

International

Raisi says Iran backs any moves to lift sanctions

New president takes over, says Tehran won't bow to pressure

TEHRAN: New ultraconservative President Ebrahim Raisi said Iran backs any moves to lift US sanctions but that the Islamic republic will not bow to pressure, as he took the oath of office yesterday. Raisi, who won a June 18 election marked by record abstention, takes office with Iran facing an economy battered by US sanctions, a grinding health crisis and thorny negotiations on its nuclear program. "Sanctions against the nation of Iran must be lifted. We will support any diplomatic plans that will realize this goal," Raisi told his swearing-in ceremony in parliament.

But he stressed that "the policy of pressure and sanctions will not cause the nation of Iran to back down from following up on its legal rights". The ultraconservative former judiciary chief officially began his four-year mandate on Tuesday when he was inaugurated by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Raisi succeeds moderate Hassan Rouhani, whose landmark achievement during his two-term presidency was the 2015 nuclear agreement between the Islamic republic and six world powers. His swearing-in ceremony was attended by around 70 foreign dignitaries, including Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Gaza's Islamist rulers Hamas. Security was stepped up for the ceremony with traffic restrictions imposed around the parliament and flights suspended for two and a half hours in Tehran and the adjacent provinces of Alborz and Qazvin.

Iran has been grappling with a deep economic and social crisis following former president Donald Trump's decision to unilaterally withdraw the

United States from the nuclear deal in 2018 and impose crushing sanctions. In response, Tehran pulled back from most of its main commitments in the deal formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Nuclear issue

The 60-year-old also faces warnings to Iran from the United States, Britain and the Zionist entity over a deadly tanker attack last week, for which Tehran denies responsibility. Iran is also battling the Middle East's deadliest outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than four million cases and upwards of 92,000 deaths.

Six rounds of nuclear talks between Iran and world powers were held in Vienna between April and June in an attempt to revive the accord. The last round concluded on June 20, with no date set for another. Raisi's presidency is due to consolidate power in the hands of conservatives following their 2020 parliamentary election victory, which was marked by the disqualification of thousands of reformist or moderate candidates.

The new president got to work on Wednesday, chairing a coronavirus task force meeting and also seeing ministers from the Rouhani administration, the presidency said.

'Multiple challenges'

Raisi will have his work cut out for him on several fronts, several Iranian newspapers noted after his inauguration. US sanctions have choked Iran and its vital oil exports, and the economy contracted by more than six percent in both 2018 and

Areas of Iraqi province lose power after attack on pylons

BAGHDAD: Iraq's northern Salaheddin province was left partially without power after "terrorists" blew several pylons, the government said yesterday, as increasing attacks add to the strain on Iraq's electricity network. "Terrorist elements" using "explosive devices" carried out attacks on 13 pylons over the past 48 hours, the electricity ministry said in a statement.

Provincial authorities distributed photos showing the damaged pylons. Several districts in Salaheddin have since been without power, including some neighborhoods in Samarra, one of the province's largest cities, an AFP correspondent said. Unclaimed attacks on Iraq's electricity network have been increasing since the start of summer.

Authorities normally accuse "terrorists" of being behind the attacks, without identifying a particular group. Oil-rich Iraq produces just 16,000 megawatts of power—far below the 24,000 megawatts needed, and even further from the expected future needs of a country whose population is set to double by 2050, ac-

ording to the UN.

The country buys gas and electricity from neighboring Iran to supply about a third of its power sector, which has been worn down by years of conflict and poor maintenance, and is unable to meet the needs of the country's 40 million population. Last month, areas in the country's south were plunged into darkness for several days after a series of similar attacks. Around the same time, Iran briefly suspended its gas and electricity exports because of Iraq's failure to pay a \$6 billion energy debt.

The US blacklisted Iran's energy industry in late 2018 as it ramped up sanctions, but has granted Baghdad a series of temporary waivers, hoping that Iraq would wean itself off Iranian energy.

The failure of Iraq's power system is particularly acute in the baking hot summer months, often a time of social protest exacerbated by electricity shortages, when temperatures shoot past 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit). Energy consultant Harry Istepanian said factors contributing to Iraq's energy crisis included not only the Iranian export suspension but also a "lack of enough generation capacity and fuel supply, lack of maintenance of the existing generation units, high demand... high technical and commercial losses, vandalism and sabotage". —AFP



TEHRAN: Iran's newly-elected President Ebrahim Raisi (center) waves during his swearing in ceremony at the Iranian parliament in the capital Tehran yesterday. —AFP

2019. Raisi will have to "face multiple challenges due to the high number of problems", an editorial in the ultraconservative Kayhan newspaper said Wednesday, including "unprecedented inflation", steep housing prices, a private-sector recession and "corruption".

Ultraconservative daily Javan called on the new government to "implement specific plans to resolve the urgent" problems. It cited "water and electricity, basic products and vaccinations" as among issues that need to be resolved in the short term. Rolling blackouts began in Tehran and other

large cities last month, with officials blaming the impact of drought on hydroelectric power generation as well as surging demand.

Demonstrators took to the streets of Khuzestan province in the southwest over water shortages. Reformist newspaper Shargh expressed the hope that "political games will make way for healthy intellectual rivalry and different discourse and voices" in the new government.

"That will only be possible by promoting press and media freedom and great tolerance on the part of government members," it added. — AFP

Tigray rebels take control of UNESCO site Lalibela: Residents

ADDIS ABABA: Rebels from Ethiopia's war-hit Tigray region yesterday seized Lalibela, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in the neighboring Amhara region famed for its 12th-century rock-hewn churches, residents told AFP. "They came in the afternoon, and there was not any fighting. There were no security forces around. The TPLF forces are in the town now," said one resident, referring to the Tigray People's Liberation Front. Tigray has been wracked by fighting since last November, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sent troops to topple the TPLF, the regional ruling party which dominated national politics before Abiy took office in 2018.

Abiy, winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, said the move came in response to TPLF attacks on army camps. But while Abiy promised victory would be swift, the war took a stunning turn in June when pro-TPLF forces retook the Tigray capital Mekele and the Ethiopian army largely withdrew.

Since then the TPLF has pressed east into neighbouring Afar and south into neighboring Amhara, where Lalibela is located. Soldiers and militia fighters have mobilised en masse in parts of Amhara to head off the rebels' advance, but multiple residents of Lalibela told AFP Thursday that the town fell without a fight.

"The TPLF just arrived in the afternoon. They were dancing and playing in the square of the city," one resident said. "Most of the people are leaving the town to the remote areas," a third resident said, adding that he was hiding in his home with his family.

The TPLF's push into the neighboring regions has drawn global criticism, and both the UN and the US this week reiterated calls for all parties to end hostilities. Billene Seyoum, Abiy's spokeswoman, told a press conference yesterday that more than 300,000 people had been displaced by recent fighting in Amhara and Afar. — AFP