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Shin Bet exposed and arrested Hamas Gaza spy network in Tel Aviv

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Shin Bet exposes Hamas spy network in Israel

Group reported to record locations of Iron Dome defense system and landing sites of  
Hamas rockets during operation 'Black Belt' in November

Gilad Morag, Yoav Zitun| Published: 01.27.20 , 20:14

The Shin Bet security agency announced on Monday it successfully exposed and arrested a Hamas spy network that operated within Israeli territory.

After a weeks-long investigation, the Shin Bet said that members of Hamas's military wing recruited Israeli citizens to gather intelligence on security matters that will serve in future terrorist activities against Israeli targets.

The espionage ring recorded locations of Iron Dome defense system and landing sites of Hamas rockets during operation 'Black Belt' in November.

The court indicted both suspects, both of them Israeli Arab citizens.

One of the suspects, 34-year-old Rajeb Daka from Lod, was indicted on charges of contacting a foreign agent, aiding the enemy during war, membership in a terrorist organization and aiding a terrorist organization.

The second suspect, 30-year-old Rami Al-Amudi from Tel Aviv, was indicted on charges of contacting a foreign agent and treason.

Amudi was born to an Israeli mother and Gazan father and lived in the Gaza Strip with his father's family until November 2019, when he moved to live in Tel Aviv. According to the Shin Bet, Amudi reestablished ties with his mother two years ago and has been working with her to receive Israeli documentation and live with her in Israel.

Daka, also born to an Israeli mother from Lod, has been working on Israeli documentation since 2017 on grounds of his mother's citizenship. Since his move to Israel, he visited his wife and five children in the Gaza Strip every few months.

The Shin Bet said Hamas "took advantage" of the fact that these Israeli civilians could enter the Gaza Strip to visit family and recruited them to the terror group's military wing.

01.27.20

Trump unveiled the Kushner, Berkowitz, Greenblatt peace plan to Netanyahu & Gantz Tuesday

01.27.20

Trump confirms peace plan unveiled Tuesday

Prime Minister Netanyahu arrives at the White House for a meeting with Trump, Gantz to meet with POTUS later in the day; plan revealed in spite of Palestinian objection

Itamar Eichner,Reuters| Updated: 01.27.20 , 19:41

U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed on Monday his proposed Middle East peace plan will be unveiled on Tuesday despite strong objection on the Palestinian side.

Sitting down with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office, Trump said his plan "makes a lot of sense for everybody."

Trump declined to disclose details of the plan and how it would be good for Palestinians but he still insisted that "it's something they should want."

Trump spoke at the beginning of his meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House.

Palestinians have refused to talk with the Trump administration in opposition to the president's pro-Israeli policies such as moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv.

Palestinians fear the plan will dash their hopes for an independent state in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. Palestinian leaders say they were not invited to Washington and that no peace plan can work without them.

"They probably won't want it initially," Trump said. But I think in the end they will ... It's very good for them. In fact it's overly good to them. So we'll see what happens. Now without them, we don't do the deal and that's okay."

"We think there's a very good chance that they're going to want this," he added.

After meeting Netanyahu, Trump was to meet Benny Gantz, the head of the centrist Blue & White Party.

On Tuesday, Trump will deliver joint remarks with Netanyahu at the White House to outline his plan, which is aimed at generating momentum toward resolving one of the world's most intractable problems.

The two days of foreign policy meetings are providing Trump with a contrast from the trial in the Republican-led Senate that is weighing articles of impeachment against him approved by the Democratic-led House of Representatives.

But whether it truly will jumpstart the long-stalled effort to bring Israelis and Palestinians together is far from certain.

Palestinians have roundly denounced a \$50-billion economic revival plan it set forth last July to lift the Palestinian and neighboring Arab state economies.

The White House hope was that if Trump could get the support of both Netanyahu and Gantz for the plan, it would help provide some momentum. A U.S. official said Trump wants to know both Netanyahu and Gantz are on board with the plan before announcing it.

