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06.17.20 – We - - -
EU cuts grant to Palestine for refusing to police its own & sign anti-terror clause

06.17.20

EU cuts grant to Palestinian group refusing to sign anti-terror clause
Organization loses funding for project seeking to expose alleged Israeli crimes in Jerusalem, says adoption of article 'criminalizes the Palestinian struggle'
i24NEWS| Published: 06.17.20 , 22:22

The European Union has canceled a grant to a Palestinian non-profit organization after it refused to sign an anti-terrorism clause obliging it to guarantee that none of the funds would be transferred to members of terrorist organizations.

The Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residence and Refugee Rights has obtained more than \$1.9 million for a project called "Mobilizing for Justice in Jerusalem," which aims to expose alleged Israeli human rights violations and "international crimes" in the holy city.

The organization, however, refused to sign article 1.5 of Annex II of the "General conditions applicable to grant contracts awarded by the European Union for external actions," declaring in a press release that the stipulation "criminalizes the Palestinian struggle against oppression and requires the recipient organization to perform 'screening' procedures which amount to policing its own people."

"The inclusion of this article to contracts with Palestinian organizations contradicts the national role of Palestinian civil society institutions in the struggle for freedom from Israeli colonialism and apartheid," Badil's statement reads.

Olga Deutsch, vice-president of the Jerusalem-based NGO Monitor, said that her group applauds "the EU for its firmness in the application of its anti-terrorist clause and its resistance to pressure."

"There is no doubt that radical groups like Badil, who promote anti-Semitism and the rejection of Israel, will never commit to fighting terrorism," she concluded.

06.17.20 – We - - -

UAE opposition to annex may draw calls for one state & setback Israel's goal

06.17.20

UAE official: Israel annexation may draw calls for one state

Emirati diplomat warns that Jerusalem's plans could lead Arab states to call for a single bi-national state, putting an end to Israel's goal of being a democracy with a solid Jewish majority

Associated Press| Published: 06.17.20 , 21:45

A senior Emirati official warned Wednesday that Israel's planned annexation of parts of the West Bank could lead Arab states to call for a single bi-national state for Israelis and Palestinians.

The Arab minister's remarks, delivered to an influential Washington think tank, struck a new setback to Israel's hopes of normalizing relations with the Arab world and added to the increasingly vocal international opposition to the Israeli annexation plan.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the strategically important Jordan Valley. Such a unilateral move would dash Palestinian hopes of establishing a viable independent state.

Israel captured the West Bank from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day war and has built dozens of settlements that are now home to nearly 500,000 Israelis. The Palestinians seek the territory as the heartland of their future state. Most of the international community considers Israel's West Bank settlements illegal under international law.

Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates' minister of state for foreign affairs, told the Washington-based Middle East Institute that his country is committed to dialog and the two-state solution to the decades-long conflict.

But he added that "ultimately, I personally believe that if we are going where we are going today, and we lose the possibility of really implementing a two-state solution, we will really be talking about equal rights and one state."

A bi-national state of Israelis and Palestinians would mean an end to Israel's goal of being a democracy with a solid Jewish majority.

Israel has cultivated close, but clandestine, ties with several Arab states, including the UAE, because of their shared concern about Iran. Those warming relations have manifested themselves publicly with Israeli ministers visiting the UAE, Israeli athletes attending sports events, and some quiet business ties.

Israel only has formal diplomatic relations with Egypt and Jordan, which also have both strongly criticized the annexation plan.

On Tuesday, Gargash told the American Jewish Committee that "the UAE is clearly against any annexation as being proposed by the current Israeli government."

Last Friday, Yousef Al Otaiba, the Gulf state's ambassador to the U.S., published an editorial in Ynet warning that annexation of occupied territory would "upend" Israel's efforts to improve ties with Arab countries.

06.17.20 – We - - -

IDF & Navy thwart Hamas arms smuggling into Gaza from Sinai Peninsula

06.17.20

IDF thwarts Hamas arms smuggling attempt into Gaza from Sinai

Joint operation between Navy, Shin Bet, and Military Intelligence leads to arrest of two operatives en route to coastal enclave, among them veteran smuggler for terror group Yoav Zitun| Published: 06.17.20 , 18:57

The IDF reported on Wednesday that the Navy, in a joint operation with the Shin Bet security agency and Military Intelligence, thwarted a weapons smuggling attempt by Hamas into the Gaza Strip from the northern Sinai Peninsula through the Mediterranean Sea several weeks ago.

The smugglers involved have been detained and arrested.

