

International

With nuke talks on hold, Iran president tours countryside

Ultraconservative leader turns his sights inward

TEHRAN: While the world impatiently awaits Iran's return to nuclear talks, ultraconservative new President Ebrahim Raisi has instead turned his sights inward, campaigning to build support in the provinces. Elected in a vote marked by a record low turnout, the former judiciary chief has taken a step back from the international stage in a bid to win the hearts and minds of his people.

Since taken office in August, he has made seven domestic trips in what state media has hailed as an outreach campaign to the common people. On a visit to the southern province of Bushehr last week, Raisi declared he had come to "get to know the problems of the local people". "In the provinces, we want to find solutions for creating jobs, restarting production and resolving problems, particularly those of the most deprived," he said.

Appearing unphased by growing pressure over the resumption of nuclear talks in Vienna, he has delegated this issue to his foreign minister. Indirect negotiations had begun in April to restore a 2015 nuclear deal that offered Tehran relief from crippling sanctions in exchange for major curbs on its nuclear program, but which was abandoned by Washington under former president Donald Trump.

Raisi's election in June put those talks on hold, and pressure has since been mounting for Iran to go back to the negotiating table. In the interim, Raisi has cultivated his image as a leader on the ground, close to the people - in contrast with his predecessor Hassan Rouhani, who was favored by the west but sometimes viewed as detached from the populace. Raisi "travels to the provinces because he wants to project an image of a pragmatic senior official looking for solutions on the ground," Iran specialist Bernard Hourcade told AFP.

'Feel the temperature'

If Iranian television painted a picture of Rouhani as a technocrat who mainly met allies in Tehran, Raisi is by contrast shown as being in dialogue with different segments of society. "He knows that a nuclear deal risks taking a long time because there is no unanimity among those in charge of the issue in Iran," said a western diplomat who asked to remain anonymous.

"He prefers to prove himself in domestic politics." Raisi's tour has taken him from the western province



Raisi tries to win hearts and minds of his people



TEHRAN: A handout picture provided by the Iranian presidency yesterday shows Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (right) meeting with Venezuela's Foreign Minister Felix Plasencia in Tehran. — AFP

of Khuzestan, where tensions have run high due to water shortages, to Sistan-Baluchistan province in the east, which has long suffered from poor infrastructure. His domestic endeavours are backed by supreme leader Ali Khamenei, who upon Raisi's inauguration in August charged him with restoring the people's "damaged" trust in the government.

The crushing toll of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country, coupled with mounting economic pressures and political crackdowns, all contributed to voter apathy. "His primary preoccupation is to put out fires before they start," said Hourcade of

the National Center for Scientific Research in Paris. "And he knows that in an economically tenuous situation, fires start with local sparks that spread if we're not careful. He must therefore be very attentive and visit those places to get a feel of the temperature."

Deliver on promises

Khamenei praised Raisi for visiting Khuzestan in September, a sentiment echoed by many of the state's media mouthpieces. Official news agency IRNA carried a poll on its website, showing the "positive impact" of Raisi's tours. The conservative

daily Kayhan also celebrated Raisi's common touch. "We see today a president who doesn't need an armored vehicle to understand the situation in the country," it said.

"He goes from province to province to familiarize himself with the realities and problems of the people." But praise for the new leader is not unanimous. Majid Nasserinejad, an MP from Khuzestan, described the trips as mere "spectacle", noting that "a day-long trip will not solve the problems of the province". Reformist paper Etemad similarly suggested that such tours are the bare minimum, but alone are "insufficient for governing". — AFP

Zionists expect 2,000 rockets a day in any war with Hezbollah

RAMLA: Zionist entity does not want war with Lebanon's Hezbollah but is prepared to face about 2,000 rockets a day from the armed group if conflict breaks out, a senior Zionist military official told AFP. In May this year, the Zionist army fought an 11-day war against Palestinian armed groups in the Gaza Strip, who fired around 4,400 projectiles towards the Jewish state.

