

Three-Quarters of Boeing 737 Jets Grounded

NAIROBI (Dispatches) -- Boeing Co should ground all of its 737 MAX 8 jets until it is established that they are safe to fly, the chief executive of Ethiopian Airlines told the BBC on Wednesday.

Tewolde Gebremariam spoke in Ethiopia's capital Addis Ababa following the crash of his airline's 737 MAX 8 on Sunday, killing all 157 people onboard. Roughly three-quarters of the 737 Max 8 aircraft in the world had been pulled from use by airlines and aviation regulators on Wednesday after the model crashed twice in just five months.

U.S. Drops Reference to 'Israeli-Occupied' Golan

OCCUPIED AL-Quds (Dispatches) -- The U.S. State Department changed its usual description of the Golan Heights from "Israeli-occupied" to "Israeli-controlled" in an annual global human rights report released Wednesday.

Tel Aviv has been lobbying U.S. President Donald Trump to recognize the regime's sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which it captured in 1981. A separate section in the report, on the West Bank and Gaza Strip -- areas that Israel also seized in 1967 -- also did not refer to those territories as being "occupied" or under "occupation."

**Viewpoint**

## Western Attempts to Constitutionalize Spurious Saudi Clan, a Deceit

## Jury Prize Goes to Iranian Actress at Dublin Film Festival

## Iran's Esteghlal Held, Persepolis Lose at AFC Champions League

## White House Opposes Saudi Yemen War Powers Resolution

## Venezuela Gives U.S. Diplomats 72 Hours to Leave

CARACAS (Dispatches) -- Relations between the United States and Venezuela appeared all but collapsed after Caracas set a 72-hour deadline for American diplomats to leave the country and the State Department said it was removing all U.S. embassy staff.

Although the two nations did not formally sever diplomatic ties, the move signaled growing tensions as the Trump administration and its allies sought to oust Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and install their favorite in his place.

"The presence on Venezuelan soil of these officials represents a risk for the peace, unity and stability of the country," the government said in a statement.

In a statement, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo said he had ordered all remaining U.S. diplomatic staff to leave Venezuela this week because their presence had "become a constraint on U.S. policy."

The Maduro government said it had ordered U.S. diplomats to leave after negotiations to establish a diplomatic interests section -- a kind of de facto embassy -- had collapsed.

U.S. special representative for Venezuela Elliott Abrams appeared to ignore the order, brazenly stating that the Trump administration did not recognize Maduro as president and so his government could not hold talks or expel diplomats.

"We don't believe the regime has the ability to tell us when to leave, and we don't believe [it] is able to provide security" to U.S. diplomatic personnel, Abrams told reporters at the State Department.

In a series of interviews, however, Pompeo said he had ordered the withdrawal to protect U.S. diplomats.

The White House has officially recognized Venezuela's opposition leader, Juan Guaido, as interim president and proactively tried to topple Maduro in a blatant example of foreign intervention in a sovereign nation's domestic affairs.

The U.S. escalation comes as Venezuela is battling its seventh day of widespread blackouts that have brought new suffering to a country already in crisis. Schools, banks and businesses were closed while hospitals and other critical facilities struggled to provide services.

Maduro accused U.S. agents

and his political opponents of causing the blackouts with a cyber-attack. The Venezuelan attorney general's office opened a criminal investigation into whether Guaido was responsible.

Guaido declared a "state of alarm" over the blackouts and other shortages. He called for more of the street unrest.

China offered on Wednesday to help Venezuela restore its power grid. Speaking in Beijing, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Lu Kang said China had noted reports that the power grid had gone down due to a hacking attack.

"China is deeply concerned about this," Lu said. "China hopes that the Venezuelan side can discover the reason for this issue as soon as possible and resume normal power supply and social order. China is willing to provide help and technical support to restore Venezuela's power grid."

Power returned to many parts of the country on Tuesday, including some areas that had not had electricity since last Thursday, according to witnesses and social media.

But power was still out in parts of the capital of Caracas and the western region near the border with Colombia. Information Minister Jorge Rodriguez said power had been restored in the "vast majority" of the country.

Maduro has blamed Washington for organizing what he said was a sophisticated cyber attack on Venezuela's hydroelectric power operations.

The latest diplomatic clash follows dozens of trade and finance sanctions that Washington has imposed on Maduro's government, adding to the country's economic woes.

Abrams said on Tuesday the United States was preparing to impose "very significant" Venezuela-related sanctions against financial institutions in the coming days.

Venezuela, which sits on the world's largest known oil reserves, has become a priority cause for the Trump administration, in part because of Cuba's widespread influence there.

Beyond sanctions and political isolation, the White House has few clear options. Officials may be waiting for sanctions imposed on Venezuela's all-important petroleum company to bite.

## Ayatollah Sistani Hails Iraq's Friends, Welcomes Better Ties



*Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (2nd L), Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif (2nd R) and Chief Staff of the Iranian President Mahmoud Vaezi (R) listen to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani during a meeting in Najaf, March 13, 2019.*

NAJAF (Dispatches) -- Iranian President Hassan Rouhani here on Wednesday held talks with Iraq's top Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani on the final day of his landmark visit to the neighboring Arab state.