The militants involved in the attempt were tracked by the Shin Bet and the Navy identified the vessel and gave pursuit. The militants on board were taken into questioning by the Shin Bet.

During the investigation, the two men said that the weapons were meant for Hamas as part of their efforts to strengthen their logistical and fighting capabilities. In addition, they provided information on other naval smuggling efforts by the terror group, including information on smugglers, equipment, and contacts within the organization.

One of the operatives captured was Mahmoud Bachar, as a senior Hamas smuggler.

"This action is part of a series of counterterrorism missions aimed at disrupting Hamas' armament plans and significantly damage their military capabilities, and is part of the ongoing effort to thwart terrorist activity of any kind against Israeli citizens," said an IDF spokesperson.

06.17.20 – We - - -

PM mulling two-phases of gradual West Bank annexation starting July 1

06.17.20

Pro-Netanyahu paper: PM mulling two-phase West Bank annexation

Israel Hayom says prime minister weighing limited initial annexation, in bid to quell international opposition, followed by renewed call for Palestinians to hold peace talks and then annexing remaining settlements

Reuters| Published: 06.17.20 , 17:10

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is weighing a limited initial annexation in the West Bank, hoping to quell international opposition to his pledge of wide territorial moves, an Israeli newspaper seen as supportive of the veteran leader said Wednesday.

Netanyahu has said a U.S. peace plan, which envisages Israel retaining its settlements in the West Bank, provides a "historic opportunity" to extend Israeli sovereignty to them and to the Jordan Valley area.

Israel captured the West Bank, along with East Jerusalem from Jordan and the Gaza Strip from Egypt, in the 1967 Six-Day War. Palestinians hope to establish a state in those areas and say the peace blueprint announced by U.S. President Donald Trump in January kills that prospect.

Israel Hayom, a pro-Netanyahu daily widely seen as reflecting his views, said Israel's longest-serving premier was now looking at the possibility of annexation in two phases.

It said Netanyahu, who has set July 1 for the start of a cabinet debate on the issue, was considering annexing only small settlements in phase one and, after renewing calls to Palestinians for peace talks, then annexing the remaining ones.

Netanyahu's annexation pledges have raised stiff opposition from the Palestinians, Arab countries, and European nations, and Israeli officials say Washington has yet to agree to the move.

Wael Abu Youssef, a member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said potential phasing of annexation made no difference. "Netanyahu is trying to confuse the international position which rejects annexation and the world will not be fooled by such a proposition," he said.

The newspaper said Netanyahu does not anticipate a strong punitive response from Europe for annexation, despite vocal opposition, nor does he see it as substantially damaging Israel's ties with the Arab world.

Nonetheless, by limiting annexation initially, he hopes to signal that Israel is attentive to international criticism, Israel Hayom said.

It attributed its report to sources that have held discussions with Netanyahu in the last few days but did not identify them. Netanyahu's office declined to comment.

Most countries view Israeli settlements as illegal. Israel rejects this notion on a historical, biblical, and security basis.

06.17.20 – We - - -

Yesha leaders amend map to connect & expand bloc sovereignty, not a Palestine state

06.17.20

Dissatisfied with U.S. plan, settlers propose alternative annexation

Settlement heads suggest alterations to Trump map of West Bank land to be annexed by Israel, saying their proposal ensures territorial contiguity; Israeli officials warn White House will only accept 'cosmetic changes'

Elisha Ben Kimon | Published: 06.17.20, 12:59

As July 1, the date of Israel's West Bank annexation, looms ever closer, settler leaders are working to curb, or at least amend, U.S. President Donald Trump's peace plan.

The issue has already led to clashes between settler leaders and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is a staunch supporter of the U.S. plan.

The heads of the Yesha Council of Settlers now propose an alternative annexation plan, hoping to avoid leaving 19 settlements as isolated enclaves within Palestinian territory. The settlers want to connect the isolated settlements to the blocs without exceeding the 30% of the West Bank that the U.S. plan stipulates will be under Israeli rule. As such, the alternative plan proposes to expand the enclaves so their borders connect with the West Bank's larger settlements, thus creating territorial contiguity. For example, the territory of the Ma'ale Amos and Asfar settlements in the southern West Bank would be expanded and connected to the Gush Etzion junction. Similarly, the plan calls for the roads in the northern West Bank connecting the settlements of Itamar, Har Bracha, Elon Moreh and Yitzhar to become part of the enclave itself and then expanded to Tapuah Junction when the areas around them are annexed.