Zionist entity says its Iron Dome defense system, which has been in use for around a decade, intercepted around 90 percent of the rockets headed for populated areas, while just under 300 hit inhabited districts. The rate of fire surpassed that seen in Zionists' 2006 war against Hezbollah, when a similar number of rockets were launched from Lebanon-but over the course of around a month-the Zionist army said.

In May, cities like Tel Aviv and Ashdod experienced the "highest number of fire towards them in the history of Zionist entity", said Uri Gordin, chief of the army's Home Front Command. "We saw a pace of more than 400 rockets fired towards Zionist entity on a daily basis." He said that in the case of "conflict or a war with Hezbollah, we expect more than five times the number of rockets fired every day from Lebanon to Zionist entity". "Basically we are looking between 1,500 and 2,500 rockets fired daily towards Zionist entity," he told AFP.

'Wake-up call'

Set up in 1992 after the first Gulf War, Gordin's Home Front Command is in charge of civil defense, meaning it is responsible for readying the country in case of threat, conflict or disaster. The unit was criticized for its response to the 2006 war with Hezbollah, which killed more than 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and 160 Zionists, the majority of them soldiers. That war was a "wake-up call" for the Home Front Command, Gordin said, adding that it had since beefed up its liaison units, which are now active across 250 municipalities to provide assistance in case of any attack.

The Home Front Command uses computer projections to predict a rocket's trajectory after it has been launched, and advises the public, within a specific range, to head to bomb shelters. During the Gaza conflict in May, this allowed emergency services to "go to every incident within less than five minutes", Gordin said from the control room of the unit's headquarters in Ramla, near Tel Aviv. He said preparations had been made for any incidents on the border with Lebanon.

A Zionist security source said the army hoped for "stability" in its northern neighbor, which is mired in a crippling economic crisis and on Thursday saw deadly sectarian clashes in the capital Beirut that left seven dead, including Hezbollah members. Iran-backed Hezbollah was "the source of instability in Lebanon", the security source said, adding that the group "exploits the state's resources for Iranian interests". Iran is "closer to creating fissile material for nuclear weapons than they ever were in the past" but would still need two years to obtain a bomb, the source said, echoing a timeframe cited by other Zionist officials. — AFP

A year after EndSARS, Nigeria police brutality, harassments 'resume'

LAGOS: Monsurat Ojuade had just turned 18 when she was killed by a police officer, her sister Omolara said in a trembling voice. News of her death, during a raid in her neighborhood of Nigeria's Lagos last month, shocked many in a country preparing to commemorate the first anniversary of EndSARS, a protest movement against police brutality that rocked major cities in the south.

The protests came to a grinding halt after October 20, 2020, the date of a brutal crackdown on peaceful protesters at the Lekki tollgate, the epicenter of the demonstrations. Monsurat's death in September was for many a sign that police brutality has continued in Africa's most populous country. And for the youth that mobilized massively for the first time in decades, her death was also a reminder that their demands for change have not been heard, and pervasive impunity and corruption still exists.

"It was a Friday night, we were about to lock the shop. Monsurat saw some guys running," said her sister Omolara Ojuade, speaking to AFP by phone. "We were scared... someone started hitting the door - he didn't identify as a policeman - and he shot

through the gate at Monsurat," the young woman recalled. The officer in charge was suspended and is facing trial for murder but for the Ojuade family, much more is needed. "They are not giving them (police) proper training," said the sister. "As a police officer you cannot just come to someone's gate and start shooting."

Nothing changed

Last year's protest movement, named after the social media hashtag #EndSARS, was first a campaign to end the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit, notorious for extortion, torture and extrajudicial killings. After it snowballed into wider protests against bad governance, the authorities suspended the unit and promised reforms. But the country's youth were sceptical and continued to protest - until the Lekki crackdown.

