

GENEVA (Reuters) -- United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned on Monday that white supremacy and neo-Nazi movements are becoming a "transnational threat" and have exploited the coronavirus pandemic to boost their support. Addressing the UN Human Rights Council, Guterres said the danger of hate-driven groups was growing daily. "White supremacy and neo-Nazi movements are more than domestic terror threats. They are becoming a transnational threat," he told the Geneva forum. Without naming states, Guterres added: "Today, these extremist movements represent the number one internal security threat in several countries."

BRUSSELS (Reuters) -- The European Union on Monday imposed sanctions on 19 senior Venezuelan officials, lawmakers and members of the security forces in response to December's legislative election that the bloc claimed was rigged in favor of President Nicolas Maduro. Allies of Maduro won almost all of the legislature's seats in a vote that was also disavowed by the United States. EU foreign ministers approved the sanctions on Monday, taking the total number of Venezuelans black-listed by the bloc to 55.

Viewpoint

Are Trade Transactions Worth with Fraudulent Regimes?

U.S. Reaches Dark Milestone of 500,000 COVID Deaths

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The U.S. recorded Monday a once-unthinkable tally: 500,000 people lost to the coronavirus.

A year into the pandemic, the running total of lives lost is roughly the population of Kansas City, Missouri, and just shy of the size of Atlanta. The figure compiled by Johns Hopkins University surpasses the number of people who died in 2019 of chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, Alzheimer's, flu and pneumonia combined.

"It's nothing like we have ever been through in the last 102 years, since the 1918 influenza pandemic," the nation's top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, said on CNN's "State of the Union."

The U.S. virus death toll reached 400,000 on Jan. 19 in the waning hours in office for President Donald Trump, whose handling of the crisis was judged by public health experts to be a singular failure.

The nation passed this next grim milestone on Monday. President Joe Biden was to mark the U.S. crossing 500,000 lives lost from COVID-19 with a moment of silence and candle lighting ceremony at the White House.

Biden was to deliver remarks at sunset to honor the dead, the White House said.

The first known deaths from the virus in the U.S. happened in early February 2020, both of them in Santa Clara County, California. It took four months to reach the first 100,000 dead. The toll hit 200,000 deaths in Septem-

ber and 300,000 in December. Then it took just over a month to go from 300,000 to 400,000 and about two months to climb from 400,000 to the brink of 500,000.

Joyce Willis of Las Vegas is among the countless Americans who lost family members during the pandemic. Her husband, Anthony Willis, died Dec. 28, followed by her mother-in-law in early January.

There were anxious calls from the ICU when her husband was hospitalized. She was unable to see him before he died because she, too, had the virus and could not visit.

"They are gone. Your loved one is gone, but you are still alive," Willis said. "It's like you still have to get up every morning. You have to take care of your kids and make a living. There is no way around it. You just have to move on."

Then came a nightmare scenario of caring for her father-in-law while dealing with grief, arranging funerals, paying bills, helping her children navigate online school and figuring out how to go back to work as an occupational therapist.

Her father-in-law, a Vietnam vet, also contracted the virus. He also suffered from respiratory issues and died on Feb. 8. The family isn't sure if COVID-19 contributed to his death.

"Some days I feel OK and other days I feel like I'm strong and I can do this," she said. "And then other days it just hits me."

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Lawmakers Protest Government Agreement With IAEA

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Iranian lawmakers protested on Monday against a government decision to permit "necessary" monitoring by the UN nuclear agency for up to three months, saying the move broke a law mandating an end to the agency's snap inspections this week.

"The government has no right to decide and act arbitrarily," said Mojtaba Zolnour, chairman of the parliament's national security committee. "This arrangement is an insult to the parliament."

Iran has been gradually reducing the level of its compliance with a 2015 nuclear pact since then U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from it in 2018 and reimposed sanctions.

Under the deal, Tehran agreed to voluntarily implement the Additional Protocol, which allows the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to carry out short-notice inspections.

But Iran's parliament passed a law last year obliging the govern-

ment to end implementation of the Protocol from Tuesday if U.S. sanctions are not lifted.

The UN nuclear agency on Sunday said it reached a deal with Iran to cushion the blow of Iran's reduced compliance and its refusal to permit short-notice inspections.

Under the new agreement, while the number of the IAEA inspectors on the ground will remain the same, Iran has said it will withhold footage recorded by cameras at some of its facilities from the IAEA for the time being, government officials said.

