

Honduras declares Hezbollah a terrorist organization

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TEGUCIGALPA: The Honduran government has formally declared Iranian-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah a terrorist organization, a top security official said on Monday.

"We declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization and will include it in the registry of persons and institutions linked to acts of terrorism and its financing," said Luis Suazo, Honduras' deputy security minister.

Heavily armed Hezbollah, a Shiite Muslim group, has also been designated a terrorist organization by the US government.

Last week, Guatemala's new president, Alejandro Giammattei, also signaled he would label Hezbollah a terrorist group, in addition to keeping the Guatemalan embassy in Israel in the city of Jerusalem.

Both moves were seen as aligning Guatemala's foreign policy more closely with that of US President Donald Trump.

Israel's foreign minister, Israel Katz, called the Honduran government's move "an important step in the global war on terror" and said it built on similar actions taken in recent months by Britain, Argentina and others.

"I applaud the Honduran government for its important decision to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization and to impose sanctions against it," Katz said.

Israel considers Hezbollah, which is backed by its enemy Iran, the biggest threat across its border. The two last fought a war in 2006.

Britain's Treasury, or finance ministry, said on Jan. 17 it had expanded an asset freeze to include the whole of Hezbollah in addition to its military wing.

Last year, Argentina designated the group, which it blames for two attacks on its soil, as a terrorist organization and froze its assets in the country. Other countries that have designate Hezbollah or its military wing as a terrorist organization include Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the European Union and Israel.



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[Eight EU nations back naval force to patrol Strait of Hormuz](#)

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Mon, 2020-01-20 14:59

PARIS: The French foreign ministry said Monday that eight European Union nations had given their support for a new naval patrol to help avoid potential conflicts in the Strait of Hormuz, the strategically critical entry to the Gulf.

Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal backed the new force, though the ministry did not say how many ships would be involved, or when they would begin operations.

The move comes amid escalating tensions in the region, especially between Iran and the United States, that have sparked attacks on tankers and other conflicts in a crucial zone for oil shipping.

“For months this situation has jeopardized freedom of navigation and the security of both European and foreign ships and crews,” the ministry said in a statement.

The EU initiative also underscores the bloc’s goal of acting separately from the US, which launched its own operation alongside allies last November to protect shipping in Gulf waters.

France and its European allies are hoping to distance themselves from US President Donald Trump in order to save the landmark 2015 deal curtailing Tehran’s nuclear program.

Trump abandoned the accord in 2018 and imposed economic sanctions against Iran, rekindling a smoldering conflict that led to strikes on cargo ships as well as Saudi Arabian oil facilities.

France, Denmark, Greece and the Netherlands have already confirmed they will contribute to the patrols, which will be based in the United Arab Emirates, and “new commitments” are expected in the coming days, the ministry said.



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South Korea mulls sending own ships to Strait of Hormuz
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Iran threatens to leave global nuclear treaty if Europeans send JCP0A case goes to UN

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Mon, 2020-01-20 19:16

LONDON: Iran said on Monday it could quit the global nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if European countries refer it to the UN Security Council over a nuclear agreement, a move that would overturn diplomacy in its confrontation with the West.

The 1968 NPT has been the foundation of global nuclear arms control since the Cold War, including a 2015 deal Iran signed with world powers that offered it access to global trade in return for accepting curbs to its atomic program. Britain, France and Germany declared Iran in violation of the 2015 pact last week and have launched a dispute mechanism that could eventually see the matter referred back to the Security Council and the reimposition of UN sanctions.

"If the Europeans continue their improper behavior or send Iran's file to the Security Council, we will withdraw from the NPT," Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif said, according to comments carried by IRNA and other Iranian news agencies.

He also said Iran could take other steps before withdrawing from the NPT, although he did not specify them.

The fate of the 2015 pact has been in doubt since US President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of it and reimposed sanctions. Iran has responded by scaling back its commitments, although it says it wants the pact to survive.

The nuclear dispute has been at the heart of an escalation between Washington and Tehran which blew up into military confrontation in recent weeks.

The 190-member NPT bans signatories other than the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France from acquiring nuclear weapons, in return for allowing them to pursue peaceful nuclear programs for power generation, overseen by the United Nations.

The only country ever to declare its withdrawal from the NPT was North Korea, which expelled nuclear inspectors and openly tested atomic weapons. Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan never signed up, nor did Israel, which does not say whether it has nuclear weapons but is widely presumed to have them.

The West has long accused Iran of seeking to develop nuclear arms. Tehran denies this and says its goal is to master the whole process of generating electricity from nuclear energy.

A steady escalation over Iran's nuclear plans flared into tit-for-tat military action this month, with Trump ordering a drone strike that killed a

top Iranian general, prompting Iran to fire missiles at US targets in Iraq. During a state of alert, Iran shot down a Ukrainian airliner in error. Amid that escalation – one of the biggest since Iran's 1979 revolution – Tehran has faced mounting pressure from European states which say they want to save the 2015 nuclear deal. They have also indicated a readiness to back Trump's call for a broader deal with Iran that goes beyond its nuclear plans. "Despite the ill will that we see from some European countries the door of negotiations with them has not been closed and the ball is in the court of these countries," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said. But he also told a news conference: "I don't think Iran is ready to negotiate under the conditions they have in mind."

Since Washington withdrew from the deal, Trump began a policy of "maximum pressure", saying a broader deal should be negotiated on nuclear issues, Iran's missile program and Iranian activities in the Middle East.

