the Ben Gurion Airport near Tel Aviv on September 13, 2020, demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over several corruption indictments and his handling of the coronavirus crisis, as he prepares to travel to the US. The UAE and Bahrain will sign agreements to recognise Israel, on September 15. — AFP

Netanyahu will not talk to Palestinians

Centrist leader Lapid welcomes Gulf deals

JERUSALEM: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has "no intention" of discussing peace with the Palestinians, opposition leader Yair Lapid told AFP ahead of the signing of a landmark deal with the UAE.

US President Donald Trump will host a ceremony at which Netanyahu will sign normalisation deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, the first Israel has agreed with an Arab state since the 1990s.

While centrist leader Lapid welcomed the Gulf deals, he argued Israel should also resume peace negotiations with the Palestinians. "The current government is saying we have achieved agreements with moderate Sunni countries without paying the price of negotiating with the Palestinians. What I say is it's not a price. It's an Israeli interest," he told AFP at his parliamentary office.

The Palestinian leadership has slammed the Gulf deals for going against decades of consensus among Arab states that a Palestinian peace deal is a prerequisite for ties with Israel. Lapid, who heads the Yesh Atid party, criticised the Palestinians for waiting for the Arab world and the international community to "do the job for them".

"They need to be proactive instead of victimising themselves forever, instead of complaining all

the time," said Lapid, arguing the Palestinians' fundamental demands were unrealistic.

Palestinians have called for an independent state based on the internationally recognised borders that existed before the Six-Day War of 1967, when Israel seized swathes of territory including east Jerusalem and the West Bank.

They have also called for refugees displaced since the creation of Israel in 1948 to be allowed to return along with their descendants. "This is not going to work," said Lapid, a clean-cut former TV journalist. "They need to go back to the table. We need to go back to the table."

'Two-state solution'

The last round of peace talks collapsed in 2014 and the Palestinians have rejected initiatives by the Trump administration for their pro-Israeli bias. Lapid's office is decorated with photos of him with world leaders, including Germany's Angela Merkel and US presidential candidate Joe Biden, while Trump is notably absent.

"I think we need to move forward and discuss this with the Palestinians under the two-state solution, and I don't think this government is going to do anything about it," he said.

Lapid accused Netanyahu's government of having "no intention of discussing anything with the Palestinians" as many of the premier's right-wing voters are against the creation of a Palestinian state.

He also pointed to the legal woes of the prime minister, who is currently on trial for corruption, as a further reason peace talks were off the agenda. A former finance minister under Netanyahu, Lapid stood firm in opposition to the veteran premier following March elections.

His former allies Benny Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi defected to join Netanyahu's government and now serve as defence and foreign ministers respectively.

Pointing to the Gulf deals, Lapid said it was clear both ministers "have no influence whatsoever" in government. Netanyahu "signed the deal with the Emirates and yet later with Bahrain without telling them. It's not only that he didn't consult with them. They didn't even know," Lapid said.

Virus 'failure'

Netanyahu flew to the US just moments after announcing a second nationwide lockdown to tackle the coronavirus, a sign according to Lapid of the government's "complete failure" to address the health crisis.

"It's a very aggressive move. It's devastating for

the economy and it's not that helpful in terms of stopping the epidemic," Lapid said. According to an AFP tally over the past fortnight, Israel is second behind Bahrain for the world's highest coronavirus infection rate.

"The only reason our government has decided to go into the second lockdown is because they're completely lost," Lapid said. Tens of thousands of Israelis have demonstrated in recent weeks, calling for Netanyahu to resign over the graft allegations and his handling of the pandemic and its economic fallout.

While Lapid has steered clear of the rallies outside Netanyahu's Jerusalem residence, he has joined protesters who appear along highways each Saturday evening. "I need to be able to have a clear enough message for the people in order to gain from this," he said.

Although Netanyahu's popularity has waned, his Likud party still tops opinion polls while Lapid's Yesh Atid party is third behind the far-right Yamina party. With many Israelis more focused on coronavirus and the ensuing financial crisis than the Gulf deals, the opposition chief believes he will be in a strong position when the next round of elections comes. "Netanyahu never in his life ran on a bad economy," he said. — AFP

Trump vows greater response to any Iran attack

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump on Monday vowed that any attack by Iran would be met with a response "1,000 times greater in magnitude," after reports that Iran planned to avenge the killing of top general Qasem Soleimani.

