

Iran behind tanker attacks, says Trump

U.S. Central Command releases video footage to support its claim; Tehran denies any role

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Donald Trump has said Iran was behind the attack on two ships on the Gulf of Oman, while the Central Command (CENTCOM) released a video purportedly showing an Iranian patrol boat removing an unexploded mine from the hull of Japanese owned chemical tanker *Kokuka Courageous*.

The *Kokuka Courageous* and another ship, a Norwegian-owned oil tanker, came under attack on Thursday in the Gulf of Oman.

"Iran did it and you know they did it because you saw the boat," Mr. Trump said on the TV programme *Fox and Friends* on Friday morning. "I guess one of the mines didn't explode and it's probably got, essentially, Iran written all over it."

The video shows a patrol boat pull up next to the *Kokuka Courageous*. A person, standing at the bow of the boat is seen removing an object from the hull of the tanker. That object in the video was an unexploded limpet mine and the individuals belonged to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, according to the U.S. Central Command.

Earlier on Thursday afternoon, the State Department had called a press briefing with Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, who told reporters that the U.S. believed Iran was to blame for the attacks.

"This assessment is based on intelligence, the weapons used, the level of expertise needed to execute the operation, recent similar Iranian attacks on shipping, and the fact that no proxy group operating in the area has the resources and proficiency to act with such a high degree of sophistication," Mr. Pompeo had said.



This June 13 image released by the U.S. military's Central Command shows damage and a suspected mine on the *Kokuka Courageous* in the Gulf of Oman. • AP

"On April 22, Iran promised the world that it would interrupt the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz. It is now working to execute on that promise," Mr. Pompeo said, listing a number of attacks over the last few weeks, that the U.S. believes Iran orchestrated. The list included an attack on four ships in the Strait of Hormuz on May 12.

'Japan insulted'

Mr. Pompeo said the Iranians had insulted Japan by attacking a Japanese tanker as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was in Tehran to convince the Iranians to enter into talks.

However, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif presented a different picture on Twitter on Thursday. "Suspicious doesn't begin to describe what likely transpired this morning," Mr. Zarif wrote, pointing out that the "reported attacks" happened while Japanese Prime Minister Abe was meeting Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei "for extensive and friendly" talks.

Mr. Pompeo reacted to the tweet at the press briefing. "Foreign Minister Zarif may

think this is funny, but no one else in the world does. Iran is lashing out because the regime wants our successful maximum pressure campaign lifted."

The U.S. imposed sanctions on Iran last November after U.S. President Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an international deal aimed at preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

While in Tehran, Mr. Abe had called for Iran to play a constructive role in maintaining peace in West Asia.

President Trump said that both sides were not ready for a new deal. "While I very much appreciate PM Abe going to Iran to meet with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, I personally feel that it is too soon to even think about making a deal. They are not ready, and neither are we!" Mr. Trump tweeted on Thursday.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called the U.S. a "serious threat to global stability" as he attended an international forum in Kyrgyzstan. "Over the last two years... using its economic, financial and military resources (it) has taken an aggressive approach."

Iran said its Navy rescued several dozen crew members from the two vessels, while the U.S. Navy said it had picked up 21 from the *Kokuka Courageous*.

Iran's English-language Press TV aired footage of rescued crewmen from the *Front Altair*, saying they are all in "full health."

"Everything is OK," said one of the vessel's "chief officers", presenting himself as Russian and thanking Iran for its "hospitality." Press TV said 11 of the crew were Russian, 11 Filipino and one Georgian.

'Flying object'

The crew of the *Kokuka Courageous* saw a "flying object" before a second blast on board, the operator's head said on Friday.

"The crew members are saying that they were hit by a flying object. They saw it with their own eyes," Yutaka Katada, head of *Kokuka Sangyo* shipping company, told reporters.

Washington has dispatched the destroyer, *USS Mason*, to the scene "to provide assistance," CENTCOM said in a statement while Oman said it sent two navy vessels to assist.