Having both leaders present helps take the politics out of the effort, said a U.S. source familiar with internal deliberations.

"The rationale ... is it depoliticizes this to the point that, no matter what happens on March 2, the two leaders of the two largest parties can potentially be supportive," the source said.

The Trump plan is the product of three years' effort by senior advisers Jared Kushner and Avi Berkowitz, as well as Jason Greenblatt, who left the government last autumn.

Trump last year had hoped to release his secret proposal aimed at triggering negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians but was forced to delay it as Netanyahu struggled to form a governing coalition.

The proposal, more than 50 pages long, aims to take on some of the most difficult issues separating the two, such as the status of Jerusalem. Palestinians want the city's eastern part as their future capital.

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01.27.20

Islamic State urges attacks against Israel and Jews to thwart Trump peace plan

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Islamic State urges attacks against Israel and Jews to thwart Trump peace plan

'I urge you to go against Jewish settlements; make them your experimental field for your weapons,' said a recording, whose speaker's identity could not yet be verified

Reuters, Daniel Salami | Updated: 01.27.20 , 17:26

The Islamist militant group Islamic State purportedly urged its fighters and Muslims in general to attack Jews and Jewish settlements in an audio recording released on Monday, that is said to feature the voice of spokesman Abu Hamzah Al-Quraishi.

In the recording, the voice said the group wanted to make the "Deal of the Century" fail, referring to U.S. President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, expected to be unveiled later on Monday.

The message was released by the group's al-Furqan media.

In a recording, the speaker said that the U.S. and other countries thought that if they eliminated IS leader Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi, the entire organization would be liquidated. "But we are still here and preparing," said the recording, "to start a new phase - hitting Israeli targets."

Appeals to activists of the organization were heard, "and especially to those in Syria and Sinai."

"I urge you to go out and work against the Jewish settlements and markets. Make them your experimental field for your weapons and your chemicals and missiles," the recording was heard to say.

Referring to the Trump peace plan, the recording said: "Muslims living in Palestine, you will be at the forefront of the fight against Jews."

"You will be at the forefront of destroying their schemes and their 'Deal of the Century'," the recording added.

01.26.20

Palestinians threaten riots if Trump deal goes through

01.26.20

### Palestinians threaten riots if Trump deal goes through

Palestinian leadership warns of 'serious consequences' for the region if proposed plan is implemented, while Arab MK Ayman Odeh says so-called 'Deal of the Century' is Trump's bid to help Netanyahu in upcoming elections at Palestinians' expense  
Elior Levy | Published: 01.26.20 , 18:39

Palestinian lawmakers backed by President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party, said Sunday that the day U.S. President Donald Trump presents his Middle East peace plan would be a "Day of Rage" with riots and protests in the West Bank.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue & White party leader Benny Gantz flew to Washington earlier Sunday for the presentation of what Trump himself has dubbed the "Deal of the Century" - his administration's outline for peace between Israel and the Palestinians - and talks with the American administration.

"The 'Deal of the Century' will not pass without the Palestinian people's consent," said Abbas' office in an official statement.

"The Palestinian leadership, with support of the people, will hamper all attempts to bring to an [unsatisfactory] end the Palestinian issue, as has done numerous times in the past," the statement said.

"The Palestinian leadership will conduct a series of meetings with officials and will announce its determined refusal to any concessions regarding Jerusalem," the statement said, referring to leaked details of the plan, which apparently hands sovereignty over the whole of the city to Israel, despite a Palestinian demand to have the capital of a future state in East Jerusalem.

"All possibilities are looked into, among them the fate of the Palestinian Authority," the statement said.

"Every decision will receive Arab and International support."

The statement warned of "serious consequences" for the whole region if the peace plan harms the Palestinian people's "sovereignty or identity."

"The announcement of the plan is nothing but an attempt to help Netanyahu and Trump in their personal crises at the expense of the Palestinians," the statement said, referring to the legal woes of the two leaders.