If Washington lifts the sanctions in that period of up to three months, Iran's IAEA envoy Kazem Gharibabadi tweeted, the Islamic Republic will share the data with the agency.

"Otherwise the data will be destroyed by Tehran forever," Gharibabadi said on Twitter.

But several prominent lawmakers criticized the agreement, accusing

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Ayatollah Jannati Re-Elected as Head of Experts Assembly



Iranian Athletes Preparing for World Deaf Wrestling Championship

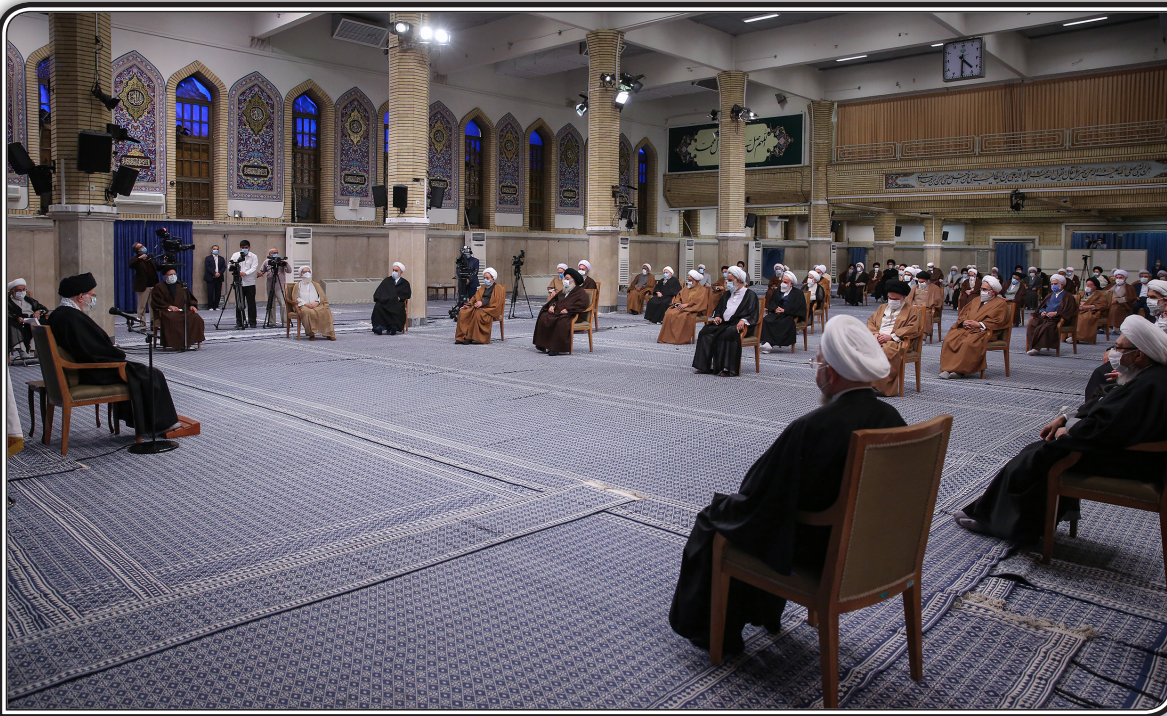


U.S.-Backed Mililitants Steal 140,000 bpd of Syrian Oil: Report



May Go As Far As 60% Enrichment

Leader: Iran Will Not Back Down on Nuclear Right



Ayatollah Khamenei meets members of the Assembly of Experts in Tehran, Feb. 22, 2021.

TEHRAN (Dispatches) -- Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on Monday said Iran will not back down on its right to peaceful nuclear technology and will continue its progress in line with its present and future needs.

"Like other issues, the Islamic Republic will not back down on the nuclear right and will continue to march forward on the basis of the country's present and future expediencies," Ayatollah Khamenei told members of the Assembly

of Experts here.

"Based on the interests and needs of the country, it will even go as far as 60 percent enrichment if it is needed."

The Leader said what prevents the Islamic Republic from building nuclear weapons is the Islamic way of thinking and its principles, which prohibit production of nuclear or chemical weapons used to massacre ordinary people.

Referring to the massacre of 220,000 innocent people in the U.S. nuclear bombardment of two

Japanese cities during World War II and bombardment of Yemeni people, their markets, hospitals and schools by Western-made warplanes, the Leader said, "Massacring civilians and innocent people is the way of Americans and Western countries, but the Islamic Republic does not believe in this method and, therefore, never thinks about nuclear weapons."