The U.S. has also accused Iran over May 12 attacks on four tankers anchored in the Gulf of Oman off the UAE port of Fujairah. The preliminary findings of a five-nation investigation indicated a state actor was responsible but stopped short of naming Iran.

The U.S. called on Thursday for the UNSC to confront the "clear threat" posed by Iran.

Oil prices jumped at the threat of an open conflict around the Strait of Hormuz, the choke point through which some 15 million barrels of crude pass daily.

(With AFP inputs)

Russia warns against 'hasty conclusions'

MOSCOW

Russia warned on Friday against jumping to conclusions over the attacks on the oil tankers, after U.S. President Donald Trump blamed them on Iran. "We consider it necessary to refrain from hasty conclusions," the Russian Foreign Ministry said, calling for a thorough international investigation. • AFP

UAE says tanker attacks a 'dangerous escalation'

ABU DHABI

The UAE said on Friday that the attacks on the tankers just weeks after four ships were damaged off the UAE marked a "dangerous escalation". "The attack against the tankers in the Gulf of Oman is a worrying development and a dangerous escalation," Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeted. • AFP

Nobody wants war, China urges restraint

BEIJING

Nobody wants war in the Gulf of Oman, China's Foreign Ministry said on Friday, calling on all sides to exercise restraint and urging dialogue to resolve differences. Earlier, the Ministry cited President Xi Jinping as telling Iran's President Hassan Rouhani in Kyrgyzstan that China would promote steady development of ties with Iran, no matter how the international situation changed. • REUTERS

UN chief pushes for probe into attacks

UNITED NATIONS

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Friday pressed for a probe into the attacks on oil tankers. "It's very important to know the truth," he said. "Obviously that can only be done if there is an independent entity that verifies those facts." • AFP

Assange: 175 years of my life is effectively at stake

U.K. court sets U.S. extradition hearing for February 2020

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's full extradition hearing to face espionage charges in the United States will begin in February, an English judge ruled on Friday.

The whistleblower is accused by Washington of violating the Espionage Act after releasing classified military and diplomatic files in 2010 about U.S. bombing campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In his first appearance since being transferred to Britain's top-security Belmarsh prison in April after police sensationally dragged him out of the Ecuadoran embassy in London, Mr. Assange told the court: "175 years of my life is effectively at stake."



Julian Assange

Speaking at Westminster Magistrates Court in London via video-link from jail, and sporting a scraggly white beard, he added: "WikiLeaks is nothing but a publisher." The 47-year-old Australian could be sentenced to 175 years in prison if convicted on all charges.

The U.S. Justice Department, which submitted the

formal extradition request after Ecuador terminated Mr. Assange's seven-year asylum stay, has filed 18 counts against him.

He is currently serving a 50-week prison sentence for violating bail conditions by fleeing to the embassy in 2012 when he was wanted on accusations of sexual assault in Sweden.

England's Chief Magistrate Emma Arbuthnot said the full hearing, expected to last for five days, would start on February 25.

Mr. Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson called the U.S. charges "a direct attack on free speech and a direct attack on journalism" and said her team would be "raising a large number of objections" to his extradition.

Trump's trusted aide Sarah Sanders quits White House job

ASSOCIATED PRESS
WASHINGTON

White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders, whose tenure was marked by a breakdown in regular press briefings and questions about the administration's credibility, as well as her own, will leave her post at the end of the month, President Donald Trump announced.

Mr. Trump said on Thursday he's encouraging her to run for Governor when she returns home to Arkansas, where her father once held the job.

Ms. Sanders is one of Mr. Trump's closest and most trusted White House aides and one of the few remain-



Donald Trump with Press Secretary Sarah Sanders on Thursday. • REUTERS

ing who worked on his campaign, taking on the job of advocating for and defending a President who had his own unconventional ideas about how to conduct the

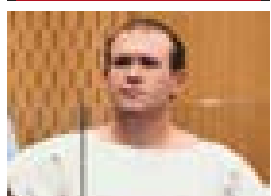
people's business.