"We call upon our people to rally around its leadership in this harsh historical reality."

According to details of the Trump outline published on Sunday, the peace plan states that during a four-year transition period, the status of all territories under the Israeli-ruled Area C of the West Bank will remain unchanged.

According to the leaked details, the plan allows Israel to annex 30% to 40% of Area C, while the Palestinians will have control over about 40% of Areas A and B.

Under the terms of the 1994 Oslo Accords, Area C is under full Israeli security and civilian control, Area B is under Israeli security and Palestinian civilian rule and Area A is under full Palestinian security and civilian control.

At the end of the four-year transition period, the Palestinians will be able to declare an independent state, but with limited powers. It will be completely demilitarized, have no

control over its aerial space or border crossings and be unable to form alliances with other countries.

Also Sunday, Joint List party head Ayman Odeh described the peace plan as an "annexation plan."

"Why do you think it was announced at this time?" said Odeh. "It's simply because Trump wants to help Netanyahu [in the March 2 elections in Israel]."

"This is what happens when one corrupt politician wants to help another corrupt politician. The real deal is between Trump and Netanyahu. Peace should be between two peoples and not two crooks."

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01.26.20

Epidemic of the newly-identified corona-virus has claimed 56 people, of 1,975 cases

01.26.20

vel' to the country where the epidemic of the newly-identified virus has so far claimed the lives of at least 56 people, with a total of 1,975 reported cases

Ynet| Published: 01.26.20 , 14:35

Israel on Sunday issued travel warning to China following an outbreak of coronavirus in the country which so far claimed the lives of at least 56 people.

The new virus appears to have accelerated its spread in China, with the latest figures reported Sunday morning cover the previous 24 hours and mark an increase of 15 deaths and 688 cases for a total of 1,975 infections. The case of acute respiratory syndrome has already been confirmed abroad, including in the United States, France, Australia and Malaysia.

"As part of the assessment of the coronavirus conducted at the Health Ministry, it was decided to recommend the public avoids all nonessential travel to China," the ministry said in a statement. "We recommend not to travel to Hubei Province at all and that the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government in the various cities should be monitored in real time."

The statement adds the health system is prepared to deal with the potential cases of the virus should it reach Israeli territory. "The ministry is in constant contact with the World Health Organization and other world's health authorities."

The ministry said if anyone who has travelled to mainland China in the past 14 days experiences the symptoms of the virus - fever and acute diarrhea - should contact their health care provider or get to the emergency room.

The newly-identified coronavirus has created alarm because there are still many unknowns surrounding it, such as how dangerous it is and how easily it spreads between people. It can cause pneumonia, which has been deadly in some cases. China's National Health Commission Minister Ma Xiaowei said the incubation period for the virus can range from one to 14 days, and the virus is infectious during incubation, which was not the case with Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). SARS was a coronavirus that originated in China and killed nearly 800 people globally in 2002 and 2003.

01.25.20

Gantz says will meet Trump separately from Netanyahu

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Gantz says will meet Trump separately from Netanyahu

PM is also travelling to Washington after the 2 leaders had been invited to the White House to discuss the long-delayed Mideast peace plan  
Reuters| Published: 01.25.20 , 22:37

The Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz said on Saturday he had accepted an invitation to meet U.S. President Donald Trump in Washington on Monday to discuss a peace plan for the Middle East.

Gantz is said to meet the American president separately from his main domestic political rival of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is also travelling to Washington to meet Trump.

But Palestinian leaders have warned that no deal can work without them on board. Trump invited both Israeli leaders to hear details of the White House's long-delayed peace plan ahead of an Israeli election in March, the third in less than a year. Israeli political analysts had viewed the U.S. invitation as a pre-election boost to Netanyahu, who heads the right-wing Likud Party and is Israel's longest-serving prime minister.