In exchange for these additional areas, the settlers are ready to postpone at this stage the annexation of other areas that under the Trump plan should be under Israeli sovereignty. The settlers argue that annexation can be delayed in some places, such as the area near Highway 443 west of Jerusalem, where thousands of Palestinians live, so as to not exceed the 30% of West Bank allocated to Israel. Thousands of maps showing the alternative proposal have already been drawn up. Yesha leaders have already submitted the map to the Americans and are preparing to distribute them across the West Bank in the coming days.

Israeli officials are lowering expectations, however, explaining that the White House has refused to make any alterations to maps it has drafted and will accept only "cosmetic changes."

"Despite the Americans' refusal, Netanyahu should insist on these changes," said David Elhayani, chairman of the Yesha Council, who himself was recently criticized by Netanyahu for his opposition to Trump's plan.

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"We demand that he listen to the needs of the settlements and draft a better map of sovereignty, not a map of a Palestinian state," he said.

06.16.20 – Tu - - -

N.Korea blew up liaison office, taking symbolic steps back to demilitarized zones

06.16.20

N.Korea blows up inter-Korea liaison office, raising tensions

Incident north of border comes as nuclear diplomacy with U.S. at an impasse; leader's sister, Kim Yo Jong, warned over weekend of building 'collapsing'

Associated Press| Published: 06.16.20 , 13:08

North Korea **blew up an inter-Korean liaison office building just north** of the heavily armed border with South Korea on **Tuesday** and **cut off all communication with its rival**. It was a carefully calibrated — and dramatic — **display of anger that sharply raises tensions** on the Korean Peninsula and puts **pressure on Washington and Seoul** amid deadlocked nuclear diplomacy.

The demolition of the building, which is located on North Korean territory and had no South Koreans working there, is largely symbolic. But it's still likely the most provocative thing North Korea has done since it entered nuclear diplomacy in 2018 after a U.S.-North Korean standoff had many fearing war. It will **pose a serious setback** to the efforts of liberal South Korean President Moon Jae-in to restore inter-Korean engagement.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency said the nation destroyed the office in a **"terrific explosion"** because its "enraged people" were **determined to "force"** (the human scum and those, who have sheltered the scum, **to pay dearly** for their crimes," apparently **referring to North Korean defectors** who for years have floated anti-Pyongyang leaflets across the border.

The agency **did not detail how** the office in the North Korean border town of Kaesong **was destroyed**.

Photos from the South's Yonhap News Agency showed smoke rising from what appeared to be a complex of buildings. The agency said the area was part of a now-shuttered inter-

The North also said it has cut off all government and military communication channels with the South while threatening to abandon bilateral peace agreements reached during North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's three summits with Moon in 2018.

Some outside analysts believe the **North, after failing to get what it wants in nuclear talks, will turn to provocation** to win outside concessions because its economy has likely worsened because of persistent U.S.-led sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic. North Korea may also be frustrated because the sanctions prevent Seoul from **breaking away from Washington** to resume joint economic projects with Pyongyang.

The liaison office has been shut since late January because of coronavirus concerns. The office, reportedly built with South Korean money, was the first such office between the two Koreas since their 1945 division and was considered a symbol of Moon's engagement policy.

Seoul's Blue House said presidential national security adviser Chung Eui-yong, who shuttled between Pyongyang and Washington to help set up Kim's first summit with President Donald Trump in June 2018, convened an emergency meeting of the National Security Council to discuss the North's destruction of the liaison office. Details weren't immediately released.

North Korea had earlier threatened to demolish the office as it stepped up its fiery rhetoric over **Seoul's failure to stop activists** from flying propaganda leaflets across the border.

On Saturday night, Kim Yo Jong, the influential sister of North Korea's leader, warned that Seoul will soon witness "a tragic scene of the useless North-South liaison office (in

North Korea) being completely collapsed.” She also said she would leave to North Korea’s military the right to take the next step of retaliation against South Korea. The North has threatened to abandon a 2018 bilateral tension-reduction agreement, which observers say could allow the North to trigger clashes along the land and sea borders. On Monday, Moon urged North Korea to stop raising animosities and return to talks, saying the two Koreas must not reverse the peace deals that he and Kim Jong Un reached during the 2018 summits. North Korea has a history of taking highly visual symbolic steps. It invited foreign journalists to watch the detonation of its underground nuclear testing tunnels in 2018 and the demolition of a cooling tower at its main nuclear complex in 2008. Both events were an attempt by the North to show it was serious about denuclearization amid rampant outside skepticism about its commitment. “It’s hard to see how such behavior will help the Kim regime get what it wants from the world, but clearly such images will be used for domestic propaganda,” said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

Earlier Tuesday, North Korea’s military threatened to move back into zones that were demilitarized under inter-Korean peace agreements. The General Staff of the Korean People’s Army said it was reviewing a ruling party recommendation to advance into unspecified border areas that had been demilitarized under agreements with the South, which would “turn the front line into a fortress.”

