

US 'prepared to meet directly' and 'urgently' with Iran on nuclear issue

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WASHINGTON: The US State Department on Monday repeated that it remains open to meeting with Iranian officials directly to discuss the nuclear deal and other issues after Iran's foreign minister said Tehran would consider this but had made no decisions.

Speaking at a briefing, State Department spokesman Ned Price also said the US had not made Iran's releasing four Americans a condition of reaching an agreement for both nations to resume compliance with the nuclear deal, saying that achieving such an agreement was an uncertain proposition.

Earlier on Monday, the State Department said the US was prepared to hold direct talks with Iran after Tehran said it would consider such an option.

"We are prepared to meet directly," a State Department spokesperson said.

"We have long held the position that it would be more productive to engage with Iran directly, on both JCPOA negotiations and other issues," the spokesperson said, referring to the nuclear deal between Iran and major powers.

The spokesperson said that meeting directly would allow "more efficient communication" needed to reach an understanding on what is needed to resuscitate the 2015 deal.

"Given the pace of Iran's nuclear advances, we are almost out of time to reach an understanding on mutual return to full implementation of the JCPOA," the official said.

The comments came after Iran said Monday it will consider direct talks with the United States during ongoing negotiations in Vienna aimed at restoring the deal.

"Iran is not currently talking with the US directly," Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said in televised remarks.

"But, if during the negotiation process we get to a point that reaching a good agreement with solid guarantees requires a level of talks with the US, we will not ignore that in our work schedule," he added.

(With AFP and Reuters)



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Iran: 'Possible' to agree on prisoners, nuclear deal
Iran nuclear agreement unlikely without release of US prisoners – Malley

['Horror scenes' in Syrian refugee camps amid 'extremely cold winter': UN official](#)

Mon, 2022-01-24 23:05

LONDON: Brutal winter conditions in northern Syria have ushered in mass-scale suffering for 2.8 million internally displaced persons, a top UN humanitarian official warned on Monday.

"We're extremely concerned about the situation there," Mark Cutts, the UN's deputy regional humanitarian coordinator for Syria, said in a briefing attended by Arab News.

The IDPs, he added, are "some of the most vulnerable people in the world," the majority of them living in temporary camps and tents.

"During this extremely cold weather, we've seen some real horror scenes in the last few days – about 1,000 tents have either collapsed completely or been very badly damaged as a result of heavy snow," said Cutts, adding that temperatures have dropped to as low as -7 degrees centigrade.

About 100,000 people have been affected by the heavy snow, while 150,000 more have been affected by freezing conditions and heavy rain.

"These are people who've been through a lot in the past few years. They've fled from one place to another. The bombs have followed them. Many of the hospitals and schools in northwest Syria have been destroyed in the 10 years of war," said Cutts, adding that what he and his team are seeing in camps now is a "real disaster zone."

He said: "Our humanitarian workers have been pulling people out from under their collapsed tents ... They've been clearing snow from tents with their bare hands."

Children, the elderly and the disabled are suffering the most from the conditions, added Cutts, who appealed to the international community to "do more, to recognize the scale of the crisis, to help us get these people out of tents and into safer, more dignified temporary shelter."

In a final plea, he said: "It's absolutely unacceptable that you've got 1.7 million people living in camps in these appalling conditions – most of them are women and children and elderly people.

"These civilians are stranded in a warzone, and now, on top of that, they're dealing with temperatures below zero. No one should have to live in these conditions."



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[Iran: 'Possible' to agree on prisoners, nuclear deal](#)

Mon, 2022-01-24 23:11

TEHRAN: Tehran on Monday said it is "possible" to reach an agreement on the two issues of Iran-US prisoners' release and the Vienna talks to restore the 2015 nuclear deal.

"They are two different paths, but if the other party (the US) has the determination, there is the possibility that we reach a reliable and lasting agreement in both of them in the shortest time," Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said during his weekly press conference.

Khatibzadeh's comments came in reaction to remarks made by the US envoy for Iran, Robert Malley, who on Sunday said it is unlikely that Washington would strike an agreement unless Tehran releases four US citizens.

BACKGROUND

The four US citizens held in Iran are Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi, 50, and his father Baquer, 85, as well as environmentalist Morad Tahbaz, 66, and businessman Emad Sharqi, 57.

“Iran has not accepted any precondition from day one of the negotiations,” Khatibzadeh said.

He added that “the negotiations are complicated enough, and should not get more complex with complicated remarks.”



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Iran nuclear agreement unlikely without release of US prisoners – Malley

[Iran nuclear agreement unlikely](#)

without release of US prisoners – Malley

Mon, 2022-01-24 03:14

VIENNA: The United States is unlikely to strike an agreement with Iran to save the 2015 Iran nuclear deal unless Tehran releases four US citizens Washington says it is holding hostage, the lead US nuclear negotiator told Reuters on Sunday.

The official, US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley, repeated the long-held US position that the issue of the four people held in Iran is separate from the nuclear negotiations. He moved a step closer, however, to saying that their release was a precondition for a nuclear agreement.