US sanctions have crippled Iran's economy, slashing its oil exports. Iran has long said it would not negotiate with Washington while sanctions are in place.

Tehran has repeatedly held talks with European officials to find ways to keep the nuclear agreement alive, but has blamed the Europeans for failing to guarantee economic benefits that Iran was meant to receive in return for curbing nuclear work.

"The European powers' claims about Iran violating the deal are unfounded," Mousavi said. "Whether Iran will further decrease its nuclear commitments will depend on other parties and whether Iran's interests are secured under the deal."

In a report on a parliamentary website, Iran's foreign minister said steps to scale back its commitments under the nuclear deal were now over.

Britain has said a "Trump deal" could replace the 2015 deal, and France has called for broad talks to end the crisis.

Iran says it cannot negotiate with Trump, who broke promises by repudiating the deal reached under his predecessor Barack Obama. Mousavi repeated Iran's rejection of a "Trump deal".

"The fact that a person's name is put on an agreement shows they're not familiar with the conditions. An agreement with a person doesn't mean anything," he said.



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Iran has not ruled out talks to end nuclear disputeUK's Johnson, France's Macron reiterate commitment to Iran nuclear deal

[Violence erupts for second night in Beirut after hundreds injured](#)

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By SARAH EL DEEB | AP

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Sun, 2020-01-19 14:24

BEIRUT: Lebanese security forces fired water cannons, rubber bullets and tear gas on Sunday to try to break up stone-throwing protesters in Beirut, which has been rocked by some of the worst violence since unrest erupted in October.

Sunday's confrontation broke out near parliament a day after more than 370 people were wounded, the biggest casualty toll since the protests against the ruling elite began.

Unrest in the capital this week has deepened the multi-faceted crisis sweeping Lebanon as it grapples with financial strains that have sunk the currency, pushed up prices and driven banks to impose capital controls. Politicians have failed to agree on a government or an economic rescue plan since the protests pushed Saad al-Hariri to quit as prime minister in October.

"We have gone from being a country we used to call the Switzerland of the east to a country ranked at the bottom in everything," said housewife Rezzan Barraaj, 47, at Sunday night's protest.

"It's clear that the more they (security forces) step up their violence, the more people's strength and determination grow."

A Reuters witness saw police fire rubber bullets. The Lebanese Red Cross said it treated 52 people and took 38 to hospital.

Hundreds of people yelled "revolution" in the commercial district of the capital. Protesters pelted riot police with stones and fireworks.

Some tried to climb over barbed wire and fencing to storm a heavily barricaded part of central Beirut that includes parliament. One man jabbed police with a pole across the barriers as the violence escalated.

Zeina Ibrahim, 37, an office manager, said protesters had faced violence from police and attacks from supporters of the sectarian, dominant parties.

"Violence only breeds violence," she said. "After all this time, all these months...I don't blame protesters at all if they move bit by bit towards violence."

The Internal Security Forces (ISF) urged people to remain calm and said otherwise it would be forced to repel them.

The interior and defence ministers and army and other security chiefs were set to meet at the presidential palace on Monday.

Human Rights Watch on Saturday called for an end to a "culture of impunity for abuse" by police, which it said fired tear gas canisters at some people's heads.

Interior Minister Raya al-Hassan said people had the right to protest but it was unacceptable to "blatantly assault" security forces.

Protesters have also turned their anger on the banks – which have curbed access to savings – with some smashing the facade of the banking association on Saturday night.

Hassan Diab, who was designated prime minister with the backing of Islamist movement Hezbollah and its allies last month, met with President Aoun on Sunday.

A senior political source told Reuters the government line-up would be finalised on Sunday, but Diab left without commenting as a cabinet deal remained elusive.



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Beirut shaken by 'barbaric' protests crackdown
Celine Dion cancels Lebanon concert

[Jordan parliament passes draft law to ban gas imports from Israel](#)

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Sun, 2020-01-19 13:21

AMMAN: Jordan's parliament on Sunday approved a draft law to ban imports of Israeli gas to the country just days after they started under a multibillion-dollar deal struck in 2016 which is opposed by much of the population. The motion was passed unanimously by Jordan's 130 lawmakers and will be

referred to the cabinet to be made law, although legal hurdles may prevent it coming into force.

The government has previously said it was a deal between companies rather than a political matter.

The \$10 billion supply deal was originally struck between Jordan's state-owned utility and a US Israeli consortium led by Texas-based Noble Energy, to provide gas to the country's power plants for electricity generation.

It was not referred to parliament for approval.

Although US ally Jordan has a peace treaty with Israel the deal, which supplies Jordan for 15 years, has faced much popular opposition, with lawmakers arguing it makes the kingdom dependent on its neighbor for energy. Many Jordanians are also the descendants of Palestinians who moved to the country after the creation of Israel in 1948, and view Israel as an erstwhile enemy that expelled their ancestors from their homes.

The Jordanian government said after the agreement was signed in 2016 that securing stable energy prices for the next decade could achieve annual savings of at least \$500 million and help reduce a chronic budget deficit. The import of Israeli gas has become a major focus in Jordan and sparked protests and calls for both the deal and the peace treaty to be scrapped. "The gas of the enemy is an occupation. Down with the gas deal," placards carried by protesters said.

Jordan's ties with Israel have come under increasing strain since the gas deal was struck as Israel has moved to the right and since Donald Trump replaced Barack Obama as US president.

Jordan's King Abdullah fears Israel's rejection of a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank could spark renewed violence and see a new generation of Palestinians relocating to Jordan.



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Jordan's king raises Palestine's plight in talks with Macron