

Israel says will help ensure a 'new' Iran deal protects interests

Sun, 2021-04-11 16:45

TEL AVIV: Israel will work with Washington to ensure any "new agreement" on Iran's nuclear program will safeguard regional security, Defense Minister Benny Gantz told his US counterpart Lloyd Austin on Sunday.

The comments came as Austin made the first high-level US trip to Israel since talks resumed on reviving the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, which the Jewish state fiercely opposed.

Gantz said "we will work closely with our American allies to ensure that any new agreement with Iran will secure the vital interests of the world and the United States, prevent a dangerous arms race in our region and protect the State of Israel."

Austin, the highest-level envoy from President Joe Biden's administration yet to visit ally Israel, said Washington would work with Israel "to advance shared security interest and priorities."

Stressing America's "iron-clad" bond with Israel, Austin said the US will "continue close consultations to ensure Israel's qualitative military edge and to strengthen Israel's security."

Austin's visit came just days after the US said it had offered "very serious" ideas on reviving the hobbled nuclear agreement reached between Tehran and world powers, which was abandoned by former president Donald Trump in 2018. Israel under hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been a fierce critic of the Iran nuclear deal, dating back to when it was being negotiated during Barack Obama's administration.

Netanyahu, whom Austin was due to meet on his visit, applauded when Trump withdrew from the deal and imposed sanctions on Tehran, which responded by stepping back from several of its commitments under the deal.

In the latest breach of its undertakings in the troubled agreement, Tehran announced on Saturday that it had started up advanced uranium enrichment centrifuges.

President Hassan Rouhani inaugurated a cascade of 164 IR-6 centrifuges for producing enriched uranium, as well as two test cascades – of 30 IR-5 and 30 IR-6S devices respectively – at Iran's Natanz uranium enrichment plant, in a ceremony broadcast by state television.

An "accident" took place at Natanz on Sunday but caused no casualties or damage, the Fars news agency reported, citing officials.

In an address marking the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, Netanyahu had said on Wednesday that Israel would not be bound to a nuclear deal that would enable the Islamic republic to develop atomic weapons.

"An agreement with Iran that would pave the way to nuclear weapons – weapons that threaten our extinction – would not compel us in any way," said the veteran premier.

Biden has said he is prepared to return to the agreement, arguing the deal had – until Washington's withdrawal – been successful in dramatically scaling back Iran's nuclear activities.

But Washington has demanded Iran returns to compliance while Tehran has

insisted on an end to all US restrictions, with each side demanding that the other make the first move.



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Pentagon chief makes first Israel visit by Biden official, Iran on the agenda
Iran boosts nuclear program in snub to US

[Jordan's King Abdullah II and Prince Hamza make first joint appearance since rift](#)

Sun, 2021-04-11 14:14

CAIRO: Jordan's King Abdullah and his half brother Prince Hamza made a joint

appearance on Sunday attending a ceremony marking 100 years of the Hashemite kingdom's independence.

The royal palace released a photo with Abdullah II, Prince Hamzah, Crown Prince Hussein and other dignitaries at the grave of King Talal in Amman, Jordan's capital.

This is their first public appearance together since a rare palace feud last week.





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[Iran reports 258 coronavirus deaths, highest daily toll since December](#)

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Sun, 2021-04-11 10:22

DUBAI: Iran reported 258 deaths from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, the health ministry said on Sunday, the highest daily toll since early December. That brings the total number of fatalities from the coronavirus to 64,490 in Iran, the worst-hit country in the Middle East. Health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari told state TV that 21,063 new cases were identified in the past 24 hours, taking the total number of

identified cases since the pandemic began to 2,070,141.

“Unfortunately, in the past 24 hours 258 people have died from the virus,” Lari said. State TV said it was the country’s highest daily death toll since Dec. 10.

Iran’s Health Minister Saeed Namaki, in a televised news conference, warned about more fatalities in the coming week if Iranians fail to adhere to health protocols. On Saturday, Tehran imposed a 10-day lockdown across most of the country to curb the spread of a fourth wave of the coronavirus. The lockdown affects 23 of the country’s 31 provinces.

Businesses, schools, theaters and sports facilities have been forced to shut and gatherings are banned during the holy fasting month of Ramadan that begins on Wednesday in Iran.



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Iran orders 10-day shutdown amid 4th wave of coronavirus pandemic
Iran surpasses one million coronavirus cases

Iran calls Natanz atomic site blackout 'nuclear terrorism'

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Sun, 2021-04-11 04:39

DUBAI: Iran on Sunday described a blackout at its underground Natanz atomic facility an act of "nuclear terrorism," raising regional tensions as world powers and Tehran continue to negotiate over its tattered nuclear deal. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility, suspicion fell immediately on Israel, where its media nearly uniformly reported a devastating cyberattack orchestrated by the country caused the blackout. If Israel was responsible, it further heightens tensions between the two nations, already engaged in a shadow conflict across the wider Middle East. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who met Sunday with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, has vowed to do everything in his power to stop the nuclear deal.

Details remained few about what happened early Sunday morning at the facility, which initially was described as a blackout caused by the electrical grid feeding its above-ground workshops and underground enrichment halls.

Ali Akbar Salehi, the American-educated head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, who once served as the country's foreign minister, offered what appeared to be the harshest comments of his long career, which included the assassination of nuclear scientists a decade ago. Iran blames Israel for those killings as well.

He pledged to "seriously improve" his nation's nuclear technology while working to lift international sanctions.

Salehi's comments to state TV did not explain what happened at the facility, but his words suggested a serious disruption.

"While condemning this desperate move, the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasizes the need for a confrontation by the international bodies and the (International Atomic Energy Agency) against this nuclear terrorism," Salehi said.