Inter-Korean relations have been strained since the breakdown of a second summit between Kim and Trump in Vietnam in early 2019. That summit fell apart because of disputes over how much sanctions should be lifted in return for Kim’s dismantling his main nuclear complex.

In 2018, the rival Koreas opened their first liaison office at Kaesong to facilitate better communication and exchanges since they were divided into a U.S.-backed South Korea and a Soviet-supported North Korea at the end of the World War II in 1945. When the office opened, relations between the Koreas flourished after North Korea entered talks with South Korea and the United States on its nuclear weapons program.

Kim later vowed to expand his nuclear arsenal, introduce a new strategic weapon and overcome the U.S.-led sanctions that he said “stifles” his country’s economy.

06.14.20 – Su - - -

Israel to begin building community Ramat Trump on the Golan Heights

06.14.20

Netanyahu says Israel to begin building Golan Heights community bearing Trump's name In May 2019, Netanyahu announced the creation of a residential community on the Golan Heights in honor of the US president after Trump signed an order recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the heights

i24NEWS| Published: 06.14.20 , 21:55

Work will begin on planning the community named after President Donald Trump on the Golan Heights, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Sunday.

Speaking during the weekly cabinet meeting Netanyahu declared Israel will begin implementation of a decision announced last year to build a town in honor of Trump.

"Today, we will begin practical steps toward establishing the community of Ramat Trump on the Golan Heights, Israel's sovereignty over which was recognized by President Trump," a statement from Netanyahu's office quoted the leader as saying. In May 2019, Netanyahu's government announced it would create a residential community on the Golan Heights in honor of the US president after Trump signed an order recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the strategically important plateau captured from Syria in the 1967 Six-Day-War. A month later Israel held a ceremony unveiling the place-name sign of the new community bearing the name of Ramat Trump, or Trump Heights.

"There is importance in moving forward with the decision of establishing the settlement at this moment in time in order to strengthen the political ties between Israel and the US," the statement from Netanyahu's office read.

The move comes as Netanyahu's government is facing controversy over its plan of declaring sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, in accordance with the peace plan put forth by Trump's administration.

06.14.20 – Su - - -

Netanyahu, Gantz meet with Friedman to avoid founding a Palestinian State

06.14.20

Netanyahu, Gantz meet with U.S. envoy over West Bank annexation

Israeli leaders sit down with David Friedman as PM's planned July 1 start date for unilateral move nears and international pressure mounts against application of sovereignty to the region

i24NEWS| Updated: 06.14.20 , 19:01

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defense Minister Benny Gantz met on Sunday with U.S. envoy David Friedman to discuss the planned annexation of territory in the West Bank.

Also present at the meeting were Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Knesset Speaker Yariv Levin.

The meeting concluded with no official statement released. Another meeting was scheduled for a later date.

On Monday, foreign ministers of the European Union are expected to hold a conference call with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo over President Donald Trump's peace plan, which Washington unveiled in February.

In a meeting between German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas and Netanyahu last week, the visitor warned Israel of implementing annexation, stressing it is "incompatible" with international law.

On Friday, The United Arab Emirates also joined the warning calls, with its Ambassador to the U.S. Yousef al-Otaiba calling Jerusalem to **choose between annexation and normalization with the Arab world.**

Another voice that had come out in opposition to the U.S. initiative was that of the West Bank settlers' leadership, who implored Netanyahu to heed their advice.

"We all want you to be the first prime minister who applied sovereignty, but **we don't want you to be remembered as the prime minister who laid the foundations of a Palestinian State,**" Yesha Council (the umbrella body of settlement municipal councils in the West Bank) said in a statement released ahead of the premier's meeting with Friedman.

06.14.20 – Su - - -

Trump cutting US troops in Germany, NATO no longer poised to push Soviet armor

06.14.20

Yankee go home: What does moving troops out of Germany mean?

