

Backchannel talks shape US-Iran pause: Report

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WASHINGTON, Mar 24 (IANS)

A SERIES of backchannel talks helped shape President Donald Trump's decision to pause planned strikes on Iran, accord-

ing to US media reports.

The 'Wall Street Journal' reported that officials from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan were involved in closed-door discussions to find a way out of the conflict.

The White House, however, refrained from giving any details. "These are sensitive diplomatic discussions and the United States will not negotiate through the news media," White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt told IANS.

These efforts came as Trump's

48-hour deadline for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz was about to expire. The ultimatum had raised fears of strikes on Iranian power infrastructure.

According to the media report, Arab officials worked to find contacts within Iran's leadership. They explored options for a temporary halt in fighting to allow further talks.

Egyptian Intelligence officials opened a channel with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which plays a key role in Tehran's decisions.

At the same time, Oman was also trying to ease tensions. Oman's Foreign Minister said the country was "working intensively to put in place safe passage arrangements for the Strait of Hormuz." The 'New York Times' reported that the United States and Iran were exchanging messages through intermediaries. But there was no sign of direct talks. Iranian officials denied that negotiations were underway.

The push for diplomacy reflects growing concern in the region. Gulf countries face the

risk of wider attacks. They are pressing for de-escalation.

The 'Wall Street Journal' said mediators were sceptical about a quick deal. The two sides are far apart on key issues, including Iran's nuclear programme and security guarantees.

There have also been nearly discussions about possible meetings in neutral countries such as Pakistan or Turkey. No meeting has been confirmed.

US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner are leading the outreach, according to reports.

Denmark votes in early election

COPENHAGEN, Mar 24 (AP)

DANISH voters went to the polls Tuesday in a general election, with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen seeking a third term at the helm of the Scandinavian country after a stand-off with US President Donald Trump over the future of the kingdom's semiautonomous territory of Greenland.

More than 4.3 million people are eligible to have their say in the vote for the new Folketing, or Parliament, in Copenhagen, which is elected for a four-year term.

Govt to cut broken rice in PDS to free up ethanol feedstock: Food Secretary

NEW DELHI, Mar 24 (PTI)

THE Centre is set to approach the Cabinet with a proposal to reduce the allocation of broken rice in grains distributed under the public distribution system (PDS) from 25 per cent to 10 per cent, a move that would free roughly 90 lakh tonne of broken rice annually for the ethanol sector, Food Secretary Sanjeev Chopra said on Tuesday.

Speaking at the All India Distillers' Association (AIDA) conference, Chopra said the proposal was aimed at providing the ethanol industry with a stable, year-round feedstock supply, reducing its dependence on whole grain stocks of the Food Corporation of India (FCI).

"Climate change is a reality. We need to make sure the supply chain



is not disrupted. A steady supply of broken rice to the ethanol sector will help ensure that," he said.

At present, the grains distributed under PDS has 25 per cent broken rice to be provided to 80 crore beneficiaries. Under the new plan, this would be brought down to 10 per cent.

The surplus broken rice, drawn from the roughly 360-370 lakh tonne of rice distributed annually,

would be sold through auction to ethanol producers, animal feed manufacturers and others. A pilot has already been conducted in five states.

From next year, the Government will stop supplying whole-grain FCI rice to distilleries. Broken rice from the revamped food scheme will take its place as the primary grain-based feedstock, Chopra said.

"Looking further ahead, from the next ethanol supply year, whole FCI rice will no longer be available for the sector. In its place, we are moving toward the supply of broken rice, a change that addresses multiple objectives simultaneously."

This proposal serves multiple interests at once: it improves the quality of grain received by

PDS beneficiaries, eases storage and logistics pressures, and gives the ethanol sector a more stable, predictable, year-round feedstock, he said.

The announcement comes against the backdrop of a sharp rise in global crude oil prices. Brent crude, which was trading at around USD 60-70 per barrel three weeks ago, has risen by nearly 40 per cent, renewing pressure on India to accelerate its ethanol blending programme.

Chopra said India's ethanol blending in petrol had already reached 20 per cent, up from just 1.5 per cent in 2013, saving the country over Rs 1.63 lakh crore in foreign exchange and cutting crude oil imports by 277 lakh metric tonne since 2014.

'Mojtaba ready to negotiate with US'



A Pine Gas LPG tanker proceeds after crossing the war-hit Strait of Hormuz amid the ongoing West Asia conflict. (MEA via PTI)

RIYADH, Mar 24 (ANI)

ARAB News has cited Israeli Media outlet Yedioth Ahronoth to report that Iran's Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei was prepared to negotiate with the Americans. Ahrnaooth cited a conversation between Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and US intermediary Steve Witkoff which was approved by the highest level in Iran.