"In the meantime, that international Zionist clown, who keeps saying that 'we will not allow Iran to build nuclear weapons', must

know that if the Islamic Republic had any decision to produce nuclear weapons, he and those bigger than him could not prevent it," the Leader said, apparently referring to Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu.

Ayatollah Khamenei said the nuclear issue is a pretext for the enemies of the Islamic Republic.

"They are even opposed to us having access to conventional weapons, because they want to strip Iran of the components of power," the Leader said.

Ayatollah Khamenei warned that Western powers want to make Iran reliant on their assistance for nuclear energy, so that they can take advantage of our need as a means for bullying and extortion.

"However, we are determined to acquire nuclear capabilities proportionate to the country's needs and this is why the level of Iran's enrichment will not remain limited to 20 percent and the country will take action to any extent that it needs."

"For example, to achieve nuclear propulsion or for other purposes, we may even increase uranium enrichment to 60 percent purity," Ayatollah Khamenei said.

"Of course, a contract has been signed for several years. If they comply with it, we will also comply until those several years are over, but Western countries are well aware that we do not seek nuclear weapons," the Leader added.

Biden's Ban on Arms Sales to Saudi Arabia a Ruse

RIYADH (Dispatches) -- President Joe Biden's vaunted freeze on arms sales to Saudi Arabia did not see the light of the day as the kingdom signed an agreement on Sunday with U.S. contractor Lockheed Martin to form a joint venture.

The deal was announced by Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI), which said it will own 51 percent of the venture, as it seeks to boost the kingdom's military capabilities.

"The joint venture is aimed at developing localization capabilities through the transfer of technology and knowledge and training of Saudi nationals to manufacture products and provide services to the kingdom's armed forces," SAMI said in a statement.

Saudi Arabia has long been a major global arms importer. But some Western countries claim they now refuse to sell weapons to the kingdom over its war on neighboring Yemen which in the throes of what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Saudi Arabia six-year war on Yemen has left at least 120,000 people dead and 80 percent of the population in need of aid. The U.S. support to the kingdom began in 2015 when Biden was serving as vice-president to Barack Obama.

Earlier this month, Biden's administration claimed that it was ending support for Saudi Arabia's offensive operations in Yemen's devastating war. Biden's administration also said it was reviewing weapons sales to the kingdom.

Only on Saturday U.S. Congressman Ro Khanna, a member of Biden's Democratic Party and a long-time critic of the Yemen war, hailed the president's pronouncements on Yemen as a "profound and historic shift."

"We're being explicit and bold and open to the Saudis saying, 'no, this is not a war we support'," Khanna said. "Now I think that President Biden has made a clear statement that relationship is no longer what it once was."

But Lockheed Martin's vice president

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Palestinian Court Declares Balfour Declaration Invalid

NABLUS (Dispatches) -- A Palestinian court has declared as invalid the Balfour Declaration, a document issued by the British government in 1917 that paved the way for the creation of Israel, as it violates the rules of international law.

The Court of First Instance in the city of Nablus in the occupied West Bank on Sunday also held Britain legally responsible for the consequences of the Balfour Declaration, demanding an apology to the Palestinians.

The Balfour Declaration came in the form of a letter from Britain's then-foreign secretary, Arthur Balfour, addressed to Lionel Walter Rothschild, a figurehead of the British Jewish community. It was published on November 2, 1917.

The declaration was made during World War I (1914-1918), and included in the terms of the British Mandate for Palestine after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.

It is widely seen as the precursor to the 1948 Palestinian Nakba, when Zionist armed paramilitary

groups, who were trained and created to fight side by side with the British in World War II, forcibly expelled more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homeland, captured huge swathes of the Arab land, and proclaimed existence of Israel.

The lawsuit was filed by Palestinian lawyers in October last year on behalf of the National Assembly of Independents, the International Foundation for the Follow-up of the Rights of the Palestinian People, and the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate, against the British government.

"Britain and its foreign minister at the time, Arthur James Balfour, from whom the 'Balfour Declaration' was issued at the time, neither owned Palestine nor did they have the right to determine the fate of its people," the court ruled Sunday.

Britain's acts violate "the rules of international law, local laws, international norms and the decisions of the United Nations League and

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