In-depth: Trump's plan to reduce active-duty personnel in the country by more than 25% was prompted by **Germany's inability to spend 2% of its GDP on defense**; the decision was not discussed with Germany, nor with any other NATO members

Associated Press| Published: **06.14.20**, 14:55

After more than a year of thinly-veiled threats to start pulling U.S. troops out of Germany unless Berlin increases its defense spending, President Donald Trump appears to be proceeding with a hardball approach, **planning to cut the U.S. military contingent by more than 25%.**

About 34,500 American troops are stationed in Germany - 50,000 including civilian Department of Defense employees - the plan Trump reportedly signed off on last week envisions reducing active-duty personnel to 25,000 by September, with further cuts possible.

But as details of the still-unannounced plan trickle out, there's growing concerns it will do more to harm the U.S.'s own global military readiness and the NATO alliance than punish Germany.

The decision was not discussed with Germany, nor with any other NATO members - additionally, Congress was not officially informed - prompting a letter from 22 Republican members of the House Armed Services Committee urging a rethink. "The threats posed by Russia have not lessened, and we believe that signs of a weakened U.S. commitment to NATO will encourage further Russian aggression and opportunism," Rep. Mac Thornberry of Texas wrote in a letter to Trump with his colleagues. Sen. Jack Reed.

The ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee slammed Trump's move as "another favor" to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Richard Grenell, who resigned as U.S. ambassador to Germany two weeks ago, told Germany's Bild newspaper that "nobody should be surprised that Donald Trump is withdrawing troops."

Grenell, who declined to comment for this article, said he and others had been pushing for Germany to increase its defense spending and had talked about troop withdrawals since last summer.

"Donald Trump was very clear he wants to bring troops home," he said, "there's still going to be 25,000 American troops in Germany."

The suggestion that removing troops will punish Germany, however, overlooks the fact that American troops are no longer primarily there for the country's defense, said retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who commanded U.S. Army Europe from 2014 until 2017.

Gone are the days when hundreds of thousands of American troops were ready to fight in the streets of Berlin or rush into the strategic Fulda Gap, through which Soviet armor was poised to push into West Germany during the Cold War.

"The troops and capabilities that the U.S. has deployed in Europe are not there to specifically defend Germany, they are part of our contribution to overall collective stability and security in Europe," said Hodges, now a strategic expert with the Center for European Policy Analysis, a Washington-based institute.

American facilities include Ramstein Air Base, a critical hub for operations in the Mideast and Africa and headquarters to the U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Africa. The Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, which has saved the lives of countless Americans wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. And the Stuttgart headquarters of both the U.S. European Command and the U.S. Africa Command.

There's also the Wiesbaden headquarters of U.S. Army Europe, the Spangdahlem F-16 fighter base and the Grafenwoehr Training Area, NATO's largest training facility in Europe.

Hodges said the facilities are a critical part of America's global military footprint.

"What's lost in all this is the benefit to the United States of having forward deployed capabilities that we can use not only for deterrence ... but for employment elsewhere," he said. "The base in Ramstein is not there for the U.S. to defend Europe. It's there as a forward base for us to be able to fly into Africa, the Middle East."

Trump indicated last summer that he was thinking of moving some troops from Germany to Poland, telling Poland's President Andrzej Duda during an Oval Office meeting:

"Germany is not living up to what they're supposed to be doing with respect to NATO, and Poland is."

Duda has been trying to woo more American forces, even suggesting Poland would contribute over \$2 billion to create a permanent U.S. base, which he said could be named "Fort Trump." In the current plan, at least some Germany-based troops are expected to be shifted to Poland.

Following Trump's comments last June, U.S. Ambassador to Poland Georgette Mosbacher tweeted Aug. 8 that "Poland meets its 2% of GDP spending obligation towards NATO. Germany does not. We would welcome American troops in Germany to come to Poland."

Grenell then tweeted: "it is offensive to assume that the U.S. taxpayers will continue to pay for more than 50,000 Americans in #Germany, but the **Germans get to spend their surplus on #domestic programs.**"

In response, Chancellor Angela Merkel reiterated Germany's commitment to "work toward" the 2% NATO defense spending benchmark - a goal it hopes to meet in 2031. "There is a lot invested here, and I think that we, in very friendly talks, will naturally always continue to heartily welcome these American soldiers, and there are also good reasons for them to be stationed here," said Merkel.