Gantz, a former general, heads the centrist Blue and White Party. His attendance in Washington had been in doubt, but on Saturday night he said that he had been in contact with senior White House officials for months and that he had decided to go.

"These are fateful times both for Israel's borders and character, as well as its democratic fabric," Gantz said in broadcast remarks.

"The peace plan devised by President Trump will go down in history as a meaningful landmark mapping the way for the different players in the Middle East to finally move forward towards an historical and regional agreement," Gantz added.

Netanyahu also issued a statement on Saturday calling the Trump initiative a "once in history" opportunity.

## POLITICAL ASPECTS

The launch of Trump's plan to end the **decades-long conflict between Israel and the Palestinians** has been delayed numerous times over the past two years.

The political aspects of the peace initiative have been closely guarded. Only the economic proposals, including a \$50 billion investment plan put forward by Trump advisor Jared Kushner, have been announced.

A source familiar with the peace team's thinking said bringing both Netanyahu and Gantz in on the details is aimed at defusing any suggestion that Trump might be favoring one Israeli candidate over another.

Israeli-Palestinian **peace talks collapsed in 2014** and Palestinians have called Trump's proposal dead in the water even before its publication.

The Palestinian leadership said that there had been no communication with the Trump administration.

Following Gantz's announcement that he would go to Washington, Palestine Liberation Organisation executive committee member Wassel Abu Youssef told Reuters:

"Blue and White and Likud are two faces of the same coin. There is an alliance between the U.S. administration and the Israeli parties running into the election."

Speaking in the West Bank city of Ramallah, he added: **"We will not accept the 'Deal of the Century' and there is no power on earth that can force the Palestinian people to concede their rights, represented in establishing their independent state, with Jerusalem as its capital."**

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has said Washington can no longer be regarded as an honest mediator, accusing it of pro-Israel bias. This followed a series of Trump decisions that delighted Israel but dismayed and infuriated Palestinians.

These included recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and slashing hundreds of millions of dollars in humanitarian aid to the Palestinians.

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**01.27.20**

**China strives to contain corona-virus with 17 cities on travel & social lockdown**

**01.27.20**

**China struggles to contain virus as death toll rises to 81**

As coronavirus grows stronger, the country takes more drastic measures to block the spread of epidemic by keeping the population from traveling and socializing; total of **17 cities with more than 50 million people are currently on lockdown**

Associated Press| Updated: **01.27.20** , 10:00



China expanded sweeping efforts on Monday in order to contain a viral disease by extending the Lunar New Year holiday to keep the public at home and avoid spreading infection as the death toll rose to 81.

Hong Kong announced it would bar entry to visitors from the mainland province at the center of the outbreak following a warning the virus's ability to spread was increasing. Travel agencies were ordered to cancel group tours nationwide, adding to the rising economic cost.

Increasingly drastic anti-disease efforts began with the Jan. 22 suspension of plane, train and bus links to Wuhan, a city of 11 million people in central China where the virus was first detected last month. That lockdown has expanded to a total of 17 cities with more than 50 million people in the most far-reaching disease-control measures ever imposed. The end of the Lunar New Year holiday, China's busiest travel season, was pushed back to Sunday from Thursday to "reduce mass gatherings" and "block the spread of the epidemic," a Cabinet statement said.

Tens of millions of people were due to crowd into planes, trains and buses to return to work after visiting their hometowns or tourist sites for the holiday. Schools will postpone reopening until further notice, the Cabinet said.

Also Monday, China's No. 2 leader, Premier Li Keqiang, visited Wuhan to "guide epidemic prevention work," the Cabinet website said. Photos on the site showed Li, in a blue smock and green face mask, meeting hospital employees.

The U.S. Consulate in Wuhan said it was arranging to evacuate its diplomats and some American citizens on Tuesday. The French government said it would fly its citizens in Wuhan to France and quarantine them there. Japan was preparing to fly its nationals out of Wuhan.

