

US and UK reject reports of imminent prisoner deal with Iran

Mon, 2021-05-03 19:37

LONDON: The US and the UK dismissed reports coming out of Iran that they are thrashing out a prisoner exchange deal with Tehran that could see the imminent release of a British-Iranian woman, Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and four Americans, among others.

Iran was a key topic of discussions Monday between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his host in London, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab. Their meeting took place a day before the first face-to-face meeting of foreign ministers from the Group of Seven leading industrial nations in two years, largely due to the coronavirus pandemic. Iran, Ukraine, China, Russia, climate change and COVID-19 are expected to dominate the talks.

Blinken's visit to London, his first since being appointed by President Joe Biden, comes amid mounting speculation of a prisoner swap deal with Iran. Such exchanges are not uncommon and were a feature of the 2015 nuclear accord between Iran and the world's leading powers. Biden has indicated he is looking to restart nuclear talks with Tehran after his predecessor, Donald Trump, pulled the US out of the agreement in 2018.

"The reports coming out of Tehran are not accurate," Blinken said at a press briefing after their meeting, adding that he had "no higher priority" than bringing all detained Americans home.

"More broadly on this, we have to take a stand against the arbitrary detention of citizens for political purposes," he said.

Raab also dismissed the prospects of an imminent breakthrough amid reports in Iran that Britain would pay a 400 million-pound (\$550 million) debt to secure Zaghari-Ratcliffe's release. He insisted that the British government was working "very intensively" on the release of detained British citizens in Iran.

"I would say it's incumbent on Iran unconditionally to release those who are held arbitrarily and in our view unlawfully," Raab said.

In Britain, there's particular interest in the well-being of Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who was last week sentenced to an additional year in prison on charges of spreading "propaganda against the system."

The two diplomats discussed an array of subjects, such as sanctions on Russian citizens, climate change and Biden's decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan later this year, a process that began in earnest over the weekend. Russia and its aggressive actions toward Ukraine were also on the agenda, with Blinken set to travel to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv on Wednesday.

Biden is also set to take a new approach with regard to North Korea following a policy review completed last week. Blinken, who met in London with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts earlier Monday, said the new approach will be "practical and calibrated" and urged the leadership in Pyongyang to "take the opportunity to engage diplomatically."

On Tuesday, the top diplomats from the full G-7 – Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the US – will meet along with their foreign minister

colleagues from selected other countries, including Australia, India and South Africa.

Ahead of the gathering, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned that “authoritarian states” around the world are “trying to play us against each other” and that breaches of international law have become commonplace. “It is important that we hold our values of democracy, state of law, human rights and a global order based on rules against them, united and credibly,” he said.

Britain’s Foreign Office said the G-7 ministers will invest \$15 billion in development finance over the next two years to help women in developing countries access jobs, build resilient businesses and recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

They are also expected to pledge to get 40 million more girls into school and 20 million more girls reading by the age of 10 in poorer nations by 2026.



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Washington denies Iran state media report saying prisoner swap agreedUK says Iran’s treatment of Zaghari-Ratcliffe is ‘torture’

Iraq summons Turkish diplomat in protest against defense minister's visit

Author:

Mon, 2021-05-03 19:21

LONDON: Iraq launched a diplomatic protest against Turkey on Monday after the Turkish defense minister visited troops in northern Iraq.

The foreign ministry summoned the charge d'affairs at the Turkish Embassy in Baghdad to protest against the minister's trip on Saturday.

Turkey launched a military operation against Kurdish militants in northern Iraq on April 23. Baghdad has repeatedly complained about Turkish offensives on its territory. Turkey claims it is hitting bases belonging to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which the group uses to carry out attacks inside Turkey.

Iraqi officials handed the Turkish diplomat a protest note expressing the Iraqi government's "strong dissatisfaction and condemnation of the presence of Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar in Iraqi lands without coordination or prior approval from authorities," the ministry said.

The Iraqi government also denounced Akar's meeting with Turkish forces that it says are in the country illegally. The statement condemned comments by the Turkish interior minister regarding Turkey's intention to establish a permanent military base in northern Iraq.

The Iraqi government "categorically rejects" the violations of Iraqi sovereignty and airspace by Turkish military forces, the statement said. Turkish media reported that Akar and military officials visited a base in Iraq and updated troops on the number of PKK militants killed in the operation.

The offensive is based in Iraq's Metina and Avashin-Basyan regions.



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Turkish jets, troops hit PKK targets in new Iraq incursion
18 Iraqis killed in multiple night-time extremist raids

[Kuwait bars unvaccinated citizens from travel abroad from May 22](#)

Author:

Mon, 2021-05-03 19:02

LONDON: Kuwaiti citizens who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 will not be able to travel abroad from May 22, the information ministry said on Monday.