NATO members agreed at a 2014 summit to "aim to move toward spending 2% of GDP on defense." Since then, the year Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula, **overall NATO defense spending has grown annually.**

Since his election in 2016, Trump has pushed for the 2% as a hard target, and repeatedly singled out Germany as a major offender, though many others are also below the goal. NATO figures put Germany's estimated defense spending for 2019 at 1.4%, and Poland's at 2%. In dollar terms, however, **Germany committed nearly \$54 billion** last year - NATO's third-largest budget after the U.S. and Britain - while **Poland spent slightly less than \$12 billion.**

Germany does need to spend more, Hodges said, but U.S. and NATO interests would be better served if Washington pushed Berlin to spend on broader military needs, like transportation infrastructure, cyber protection and air defense, that would be easier for Merkel's government to justify to a largely pacifist population.

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"We don't need more German tanks, we need more German trains," he said. "Why not be a little bit more strategic and think about what the alliance really needs from Germany?"

06.14.20 – Su - - -

Rise in virus cases no longer deemed a risk to public order or banning protests

06.14.20

U.S., China, Korea, Egypt report rise in virus cases as curbs ease

Chinese report the highest daily rise since mid-April, with most cases recorded in Beijing, while Egypt sees its biggest daily increase since the start of the outbreak; in U.S. some states see more than 1,000 per day

Associated Press| Published: 06.14.20 , 10:02

China reported its highest daily total of new coronavirus cases in two months on Sunday and infections in South Korea also rose, showing how the disease can come back as curbs on business and travel are lifted.

Meanwhile, Egypt reported its biggest daily increase on Saturday. Infections were rising in some U.S. states as President Donald Trump pushed for businesses to reopen despite warnings by public health experts.

China had 57 confirmed cases in the 24 hours through midnight Saturday, the National Health Commission reported. That was the highest since mid-April and included 36 in Beijing, the capital.

The biggest wholesale food market in Beijing, a city of 20 million residents, was shut down Saturday after 50 people tested positive for the virus. They were the city's first confirmed cases in 50 days.

The world is seeing more than 100,000 newly confirmed cases every day, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

China, where the pandemic began in December, and other countries that suffered early on including South Korea, Italy and Spain have seen numbers of new infections decline.

Brazil, India, the United States and other countries are seeing large increases.

China responded to the outbreak with the world's most intensive anti-disease controls, isolating cities with some 60 million people and shutting down much of its economy in steps that later were imitated by some other governments.

The ruling Communist party eased most limits on business and travel after declaring victory over the disease in March. Some curbs still are in place including a ban on most foreign travelers arriving in the country.

On Saturday, authorities in Beijing locked down 11 residential communities near the Xinfadi market. White fencing sealed off a road leading to apartment buildings and drivers were required to show identification to enter the area.

South Korea's government reported 34 more coronavirus cases, adding to an upward trend in infections.

The Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said 30 of the new cases were in the greater Seoul area, where half of the country's 51 million people live. New cases have been linked to nightlife establishments, church services, a large-scale e-commerce warehouse and door-to-door sellers.

The Egyptian Health Ministry announced 1,677 new confirmed cases. Egypt is the Arab world's most populous country and has its highest coronavirus death toll. The country has reported 1,484 deaths and 42,980 confirmed cases.

In the United States, the number of new cases in the southwestern state of Arizona has risen to more than 1,000 per day from fewer than 400 when the state's shutdown was lifted in mid-May.

Gov. Doug Ducey is not requiring Arizona residents to wear masks in public despite warnings by public health experts outside the government.

Elsewhere, bar owners in New Orleans were preparing to reopen. San Francisco restaurants resumed outdoor seating Friday and the California government allowed hotels, zoos, museums and aquariums to reopen.

The states of Utah and **Oregon suspended further reopening** of their economies due to a spike in cases.

The latest Chinese cases raised the mainland's total to 83,132, with 4,634 deaths, according to the Health Commission. South Korea has reported 12,085 cases and 277 deaths.

Also Sunday, China's air regulator announced China Southern Airlines was required to suspend flights between Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the southern city of Guangzhou for four weeks after 17 passengers on Thursday's flight tested positive for the virus.

Beijing allows each airline to make one flight per week on each route. Under rules announced June 4, a route will be suspended for one week if five passengers on a flight test positive and four weeks if the number rises to 10.