A year later, many wonder if their efforts had any impact. "Nothing has really changed," said Amnesty International researcher Damian Ugwu. "SARS may have been disbanded, but there were only cosmetic changes." "All the things people complained about, extortion, extrajudicial



LAGOS: 'Flag Boi' Akinwunmi Ibrahim Adebajo waves the national green and white flag together with EndSars flag as youth prepare to commemorate the first anniversary of the protest movement in Lagos. — AFP

killings, torture, ill-treatment, all those things are still within the police force," said Ugwu. Police training was given, but there were no in-depth reforms, and security forces remain under-resourced and poorly paid.

Harassment from corrupt police officers on the streets of Lagos has resumed, according to Femi, a taxi driver. "You have to give them money, or you have problems with them." Outside the economic capital, some security agents do not wear an official uniform and use clubs or whips to threaten drivers, an AFP journalist witnessed. After last year's protests, police violence initially "decreased"

said Rinu Oduala, one of the leading figures of EndSARS, but in recent months it "resumed with more brutality than ever before".

The 22-year-old has launched Connect Hub, an NGO that works to document police violence, "to show the world why we are fighting". "We have in the space of a month, close to 100 cases reported. We get cases ranging from extrajudicial killings to extortions, harassment, profiling, arbitrary arrests, rape and other crimes committed by the Nigerian Police." Neither the government nor the police responded to AFP's request for comment on her claims. — AFP



MOSCOW: A security guard patrols outside a building that houses the NATO information office in Moscow yesterday. — AFP

Russia cuts diplomatic ties with NATO in latest row

MOSCOW: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday that Moscow was suspending its mission to NATO and closing the Western military bloc's liaison mission in Russia, in a new diplomatic row. "We are suspending the work of our official mission to NATO, including the work of our military representative from November 1 or it could take a few more days," Lavrov told reporters. Lavrov said that Russia would also be ending the alliance's liaison mission-established in 2002 and hosted at the Belgian embassy-and information office in Moscow. The bloc's information office was established in Moscow in 2001 to improve understanding between NATO and Russia.

The latest row comes after NATO earlier this month stripped accreditations of eight members of the Russian mission to the alliance, describing them as "undeclared Russian intelligence officers". NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said at the time that the decision to kick out the Russian representatives was not "linked to any particular event"-but gave no more details over the move. Yesterday, Lavrov cited "recent moves" by NATO, saying there were no longer "basic conditions for common work."

He said that in case of urgent matters, NATO could liaise via the Russian ambassador in Belgium. Russia has long had an observer mission to NATO as part of a two-decade-old NATO-Russia Council meant to promote cooperation in common security areas, but it is not a member of the US-led alliance. The Russian mission has been downsized once before, when seven of its members were ejected after the 2018 poisoning by the Novichok nerve agent on a Russian former double agent, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter in Britain. — AFP

4 dead, 19 missing; migrant boat sinks

TUNIS: Four Tunisian migrants died and 19 were missing after their boat capsized, a judicial source told AFP, the latest deadly mishap in waters off North Africa. A total of 30 Tunisians, most of them young men, had set off in the small vessel, said Farid Ben Jha, spokesman for the Mahdia and Monastir court on the country's east coast. One of them managed to swim to shore and raise the alarm after their boat sank at dawn off the coast of Mahdia governorate, which is only around 140 kilometers from the Italian island of Lampedusa.

"Seven were able to be rescued" and four bodies were found, Ben Jha said, adding that the other passengers were missing. "The boat was too small to carry 30 people," he said. Those rescued did not say where exactly the boat had set off from. Four people were arrested for helping to organize the attempted sea crossing, Ben Jha added. He said an investigation had been opened to identify those responsible.

Also Sunday, the defense ministry in neighboring Algeria said that country's coastguards had recovered four bodies from the Mediterranean Sea and rescued 13 migrants after a boat capsized in its waters. On Tuesday the United Nations refugee agency said 15 migrants drowned after two boats capsized off Libya, adding to the toll on the perilous sea route to Europe. Libya is a major point of departure for desperate migrants seeking to reach Europe, many of them from sub-Saharan African countries. — AFP