French automaker PSA Peugeot Citroen, which has a factory in Wuhan, said it was moving foreign employees and their families by bus to be quarantined in another city. The disruption to business and consumer spending threatens to depress Chinese economic growth that Beijing is struggling to shore up after it sank to a multi-decade low of 6.1% last year. That could spread shockwaves to Asian economies that rely on China as a source of tourists and export markets.

Chinese regulators called on banks and insurers in a statement Monday to support to people and companies affected by the outbreak.

The biggest impact will be on travel, hotels and restaurants but Chinese retail spending, factory output and investment also might suffer if the outbreak and quarantines last, forecasters say.

The outbreak is a "notable downside risk to growth," though it could potentially be a "high impact but short-lived event," said Tommy Wu and Priyanka Kishore of Oxford Economics in a report.

They pointed to the example of the 2003 SARS outbreak, when economic activity plunged but recovered relatively quickly. The impact should be "less severe than SARS because of faster official reaction and "increased transparency," they said.

Abroad, economies including Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore and Philippines with big tourism industries that rely on Chinese travelers "seem most at risk," said Wu and Kishore.

The National Health Commission said 2,744 cases were confirmed by midnight Sunday. There were 24 new deaths on Sunday, all in Hubei province, where Wuhan is located. The youngest patient is a 9-month-old girl in Beijing. China also reported five cases in Hong Kong and two in Macao.

South Korea confirmed its fourth case Monday. Scattered cases also have been confirmed in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, the U.S., Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Nepal, France, Canada and Australia.

The U.S. has confirmed cases in Washington state, Chicago, southern California and Arizona.

China's health minister, Ma Xiaowei, said the country was entering a "crucial stage, as it seems like the ability of the virus to spread is getting stronger."

President Xi Jinping has called the outbreak a grave situation and said the government was stepping restrictions on travel and public gatherings while rushing medical staff and supplies to Wuhan.

The epidemic has revived memories of the 2002-03 SARS outbreak that originated in China and killed nearly 800 people.

Then, Chinese authorities were criticized for reacting slowly and failing to disclose information. The government has responded more aggressively to the latest outbreak.

The National Health Commission said anyone traveling from Wuhan is required to register with community health stations and quarantine themselves at home for 14 days -- the virus' maximum incubation period.

Hong Kong announced it would bar entry to travelers from Hubei, starting Monday.

Hong Kong residents returning from the area will be allowed to the territory but were told to quarantine themselves at home.

Two of Hong Kong's most popular tourist attractions, Hong Kong Disneyland and Ocean Park, closed.

Also Sunday, Wuhan banned most vehicle use, including private cars, in downtown areas. The city will assign 6,000 taxis to neighborhoods to help people get around if they need to.

Wuhan is building two hospitals, one with 1,500 beds and another with 1,000, for the growing number of patients. The first is scheduled to be finished next week.

The National Health Commission said it is sending extra medical teams to Wuhan. The Chinese military dispatched 450 medical staff, some with experience in past outbreaks including SARS and Ebola.

The virus is from the coronavirus family that includes the common cold but also more severe illnesses like SARS and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome. The new virus causes cold- and flu-like symptoms, including cough and fever, and in more severe cases, shortness of breath and pneumonia.

01.26.20

Virus death toll in China rises to 56 as U.S. prepares evacuation

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Virus death toll in China rises to 56 as U.S. prepares evacuation

President Xi calls outbreak 'grave situation'; government steps up efforts to restrict travel and public gatherings while rushing medical staff and supplies to Wuhan, which remains on lockdown

Associated Press| Published: 01.26.20 , 09:12

The new virus accelerated its spread in China with 56 deaths so far, and the U.S. Consulate in the epicenter of the outbreak, the central city of Wuhan, announced Sunday it will evacuate its personnel and some private citizens aboard a charter flight.

Chinese President Xi Jinping called the outbreak a grave situation, and the government stepped up efforts to restrict travel and public gatherings while rushing medical staff and supplies to Wuhan, which remains on lockdown.