In Europe, France's highest administrative court ruled Saturday that **virus concerns no longer justify banning public protests.**

The Council of State's decision allows for demonstrations and marches as long as health protections are respected. Events must be declared in advance to local authorities and **not deemed a risk to public order.**

06.14.20 – Su - - -

US drone in NW Syria killed two al-Qaeda commanders of Yemen & Jordan

06.14.20

Drone strike kills 2 al-Qaeda commanders in NW Syria

Opposition groups report that the two men - a Jordanian and a Yemeni - headed local militias linked to the terror group as part of Coalition efforts to stamp out radical factions in region

Associated Press| Published: **06.14.20** , 21 :22

A **drone** strike in **northwestern Syria** on **Sunday** killed **two senior commanders** with an al-Qaeda-linked group, opposition activists said.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said the strike was believed to have been carried out by the **U.S.-led coalition**, which has been targeting extremists in Syria for years.

The drone strike hit a vehicle carrying the two commanders — a Jordanian and a Yemeni — in the northwestern province of Idlib, the last remaining rebel stronghold in war-torn Syria. Idlib is dominated by al-Qaeda-linked militants, and is also home to 3 million civilians.

The Observatory said the **men killed were** with the **al-Qaeda**-linked Horas al-Din group, Arabic for “**Guardians of Religion**.” Horas al-Din are hardcore al-Qaeda elements who broke away from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the strongest insurgent group in the Idlib enclave. Al-Mohrar Media, an activist collective in northern Syria, said the dead were Horas al-Din’s general military **commander**, known as Qassam al-Urduni, or “Qassam the **Jordanian**.” It said the second man was a **Yemeni** citizen known as Bilal al-Sanaani, the **commander** of the group’s so-called “**desert army**.”

In December, a drone strike killed a senior Horas al-Din commander, the Jordanian citizen Bilal Khuraisat, also known as Abu Khadija al-Urduni.

In July last year, the U.S. military said it struck an al-Qaeda leadership and training facility in northern Syria, where it said attacks threatening Americans and others were being planned. The U.S. Central Command said in a statement at the time that the strike occurred near the northern province of Aleppo.

06.13.20 – Sa - - -

Iran cash swayed Iraq militias, now facing economy woes from U.S. sanctions

06.13.20

Troubled Iran struggles to maintain sway over Iraq militias

In-depth: Without Soleimani to unify disparate factions, **divisions have emerged** in the umbrella group of mainly Shiite forces, who decry the lack of cash influx and lack of trajectory to institutionalize the militias

Associated Press| Published: **06.13.20**, 09:41

Iraqi militia factions expected the usual cash handout when the new head of Iran’s expeditionary **Quds Force** made his first visit to Baghdad earlier this year, succeeding the slain Gen. Qassim Soleimani. Instead, to their disappointment, Esmail Ghaani **brought them silver rings**.

For his second visit, Ghaani **had to apply for a visa**, something unheard of in Soleimani’s time — a bold step by Baghdad’s new government effectively curtailing Iran’s freedom of movement inside Iraq.

The episodes, relayed by several Iraqi officials, illustrate Iran’s struggles to maintain sway over Iraqi militias six months after America assassinated Soleimani and top militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike. **Iran** at the same time is **grappling with the economic fallout from U.S. sanctions** and the coronavirus outbreak.

Without imposing figures like Soleimani and al-Muhandis to unify disparate factions, divisions have emerged in the Popular Mobilization Forces, the umbrella group of mainly Shiite forces.

Their deaths also disrupted a trajectory to institutionalize the militias, which al-Muhandis had been meticulously planning with Soleimani’s blessing.

“With al-Muhandis gone, there is an absence of an anchor around which (PMF) politics revolves,” said Fanar Haddad, an Iraq researcher.

Reduced funds and clout

Among Iraq’s Shiite political and militia factions, Soleimani, a chief architect of Iran’s proxy groups across the region, held almost legendary status.

Charismatic and a fluent Arabic speaker, his rapport with Iraqi officials was unmatched. He slipped in and out of Iraq regularly to plan, mediate and **give out cash assistance**. One surprise visit by him was sufficient to broker agreement between rival factions, officials said.

Since his death, Shiite factions have shown discord, arguing over a premier candidate twice before they settled on Mustafa al-Kadhimi.

Soleimani’s successor as Quds Force commander, **Ghaani, is less familiar with Iraqi militia leaders and speaks to them through an interpreter**. Meetings in Iraq have increasingly been handled by Iranian Ambassador Iraj Masjedi, himself a former Quds Force member.

Ghaani’s gift of silver rings — **symbolically** important in Shiite Islam — **rather than cash** came during a meeting in April with leaders of several militia factions, according to three officials. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press.

Ghaani told them that, **for the moment**, they would **have to rely on Iraqi state funding**, they said, a sign of Iran’s economic crisis.