Rouhani sat down with Ayatollah Sistani at his residence after visiting the shrine of Imam Ali (AS) -- the first Imam of Shia Muslims.

During the meeting, the Iranian president briefed Ayatollah Sistani on his meetings with Iraqi officials

as well as agreements about further promotion of ties.

Sistani welcomed "any steps to strengthen Iraq's relations with its neighbors ... based on respect for the sovereignty of the countries and no interference in domestic affairs," a statement from his office said.

He also hailed the great sacrifices made by the Iraqis in the fight against Daesh and praised the role of Iraq's friends in defeating the terrorist group.

"The most important challenges

facing Iraq are fighting corruption, improving services and keeping weapons in the hands of the state and its security services," the statement added.

Rouhani is the first Iranian president ever to have met with Ayatollah Sistani.

Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif and Ambassador to Baghdad Iraj Masjedi were also present at the meeting.

Grand Ayatollah Sistani is known as the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shia

Muslims and one of the most senior clerics in Shia Islam. His fatwas have significantly contributed to shaping Iraq's political structure.

In June 2014 -- when the Daesh group unleashed its campaign of terror and destruction in Iraq -- Ayatollah Sistani called on his followers to rush to the national army's help in the fight against the terrorist outfit.

The fatwa helped bring together Shia fighters, Sunni tribesmen as well as Christian and Izadi volunteers under the umbrella of Hashd al-Sha'abi to reverse Daesh's gains and ultimately end the group's territorial rule in Iraq in late 2017.

Later on Wednesday, the Iranian president was expected to meet with other senior officials and clerics in Najaf.

Rouhani visited the shrines of Imam Hussein (AS), the third Shia Imam, and his half-brother Abbas ibn Ali, in the holy city of Karbala on Tuesday.

Heading a high-ranking delegation, Rouhani began his official Iraq visit on Monday, which featured several meetings and the signing of memorandums of understanding for the expansion of bilateral ties in various fields.

In a joint statement, the two neighboring states hailed Rouhani's Iraq visit as a "turning point" in efforts to strengthen "strategic" cooperation based on non-interference in each other's internal affairs.

## Official Warns Over 'Suspicious Nuclear Projects' in Region

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- A senior Iranian security official on Wednesday warned regional states over spending money on "suspicious nuclear projects", saying such threats would force Tehran to revise its defense strategy.

Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, did not name the countries - but a proposed transfer of U.S. nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia has raised concerns in Tehran.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly confirmed that Iran's nuclear work is entirely peaceful, and Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has issued a religious decree against the development of nuclear weapons.

"Some countries in the region are spending their petro-dollars on suspicious nuclear projects that can endanger the security of the region and the world," Shamkhani was quoted as saying by Fars news agency.

"New threats like this will force us to revise our strategy based on the nature and geography of new threats, and predict the requirements of our country and armed forces," he added.

Shamkhani said Tehran was watching the "unusual activities" of countries in the region that he said were supporting militant groups.

Iranian Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif hit out at the U.S. hypocrisy last month for trying to wreck Iran's nuclear program while seeking to sell nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia.

Iran said on Wednesday that it would respond firmly to any Israeli naval action against its oil shipments, a week after the occupying regime's prime minister said its vessels could act against Iranian oil "smuggling".

U.S. President Donald Trump last year quit a nuclear deal with Iran and reimposed all sanctions, aiming to cut Tehran's oil exports to zero. Netanyahu told

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## President Erdogan: Netanyahu a 'Tyrant' Who Massacres Palestinians

ANKARA (Dispatches) -- Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Wednesday blasted Israeli premier Benjamin Netanyahu as a "tyrant" who "massacred" Palestinian children as the two leaders exchanged insults in their latest spat.

Erdogan was responding to comments from Netanyahu earlier on Wednesday slamming the Turkish leader as a "dictator" and "a joke", after a day of tit-for-tat exchanges between them.

Turkey and the occupying regime of Israel have tense relations and Erdogan is a vocal critic of Zionist policies. The two leaders have exchanged barbs in the past over Gaza.

"Hey Netanyahu, behave yourself. You are a tyrant, you are a tyrant who massacred seven-year-old Palestinian children," Erdogan told a rally of supporters in the Turkish capital Ankara.

Erdogan also referred to clashes

between Israeli police and Palestinians in Jerusalem al-Quds, denouncing Zionist forces for entering a "holy place".

"Do not provoke. Look, we have not oppressed any of the Jews in this country. We have not done anything you did to any synagogues here. Don't provoke us. We will not fall into this trap."

The latest exchange came after Netanyahu had called Israel the nation-state of "the Jewish people" only, not all its citizens. That prompted Turkey on Tuesday to condemn the Zionist leader for "blatant racism".

Netanyahu struck back in a statement from his office early Wednesday. "Turkey's dictator Erdogan attacks Israel's democracy while Turkish journalists and judges fill his prisons," it read. "What a joke!"

Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin was swift to respond on Twitter, saying Netanyahu had

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