“They’re separate and we’re pursuing both of them. But I will say it is very hard for us to imagine getting back into the nuclear deal while four innocent Americans are being held hostage by Iran,” Malley told Reuters in an interview.

“So even as we’re conducting talks with Iran indirectly on the nuclear file we are conducting, again indirectly, discussions with them to ensure the release of our hostages,” he said in Vienna, where talks are taking place on bringing Washington and Tehran back into full compliance with the deal.

In recent years, Iran’s elite Revolutionary Guards have arrested dozens of dual nationals and foreigners, mostly on espionage and security-related charges.

Rights groups have accused Iran of taking prisoners to gain diplomatic leverage, while Western powers have long demanded that Tehran free their citizens, who they say are political prisoners.

Tehran denies holding people for political reasons.

MESSAGE SENT

Malley was speaking in a joint interview with Barry Rosen, a 77-year-old former US diplomat who has been on hunger strike in Vienna to demand the release of US, British, French, German, Austrian and Swedish prisoners in Iran, and that no nuclear agreement be reached without their release.

Rosen was one of more than 50 US diplomats held during the 1979-1981 Iran hostage crisis.

“I’ve spoken to a number of the families of the hostages who are extraordinarily grateful for what Mr. Rosen is doing but they also are imploring him to stop his hunger strike, as I am, because the message has been sent,” Malley said.

Rosen said that after five days of not eating he was feeling weak and would heed those calls.

“With the request from Special Envoy Malley and my doctors and others, we’ve agreed (that) after this meeting I will stop my hunger strike but this does not mean that others will not take up the baton,” Rosen said.

The indirect talks between Iran and the United States on bringing both countries back into full compliance with the landmark 2015 nuclear deal are in their eighth round. Iran refuses to hold meetings with US officials, meaning others shuttle between the two sides.

The deal between Iran and major powers lifted sanctions against Tehran in exchange for restrictions on its nuclear activities that extended the time it would need to obtain enough fissile material for a nuclear bomb if it chose to. Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons.

Then-President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of the deal in 2018, reimposing punishing economic sanctions against Tehran. Iran responded by breaching many of the deal's nuclear restrictions, to the point that Western powers say the deal will soon have been hollowed out completely.

LEVERAGE

Asked if Iran and the United States might negotiate directly, Malley said: "We've heard nothing to that effect. We'd welcome it."

The four US citizens include Iranian-American businessman Siamak Namazi, 50, and his father Baquer, 85, both of whom have been convicted of "collaboration with a hostile government." Namazi remains in prison. His father was released on medical grounds in 2018 and his sentence later reduced to time served. While the elder Namazi is no longer jailed, a lawyer for the family says he is effectively barred from leaving Iran.

"Senior Biden administration officials have repeatedly told us that although the potential Iranian nuclear and hostage deals are independent and must be negotiated on parallel tracks, they will not just conclude the nuclear deal by itself," said Jared Genser, pro bono counsel to the Namazi family.

"Otherwise, all leverage to get the hostages out will be lost," he added. The others are environmentalist Morad Tahbaz, 66, who is also British, and businessman Emad Shargi, 57.



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[Palestinian minister says holds first meet with Israel's Lapid](#)

Author:

Mon, 2022-01-24 01:37

JERUSALEM: Israel's top diplomat held an official meeting Sunday evening with a Palestinian minister, the latter said, the first such encounter between the Jewish state's current foreign minister and a Palestinian official.

"I met this evening with Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and we discussed several political and bilateral issues," Palestinian civil affairs minister Hussein Al-Sheikh said on Twitter.

"I have highlighted the need for a political horizon between the two parties based on international legitimacy," he added, without saying where the encounter took place.

The Israeli foreign ministry declined to comment to AFP but did not deny that the meeting took place.

In late December, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz hosted talks with Mahmud Abbas on the Palestinian president's first visit to Israel for an official meeting since 2010.

At that time, Israel's defense ministry announced "confidence-building measures" with the Palestinian Authority.

These included a \$32 million (100 million shekel) advance payment to the PA in taxes collected on its behalf by Israel, and the granting of 600 extra permits allowing Palestinian businessmen to cross into Israel.

It also announced the regularization of 6,000 more Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank, which has been under Israeli control since the Six-Day War of 1967.

Sheikh had welcomed Abbas' meeting with Gantz, saying at the time that it had been a "serious and courageous effort" toward a "political" solution.

After Israel's coalition government led by Prime Minister Naftali Bennett was formed in June, Gantz visited the PA's headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah in August for talks with Abbas, the first official meeting at such a level for several years.

Right-winger Bennett leads a motley coalition of parties ranging from the Jewish nationalist right to the center and left, and includes an Israeli Arab party for the first time.

After those talks, hawkish Bennett, the former head of a settler lobby group who opposes Palestinian statehood, underlined that there was no peace process under way with the Palestinians, "and there won't be one."



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lawmaker emerges as settler critic