Earlier, the spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry had dismissed US President Donald Trump's claims of talks with Iran, saying Tehran has had no negotiations with Washington over the past 24 days of the unprovoked US-Israel war against the Islamic Republic.

The key development comes after United States President Donald

Trump on Monday said the Strait of Hormuz, a vital global shipping route, will be "open very soon" amid the conflict in West Asia and suggested that he envisions it being managed jointly by the US and Iran.

Speaking to reporters in Florida, Trump said that the strait will be "open very soon" if ongoing negotiations with Tehran continue successfully.

He added that he and the newly appointed Supreme Leader of Iran, Mojtaba Khamenei, will "jointly" control the critical shipping and global energy route.

IRANIAN ARMED FORCES WILL FIGHT 'UNTIL COMPLETE VICTORY', SAYS SPOKESMAN: THE spokesman of Iran's top military command said on Tuesday that its Armed Forces will fight "until complete victory." The comments by Major General Ali Abdollahi Aliabadi of the Khatam-al Anbiya Central Headquarters appeared to be related to US President Donald Trump's announcement that there were negotiations ongoing between Tehran and Washington.

Iran has denied that any talks are taking place, though its Foreign Minister has been talking to counterparts around the region. Iranian State television quoted Aliabadi as saying: "Iran's powerful Armed Forces are proud, victorious and steadfast in defending Iran's integrity, and this path will continue until complete victory."

LEBANON WITHDRAWS ACCREDITATION OF IRAN'S AMBASSADOR: THE Lebanon Government on Tuesday ordered Iran's ambassador to leave country. The Foreign Ministry said Tehran's diplomatic representative in the tiny war-torn

Zolqadr is Iran's new security chief

TEHRAN, Mar 24 (IANS)

MOHAMMAD Baqer Zolqadr has been appointed as the new Secretary of



Iran's Supreme National Security Council, replacing Ali

Larijani who was killed in an Israeli attack last week, the Iranian media reported on Tuesday quoting a statement issued by Mehdi Tabatabai, the Iranian President's Public Relations aide.

It was stated that Zolqadr has been appointed with the approval and consent of leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Mojtaba Khamenei and by the decree of President Masoud Pezeshkian. Zolqadr, a veteran commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), used to serve as the Secretary of the Expediency Council.

country has to leave by Sunday, declaring him persona non grata.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Denise Rahme told 'The Associated Press' that Iran's embassy will still have a charge d'affaires to head its diplomatic mission. The Lebanese Government has been critical of Iran and accuses its elite Revolutionary Guard of operating in Lebanon alongside the Hezbollah militant group and dragging the country into another war with Israel.

Airstrikes hit Iran capital

Tehran targets Israel, Gulf States

Mixed signals over talks to end war

■ By Jon Gambrell, David Rising
and Samy Magdy

DUBAI, Mar 24 (AP)

AIRSTRIKES battered Iran's capital and Iranian missiles and drones targeted Israel's Tel Aviv and sites across the Mid East on Tuesday, even as President Trump said the US was in talks with the Islamic Republic to end the war.

Read Editorial
A FRAGILE PAUSE
on page 8

With thousands more United States Marines on their way to the Gulf, both sides firing intense barrages and Iran denying any negotiations are taking place, the war's tempo remained high a day after Trump delayed his self-imposed deadline for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

Tehran's chokehold on that crucial waterway has snarled international shipping, sent fuel prices skyrocketing, and threatened the world economy.

PM Modi, President Trump discuss Middle-East crisis

NEW DELHI, Mar 24 (PTI)

INDIA supports de-escalation and restoration of peace at the earliest in West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Tuesday after he held a phone conversation with US President Donald Trump that focused on securing the Strait of Hormuz for global shipping.

The call was initiated by the US President, a day after he extended
(Contd on page 5)

Any talks between the US and Iran - which appeared at the most tentative on Tuesday - would face monumental challenges.

(Contd on page 5)

SC grants pension to women officers who were denied Permanent Commission

NEW DELHI, Mar 24 (PTI)

IN A significant verdict, the Supreme Court on Tuesday ruled that women Short Service Commission (SSC) officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force, who were denied Permanent Commission due to arbitrary assessment, are entitled to full pensionary benefits.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justices Ujjal Bhuyan and N Kotiswar Singh held that the officers would be “deemed” to have completed the minimum qualifying service of 20 years required for a pension, even if they were released

from service earlier.

The judgement came on a batch of petitions, including those filed by Wing Commander Sucheta Edan and others, challenging the denial of Permanent Commission (PC) based on policy changes in 2019 and previous Armed Forces Tribunal (AFT) rulings.

Reading the operative parts of the judgement, the CJI said the Annual Confidential Reports (ACRs) for women officers were often graded “casually” under the assumption that they would not be eligible for career progression or PC.

(Contd on page 5)