Anyone traveling from Wuhan is now required to register with community health stations and quarantine themselves at home for 14 days, according to an order from the National Health Commission.

The latest figures reported Sunday morning cover the previous 24 hours and mark an increase of 15 deaths and 688 cases for a total of 1,975 infections.

The government also reported five cases in Hong Kong, two in Macao and three in Taiwan. Small numbers of cases have been found in Thailand, Japan, South Korea, the U.S., Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Nepal, France and Australia.

Canada said it discovered its first case, the man in his 50s who recently flew from Wuhan to Guangzhou, China, and then on to Toronto.

A notice from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing said there would be limited capacity to transport U.S. citizens on the Tuesday flight from Wuhan that will proceed directly to San Francisco. It said that in the event there are not enough seats, priority will be given to individuals "at greater risk from coronavirus."

The French Consulate also was considering the evacuation of its nationals from the city. It said it's working on arranging a bus service to help French citizens leave Wuhan.

French automaker PSA Group said it will evacuate its employees from Wuhan, quarantine them and then bring them to France. The Foreign Ministry said it was working on "eventual options" to evacuate French citizens from Wuhan "who want to leave." It didn't elaborate.

An Ethiopian student in Wuhan told The Associated Press that it's becoming difficult to buy food and the situation was worsening.

"There are more than 100 Ethiopian students who are studying in Wuhan, and 300 in Hubei province," said the student, who spoke on condition of anonymity for his safety.

"We fear that we will be sick soon. Our school didn't arrange anything ... (other than) giving us masks." He did not say which school.

Also Sunday, two of Hong Kong's biggest attractions, Hong Kong Disneyland and Ocean Park, announced they were closing for the time being.

"As a precautionary measure in line with prevention efforts taking place across Hong Kong, we are temporarily closing Hong Kong Disneyland park out of consideration for the health and safety of our guests and cast members," the park said in a statement. It said a reopening date would be announced based on the advisement of local authorities.

Travel agencies have been told to halt all group tours, and concern is growing over the potential impact of millions of people traveling back to the cities after the Lunar New Year holiday ends on Thursday. The vast majority of the infections and all the deaths have been in mainland China, but fresh cases are popping up.

Singapore reported its fourth case on Sunday, a 36-year-old man from Wuhan. The Health Ministry said he did not exhibit any symptoms on his flight. He developed a cough the next day, sought treatment on Jan. 24 and was immediately isolated.

South Korea confirmed its third case, according to the Yonhap news agency.

In the heart of the outbreak where 11 million residents are already on lockdown, Wuhan banned most vehicle use, including private cars, in downtown areas starting Sunday. The city will assign 6,000 taxis to neighborhoods to help people get around if they need to. Wuhan plans to build a second makeshift hospital with about 1,000 beds to handle the growing number of patients. The city has said another hospital was expected to be completed Feb. 3.

Medical workers in Wuhan have been among those infected and local media reported a doctor died on Saturday morning. The 62-year-old physician worked at the ear, nose and throat department at Hubei Xinhua Hospital. He was hospitalized on Jan. 18 and died a week later.

Xinhua also said medical supplies are being rushed to the city, including 14,000 protective suits, 110,000 pairs of gloves and masks and goggles.

The National Health Commission said it is bringing in medical teams to help handle the outbreak, a day after videos circulating online showed throngs of frantic people in masks lined up for examinations and complaints that family members had been turned away at hospitals that were at capacity.

The Chinese military dispatched 450 medical staff, some with experience in past outbreaks, including SARS and Ebola, who arrived in Wuhan late Friday to help treat many patients hospitalized with viral pneumonia, Xinhua reported.

The new virus comes from a large family of what are known as coronaviruses, some causing nothing worse than a cold. It causes cold- and flu-like symptoms, including cough and fever, and in more severe cases, shortness of breath. It can worsen to pneumonia, which can be fatal.