A US media report, quoting unnamed officials, said that an alleged Iranian plot to assassinate the US ambassador to South Africa was planned before the presidential election in November.

"According to press reports, Iran may be planning an assassination, or other attack, against the United States in retaliation for the killing of terrorist leader Soleimani," Trump tweeted.

"Any attack by Iran, in any form, against the United States will be met with an attack on Iran that will be 1,000 times greater in magnitude!"

Relations between Washington and Tehran have been tense since the Iranian revolution, and have spiralled since Trump unilaterally pulled out of a landmark international nuclear deal with Iran in May 2018.

In January, a US drone strike killed Soleimani in Baghdad, and Washington is pushing to extend an arms embargo on Iran that starts to progressively

expire in October as well as reimposing UN sanctions on the Islamic republic.

Iran denies plot

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Monday declined to comment directly on the reported threat to Lana Marks, the US ambassador to South Africa who is a close ally of Trump.

But Pompeo told Fox News that "the Islamic Republic of Iran has engaged in assassination efforts all across the world. They have assassinated people in Europe and in other parts of the world. We take these... allegations seriously."

"We make very clear to the Islamic Republic of Iran that this kind of activity — attacking any American any place at any time, whether it's an American diplomat, an ambassador, or one of our service members — is completely unacceptable."

The Iranian foreign ministry spokesman on Monday dismissed the report of an assassination plot as "baseless" and part of "repetitive and rotten methods to create an anti-Iranian atmosphere on the international stage."

The Iranian navy last week said it drove off American aircraft that flew close to an area where military exercises were underway near the Strait of Hormuz. The military said three US aircraft were detected by Iran's air force radars after they entered the country's air defence identification zone. In June last year, a US RQ-4 drone was shot down by Iran after allegedly violating Iranian airspace — a claim the US has denied. — AFP

Two dozen HK activists in court over banned Tiananmen vigil

HONG KONG: Hong Kong activists shouted anti-government slogans outside court yesterday as more than two dozen high profile democracy campaigners appeared over a banned vigil to mark the Tiananmen Square crackdown.

Tens of thousands of Hong Kongers defied a ban on rallies on June 4 to mark the anniversary of Beijing's deadly suppression of students pushing for democracy. The annual vigil has been held in Hong Kong for the last three decades and usually attracts huge crowds, but this year's gathering was banned for the first time with authorities citing coronavirus measures — even though local transmission had largely been halted.

The group of defendants represents a broad section of the pro-democracy movement, from 72-year-old media mogul Jimmy Lai to younger campaigners such as Joshua Wong. The 26 accused are charged with either participating in or inciting others to take part in an unlawful assembly. The incitement charge carries up to five years in jail.

Activists gathered at West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts ahead of the procedural hearing to shout slogans and display banners defending their right to hold a Tiananmen vigil.

"It's not a crime to mourn June 4," one poster read, while another said: "Oppose political prosecutions,

Protest political suppression." Veteran activist Lee Cheuk-yan, 63, told the crowd over a loudspeaker: "We must reiterate that mourning June 4 is not a crime."

The vigil, traditionally held in Victoria Park, has taken on particular significance in recent years as the semi-autonomous city chafes under Beijing's increasingly authoritarian rule.

Lee added: "Suppression suffered by activists on June 4, 1989, is very similar to what Hong Kong people suffered in the past year."

Some of those charged face separate prosecutions related to last year's huge and often violent pro-democracy protests.

China's leaders have rejected calls to give Hong Kongers universal suffrage, and portrayed the protests as a plot by foreigners to destabilise the motherland. In late June, Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law aimed at stamping out the demonstrations once and for all.

The legislation targets subversion, secession, terrorism and foreign collusion, with sentences including life in prison. But its broad phrasing — such as a ban on encouraging hatred towards China's government — has sent fear rippling through a city used to being able to speak its mind. — AFP