

Trump says US withdrawal would be 'worst thing' for Iraq

Tue, 2020-01-07 22:36

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump said Tuesday that a US troop withdrawal from Iraq at this stage would be the "worst thing" for the country, after Baghdad's parliament demanded the expulsion of American forces.

"At some point we want to get out, but this isn't the right point," Trump said. "It's the worst thing that could happen to Iraq."

Iraqi MPs have urged the government to expel the 5,200 US troops stationed in the country in response to the drone attack that killed Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and top Iraqi military figure Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

Trump backed away from his earlier insistence that he has the right to order the bombing of Iran's cultural treasures during a war.

Facing strong criticism that such attacks would be a war crime, Trump said he was "OK" with following international law. However, he repeated an earlier complaint that he found the restriction unfair.

"Think of it: they kill our people, they blow up our people and then we have to be very gentle with their cultural institutions. But I'm OK with it," Trump told reporters.

"You know what, if that's what the law is, I like to obey the law."

He added a warning that if Iran "does anything that they shouldn't be doing, they're going to be suffering the consequences and very strongly."

Trump previously prompted an outcry from domestic critics, the Iranian government and the UN's cultural agency UNESCO when he said that he did not need to abide by international law on protecting such sites in war.

"It doesn't work that way," he said.

Trump's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper had both sought to walk back the threat.

Iran boasts an ancient culture with two dozen places on UNESCO's list of world heritage sites.



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Saudi Arabia's Deputy Defense Minister Prince Khalid bin Salman meets Donald Trump in Washington. Trump threatens sanctions on Baghdad after lawmakers call on US troops to leave.

[US Defense Secretary Esper: US seeks diplomacy with Iran, but must de-escalate first](#)

Tue, 2020-01-07 22:09

WASHINGTON: US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told CNN on Tuesday that the US wants to de-escalate the current tensions with Iran, but the country is ready to finish any war that could be started.

"We are not looking to start a war with Iran but we are prepared to finish

one,” he said. “What we’d like to see is the situation de-escalated.”

Esper defended the intelligence signaling an “imminent threat” from Soleimani that he and other senior US officials have cited to justify the strike, saying it was persuasive.

“The threat was being orchestrated by Soleimani,” Esper said. “I think it was only a matter of days, certainly no more than weeks” before an attack.

Esper suggested on Monday that the US military would not violate the laws of armed conflict by striking Iranian cultural sites, a move threatened by President Donald Trump.

Asked about the issue again on Tuesday, Esper said he was confident that Trump “will only give us legal orders.

“We do not violate the laws of armed conflict,” Esper said.

Targeting cultural sites with military action is considered a war crime under international law, including a UN Security Council resolution supported by the Trump administration in 2017 and the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property.



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Trump says US withdrawal would be 'worst thing' for Iraq
Britain says war with Iran would strengthen militants

[NATO taking 'some personnel' out of Iraq](#)

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1578420740720773200

Tue, 2020-01-07 17:51

BRUSSELS: NATO said Tuesday it would take "some personnel" out of Iraq because of the increased danger there after the US killing of an Iranian general triggered revenge threats.

The withdrawal is temporary but "the safety of our personnel is paramount," a NATO official said in a statement.

US and allied foreign troops in Iraq are concerned they might be targeted by Iran or allied Iraqi militias in retaliation for Friday's killing in Baghdad of Revolutionary Guards General Qasem Soleimani, who commanded Iran's operations across the Middle East.

NATO announced on Saturday that it had suspended its training mission in Iraq, which fields 500 instructors.

The NATO official said other mission personnel were being moved to other parts of Iraq, and emphasised that "NATO maintains a presence."

The alliance plans to resume its training there "when the situation permits." He declined to give details on how many personnel were being moved or to where.

"The temporary repositioning of some personnel" was "to different locations both inside and outside of Iraq.

"To protect the safety of our personnel on the ground, we cannot go into operational details," he added.

Romania's defense ministry said separately that its 14 soldiers taking part in the NATO deployment "will be temporarily relocated to another coalition base."

Hungary's defense minister Tibor Benko said Hungarian soldiers in Iraq were ready for evacuation "if necessary," the official MTI agency reported.

Benko added that unless Hungary's soldiers were asked to withdraw, they would continue their mission.

Around 200 Hungarian soldiers are stationed in the northern Iraqi city of Irbil, both as part of NATO's training mission and the broader coalition against the Islamic State organization.

The NATO training mission in Iraq is separate to the far bigger foreign military deployment in the country led by the US, which has 5,200 soldiers

stationed in Iraqi bases.

The US general in charge of that force has sent a letter to Iraqi authorities saying the American troops were preparing to leave.

But he and US officials in Washington later said the “draft” letter had been mistakenly sent and that the troops are staying.

Soleimani was killed by a US drone on orders of President Donald Trump, who has warned Iran not to strike back.

NATO’s chief, Jens Stoltenberg, on Monday warned Tehran to avoid “further violence and provocations.”

Iran’s leaders have sworn to avenge Soleimani’s death at a time and place of their choosing.

They are also intent on solidifying their hold on Iraq and Syria, which they view as part of an “axis of resistance” stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea.

The head of the Revolutionary Guards, Major General Hossein Salami, said “we will take our revenge” and added that the process of “expelling the United States from the region has begun.”



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NATO Iraq mission not disrupted by Iran tension: commander
No US troops pullout from Iraq, Pentagon chief says

EU ministers condemn 'outside interference' in Libya

Tue, 2020-01-07 18:36

BRUSSELS: The EU's diplomatic chief on Tuesday condemned Turkish "interference" in Libya after Ankara sent troops to support the UN-backed Tripoli government, warning this complicates the crisis in the oil-rich state.

After emergency talks on the situation with the foreign ministers of France, Britain, Germany and Italy, Josep Borrell said the Turkish intervention was "something that we reject and which increases our worries about the situation in Libya".



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