China cut off trains, planes and other links to Wuhan on Wednesday, as well as public transportation within the city, and has steadily expanded a lockdown to 16 surrounding cities with a combined population of more than 50 million - greater than that of New York, London, Paris and Moscow combined.

A growing number of cities and provinces were enacting their own travel restrictions to contain the virus. The city of Shantou, almost 1,000 kilometers (620 miles) southeast of

Wuhan, was banning bus, taxi, ferry and car-hailing services from Monday. Only those authorized would be allowed to enter the city to maintain supplies or provide services. Shantou has reported two cases, with another 96 in the surrounding province of Guangdong.

Elsewhere, long-distance, inter-provincial bus services had been suspended, including those to and from Beijing.

The rapid increase in reported deaths and illnesses does not necessarily mean the crisis is getting worse but could reflect better monitoring and reporting of the virus. Those killed by the virus have mostly been middle-aged or elderly people, sometimes suffering from other conditions that weaken their ability to fight back.

It is not clear how lethal the new coronavirus is or even whether it is as dangerous as the ordinary flu, which kills tens of thousands of people every year in the U.S. alone.

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01.26.20

Trump says U.S. will not lift sanctions to negotiate with Iran

01.26.20

Trump says U.S. will not lift sanctions to negotiate with Iran

The comments come in apparent response to Iranian foreign minister's remarks that Iran is willing to negotiate with the United States if the latter removes the crippling sanctions on the Islamic Republic

Reuters,Associated Press| Published: 01.26.20 , 08:44

The United States will not lift sanctions on Iran in order to negotiate, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted late on Saturday, seemingly in response to a Der Spiegel interview with Iran's foreign minister.

"Iranian Foreign Minister says Iran wants to negotiate with The United States, but wants sanctions removed. @FoxNews @OANN No Thanks!" Trump tweeted in English on Saturday and later in Farsi.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded on Sunday by tweeting an excerpt from the interview with Der Spiegel published on Friday, where he said Iran is still open to negotiations with America if sanctions are lifted.

"@realdonaldtrump is better advised to base his foreign policy comments & decisions on facts, rather than @FoxNews headlines or his Farsi translators," Zarif said in the tweet with the interview excerpt.

Tensions between Iran and the United States have reached the highest levels in decades after the U.S. killed top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike in Baghdad

on Jan. 3, prompting Iran to fire missiles days later at bases in Iraq where U.S. troops are stationed.

Tensions between the two have been increasing steadily since Trump pulled the United States out of Iran's nuclear pact with world powers in 2018 and reimposed sanctions that have driven down Iran's oil exports and hammered its economy.

Meanwhile on Saturday, Ali Asghar Zarean, an aide to Iran's nuclear chief, said Iran's enriched uranium stockpile has exceeded 1,200 kilograms (2,646 pounds), which is far beyond the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers allowed.

"Iran is increasing its stockpile of the enriched uranium with full speed," he said. The claim has not been verified by the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog.

Following the U.S. drone strike on Jan. 3 that killed Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, Iran announced it would no longer abide by any of the deal's limitations to its enrichment activities. It then retaliated Jan. 8, launching ballistic missiles at two bases in Iraq housing American troops, causing injuries but no fatalities among soldiers there.

In November, the International Atomic Energy Agency said Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium had grown to 372.3 kilograms (821 pounds) as of Nov. 3. The nuclear deal limited the stockpile to 202.8 kilograms (447 pounds).

Iran has routinely vowed to begin enriching its stockpile of uranium to higher levels closer to weapons grade if world powers fail to negotiate new terms for the nuclear accord following the U.S. decision to withdraw from the agreement and restore crippling sanctions. European countries opposed the U.S. withdrawal and have repeatedly urged Iran to abide by the deal.

Under the agreement, Iran agreed to limit its enrichment of uranium under the watch of U.N. inspectors in exchange for the lifting of sanctions.