The IAEA, the United Nations' body that monitors Tehran's atomic program, earlier said it was aware of media reports about the incident at Natanz and had spoken with Iranian officials about it. The agency did not elaborate. However, Natanz has been targeted by sabotage in the past. The Stuxnet computer virus, discovered in 2010 and widely believed to be a joint US-Israeli creation, once disrupted and destroyed Iranian centrifuges at Natanz amid an earlier period of Western fears about Tehran's program.

Natanz suffered a mysterious explosion at its advanced centrifuge assembly plant in July that authorities later described as sabotage. Iran now is rebuilding that facility deep inside a nearby mountain. Iran also blamed Israel for the November killing of a scientist who began the country's military nuclear program decades earlier.

Multiple Israeli media outlets reported Sunday that an Israeli cyberattack caused the blackout in Natanz. Public broadcaster Kan said the Mossad was behind the attack. Channel 12 TV cited "experts" as estimating the attack shut down entire sections of the facility.

While the reports offered no sourcing for their information, Israeli media maintains a close relationship with the country's military and intelligence agencies.

"It's hard for me to believe it's a coincidence," Yoel Guzansky, a senior fellow at Tel Aviv's Institute for National Security Studies, said of Sunday's blackout. "If it's not a coincidence, and that's a big if, someone is trying to send a message that 'we can limit Iran's advance and we have red lines.'"

It also sends a message that Iran's most sensitive nuclear site is "penetrable," he added.

Netanyahu later Sunday night toasted his security chiefs, with the head of the Mossad, Yossi Cohen, at his side on the eve of his country's Independence Day.

"It is very difficult to explain what we have accomplished," Netanyahu said of Israel's history, saying the country had been transformed from a position of weakness into a "world power."

Israel typically doesn't discuss operations carried out by its Mossad intelligence agency or specialized military units. In recent weeks, Netanyahu repeatedly has described Iran as the major threat to his country as he struggles to hold onto power after multiple elections and while facing corruption charges.

Speaking at the event Sunday night, Netanyahu urged his security chiefs to "continue in this direction, and to continue to keep the sword of David in your hands," using an expression referring to Jewish strength.

Meeting with Austin on Sunday, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said Israel viewed America as an ally against all threats, including Iran.

"The Tehran of today poses a strategic threat to international security, to the entire Middle East and to the state of Israel," Gantz said. "And we will work closely with our American allies to ensure that any new agreement with Iran will secure the vital interests of the world, of the United States, prevent a dangerous arms race in our region, and protect the state of Israel."

The Israeli army's chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, also appeared to reference Iran.

The Israeli military's "operations in the Middle East are not hidden from the eyes of the enemy," Kochavi said. "They are watching us, seeing (our) abilities and weighing their steps with caution."

On Saturday, Iran announced it had launched a chain of 164 IR-6 centrifuges at the plant. Officials also began testing the IR-9 centrifuge, which they say will enrich uranium 50 times faster than Iran's first-generation centrifuges, the IR-1. The nuclear deal limited Iran to using only IR-1s for enrichment.

Since then-President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in 2018, Tehran has abandoned all the limits of its uranium stockpile. It now enriches up to 20 percent purity, a technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90 percent. Iran maintains its atomic program is for peaceful purposes.

The nuclear deal had granted Tehran sanctions relief in exchange for ensuring its stockpile never swelled to the point of allowing Iran to obtain an atomic bomb if it chose.

On Tuesday, an Iranian cargo ship said to serve as a floating base for Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard forces off the coast of Yemen was struck by an explosion, likely from a limpet mine. Iran has blamed Israel for the blast. That attack escalated a long-running shadow war in Mideast waterways targeting shipping in the region.



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Iran orders 10-day shutdown amid 4th wave of coronavirus pandemicIran boosts nuclear program in snub to US

[Libya launches COVID-19 vaccination drive after delays](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2021-04-10 16:11

TRIPOLI, April 10 (Reuters) – Libya’s new unity government launched a long-delayed COVID-19 vaccination programme on Saturday after receiving some 160,000 vaccine doses over the past week, with the prime minister receiving his jab on live television.

While Libya is richer than its neighbours due to oil exports, the country’s healthcare system has been strained by years of political turmoil and violence, and it has struggled to cope during the pandemic.

Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh called it a “blessed day” in the fight against COVID-19 after receiving his shot, without saying which vaccine he had been given. At least 100,000 of the doses that arrived this week were Russia’s Sputnik V vaccine.

Dbeibeh’s interim Government of National Unity was sworn in last month after emerging through a UN-facilitated process with a mandate to unify the country, improve state services and oversee the run-up to a national election in December.

Dbeibeh’s government has framed the delivery of vaccines and the national roll-out as evidence that it is improving the lives of ordinary Libyans after replacing two warring administrations that ruled in the east and west of the country.

“Through the political consultations and the efforts of the prime minister, the vaccine is available,” said Health Minister Ali Al-Zanati, who has said previously the government had so far ordered enough doses to inoculate 1.4 million of the country’s more than six million people.

Libya’s National Centre for Disease Control has said more than 400,000 people have registered for vaccination in more than 400 centres around the country.

Libya has recorded more than 166,000 coronavirus cases and nearly 3,000 deaths, though UN envoys have said the true figures are likely far higher.

“I feel sorry that the vaccine arrived late in Libya after thousands were infected. But better late than never,” said Ali al-Hadi, a shop owner, adding that his wife had been sick with COVID-19 and recovered.

Many Libyans fear the vaccination campaign could be marred by political infighting or favouritism after years of unrest.

“We hope the Health Ministry will steer away from political conflicts so that services can reach patients,” said housewife Khawla Muhammad, 33.



Egypt, Tunisia presidents: 'We fully support' Libyan peace process
Libya gets 57,000 AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine doses from COVAX