A decision was taken "not to allow citizens and their companions who are first-degree relatives and domestic workers to travel outside the country

unless they have been immunized from the coronavirus,” the ministry said. The ban does not include people in age groups not eligible to receive vaccinations against the coronavirus. A previous directive banning the entry of non-Kuwaitis into the country still stands, the statement said. The Ministry of Health has extended the period between administering the first and second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine due to a delay in the shipment from the manufacturer. “This comes in light of the global competition to obtain ample quantities of vaccines,” the health ministry said, adding the decision applies to everyone who will receive the first dose of the vaccine starting Monday.
(With Reuters)



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Kuwait suspends all commercial flights with India over high COVID-19 cases
Saudi COVID-19 travel insurance approved as EU moves closer to opening

Oman bans commercial activity from May 8 to 15

Author:

Sun, 2021-05-02 21:13

LONDON: Oman will ban the movement of people and vehicles from 7 p.m. to 4 a.m. from May 8 until May 15, the state news agency said on Sunday, citing the Supreme Committee for Combating Coronavirus.

Oman will also ban commercial activity all day during the same period, except for food stores, gas stations, health institutions and pharmacies. Home delivery services for all goods are also exempt.

The decision came following a supreme committee meeting chaired by Minister of Interior Hammoud bin Faisal Al-Busaidi on developments in the pandemic. The sultanate also said government employees will work from home from May 9 until May 11, and urged private sector companies to implement business continuity plans by working remotely and downsizing the number of employees who are required to come to the workplace.

The supreme committee also instructed people to not hold Eid prayers and traditional markets, and banned all kinds of gatherings and celebrations in various locations, including beaches, parks and public gardens, during Eid Al-Fitr.

Eid Al-Fitr, also called the "Festival of Breaking the Fast" or Lesser Eid, is celebrated by Muslims around the world to mark the end of the fasting month of Ramadan. This year, it is expected to start on May 12.

The committee said the measures aim to "protect society from the pandemic and its great health risks," and called on the public to adhere to them and avoid gatherings during the remainder of Ramadan and throughout the Eid holiday. The committee added that the decisions are continuously being reviewed according to epidemiological developments.



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Saudi Arabia's King Salman invites Oman's sultan to visit the Kingdom

[Yemen government troops advance in Marib province amid fierce fighting](#)

Author:

Sun, 2021-05-02 21:19

AL-MUKALLA: Yemeni government troops, backed by Arab coalition warplanes, seized control of several mountainous locations near the central city of Marib after fierce clashes with the Houthis, an army spokesperson said on Sunday.

Maj. Gen. Abdu Abdullah Majili told a press briefing that troops had expelled the militia from several locations in Al-Kasara and Al-Mashjah, west of Marib, captured three rebels and destroyed more than 20 military vehicles. Coalition warplanes destroyed vehicles carrying ammunition and fighters headed for battle.

"The Houthi militia suffered heavy casualties. They are fleeing their locations, barricades and trenches."

He played a video that showed troops climbing mountains and rebels fleeing their vehicles and locations.

Thousands of troops and Houthis have been killed in the province since February, when the rebels resumed a military offensive on the city.

Official media on Sunday reported government military leader in Marib, Fahed Mabkhout Al-Arada, as saying that the bodies of Houthi fighters were still scattered on the battlefield as forces pressed to push the rebels away from the province.

"Houthi losses are very big. Their bodies are thrown in mountains and valleys. We would not allow them to enter Marib."

Military officials said that, following the latest territorial gains, troops had halted the offensive in part of the province and taken the upper hand.

Col. Yahiya Al-Hatemi, the director of the military media, described the troops' latest operations as the "mother of all battles" that gave loyalists a big morale boost as they managed to push back months of aggressive assault.

"The battle revealed the enemy's fragility and demonstrated the strength, boldness, skills and professionalism of the national army," Al-Hatemi said,

adding that coalition air cover had helped government troops to liberate mountains west of Marib during the last 48 hours.

In Houthi-held areas such as Sanaa and Saada, rebels arranged funeral processions for the dozens of fighters killed in the Marib fighting.

During a meeting with senior military officials and the governors of Marib, Sanaa, Rayma and Jouf, Defense Minister Mohammed Ali Al-Magdashi said the army backed the Marib governor's latest calls for mobilizing forces to liberate the province and the other remaining areas under Houthi control.

"We are able to achieve an honorable victory," the minister said.



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Yemen officials: Heavy flooding from seasonal rains kills 13