The PMF are paid primarily through the state — **\$2 billion in the 2019 budget** — but the funds are not dispersed equally. Smaller Iranian-backed groups rely on other informal means of revenue and receive extras from Iran, roughly \$3-9 million, two Iraqi officials close to the militias said.

Growing fractures

The PMF was created in 2014 as a framework to organize and pay the thousands who volunteered to fight the Islamic State group after a fatwa by Iraq’s top cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. Since then, its political and military might has soared. Under the staunchly pro-Iranian al-Muhandis, it became a channel for Tehran’s influence.

His death opened the door for factions opposed to that influence — particularly ones associated with al-Sistani — to break from the PMF leadership. Militias complain that Iran-friendly groups receive preferential treatment.

The man seen as al-Muhandis’ likely successor, Abdulaziz al-Mohammadawi, known as Abu Fadak, met opposition from factions who saw him as the Iranian-backed choice. He has not been officially recognized by the prime minister, though he has assumed some administrative duties, according to officials.

Some of the most Iran-friendly militias under the PMF have shown signs of splintering. Attacks against U.S. forces in March were claimed by a purported new group, Usbat al-Thairen, believed to have emerged from the powerful Kataib Hezbollah, which the U.S. accused in previous attacks.

Recently, four militias affiliated with the shrines connected to al-Sistani said they would take orders directly from Iraq’s premier, bypassing the PMF leadership.

A senior official from Kataib Hezbollah said the move has weakened the PMF and its legitimacy among the public. For many Iraqis, the group's credibility is derived from al-Sistani's fatwa.

The fissure was plain to see when, weeks into his leadership, Prime Minister al-Kadhimi visited the PMF headquarters. To his right, sat figures friendly with Tehran, to his left, those affiliated with al-Sistani.

It marks a "major wrench" by the Shiite establishment led by al-Sistani into Iran's broader plans, said Randa Slim, director of the Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program at the Middle East Institute.

"They are basically saying **we do not want an organ that takes its orders from Iran,**" she said.

Uncertain future

A larger question looms over the future of the PMF.

Al-Muhandis had been directing plans to transform a band of independent militias into a more professional force. Those plans remain unfinished, said three militia commanders on a recent visit to Mosul.

Under al-Muhandis, the PMF began referring to its units by brigade numbers rather than faction names and made moves toward imposing military rank structures and disciplinary courts. He oversaw the creation of engineering units providing services such as roadworks.

He held immense influence over militias and their supporters.

When protesters attacked the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad on Dec. 31 in response to American strikes on Kataib Hezbollah targets, it was al-Muhandis and not Iraqi security forces who was ultimately called upon to have them pull back, according to two Iraqi officials.

"Hajj Abu Mahdi made us an official group, it's the most important thing he did," said Mohammed al-Mousawi, a PMF commander. For the years ahead, he had planned greater training for fighters, academies and recruitment to improve management, al-Mousawi said.

Iran appears to be taking a back foot in Iraq. But, experts said, this is **likely** be **short-lived**.

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Iran on Sunday reported 107 fatalities in the past 24 hours, overall toll 8,837.

06.14.20

Iran daily virus deaths exceed 100 for first time in 2 months

Islamic Republic officials claim rise in cases is result of increase in testing rather than worsening caseload, but skepticism still remains at home and abroad over **official toll**

AFP| Published: **06.14.20** , 18:44

Iran on **Sunday** reported over 100 new deaths in a single day from the novel coronavirus, for the first time in two months.

In televised remarks, health ministry spokeswoman Sima Sadat Lari announced **107 Covid-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours**, raising the overall toll to 8,837.

"It was very painful for us to announce the triple-digit figure," said Lari. "This is an unpredictable and wild virus and may surprise us at any time," she added, urging Iranians to observe health protocols.

Iran last recorded triple-digit daily fatalities on April 13, with **111 dead**.

Lari also announced 2,472 new cases confirmed in the past day, bringing the total infection caseload to 187,427, with over 148,000 recoveries.

There has been skepticism at home and abroad about Iran's official COVID-19 figures, with concerns the real toll could be much higher.

Iran has struggled to contain what has become the Middle East's deadliest **outbreak** of the illness since it reported its first cases in the Shiite holy city of Qom in February.

But since April it has gradually lifted restrictions to ease the intense pressures on its sanctions-hit economy.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday **reproached citizens for failing to observe** measures designed to rein in the virus.

Official figures have shown a **rising trajectory in new confirmed cases** since early May, which the government has attributed to increased testing rather than a worsening caseload.