At an unrelated White House event, Mr. Trump described Sanders as a "warrior" as he called her to the stage. Ms. Sanders, appearing emotional, said serving Mr. Trump had been "the honor of a lifetime" and pledged to remain one of his "most outspoken and loyal supporters."

Ms. Sanders, who is married and has three young children, later told reporters she wanted to spend more time with her family, but she did not rule out running for public office.

"I learned a long time ago never to rule anything out," said Ms. Sanders, 36.

IN BRIEF



Christchurch attacker pleads not guilty

CHRISTCHURCH

Brenton Tarrant, the man accused of shooting dead 51 Muslim worshippers in the Christchurch mosque attacks in March, smiled on Friday as his lawyers entered not guilty pleas to multiple murder and terrorism charges. • AFP

'Probe under way into Sudan sit-in crackdown'

KHARTOUM

Sudan's ruling military has acknowledged that security forces committed violations when they moved in to disperse protesters at a sit-in camp outside the military headquarters in Khartoum last week. Spokesman for the military council General Shams Eddin Kabashi said a probe was under way. • AP

Riyadh repatriates Sri Lankans linked to Easter attacks

The suspects were arrested in the Saudi city of Jeddah

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
COLOMBO

Five Sri Lankans wanted in connection with the Easter bombings that killed 258 people were arrested in Saudi Arabia and repatriated on Friday, the police said.

Correcting his earlier statement that the men were seized in Dubai, police spokesman Ruwan Gunasekera said the suspects were taken into custody in the Saudi city of Jeddah.

Among them was Mohamed Milhan, a senior leader of the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ) group, which was held responsible for the April 21 bombings, Mr. Gunasekera said. Milhan was also wanted in connection with the

November killing of two police constables in the east of the island where NTJ leader Zahrani Hashim had his base.

"A team of Criminal Investigations Department officers brought the suspects back to Sri Lanka this morning," Mr. Gunasekera said. No further details were immediately available.

Second such arrests

This is the second time suspects have been arrested abroad in connection with the attacks against three churches and three luxury hotels in the country, which were claimed by the Islamic State group.

Last month, Army chief Mahesh Senanayake said two suspects were arrested

in Qatar and Saudi Arabia. He did not disclose the nationalities of the suspects, but official sources said they were Sri Lankans.

Sri Lankan authorities have arrested just over 100 people who had links with the NTJ and its leader Hashim, who was one of two suicide bombers who attacked the Shangri-La hotel in Colombo.

The island nation has been under a state of emergency since the attacks, which also left 45 foreign nationals dead and wounded nearly 500 people. There have been recriminations over the failure on the part of police and security forces to act on advance warnings of the impending attacks.

'Russia sources targeted EU elections'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BRUSSELS

EU officials said on Friday that "Russian sources" stepped up a long-running disinformation campaign against the European Union in a bid to undermine the bloc's elections last month.

The sources used fake social media accounts, bots and news sites to amplify existing divisive content by targeting particular groups of voters and countries, Security Commissioner Julian King said.

"The number of disinformation cases attributed to Russian sources ... doubled as compared to the same period a year ago," Mr. King said, highlighting a report by European Commission investigators.

"So almost 1,000, as compared with over 400."

China lodges protest against U.S. comments on Hong Kong

Asks Washington to respect the city's legislative process

REUTERS
BEIJING

China summoned a senior U.S. diplomat on Friday to lodge a formal complaint about U.S. comments on Hong Kong, after proposed U.S. legislation that would require the government to justify the continuation of special treatment for the territory.

The bipartisan Senate legislation would require the U.S. Secretary of State to issue an annual certification of Hong Kong's autonomy to justify special treatment under the U.S. Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992.

The proposed law would also require the U.S. President to identify those responsible for the abduction of booksellers and other in-



A woman protesting against the extradition law in Hong Kong on Friday. • AP

dividuals from Hong Kong and subject them to U.S. sanctions.

The planned legislation comes amid a political crisis in the former British colony, where protests have boiled over against a proposed law

that would allow extraditions to mainland China.

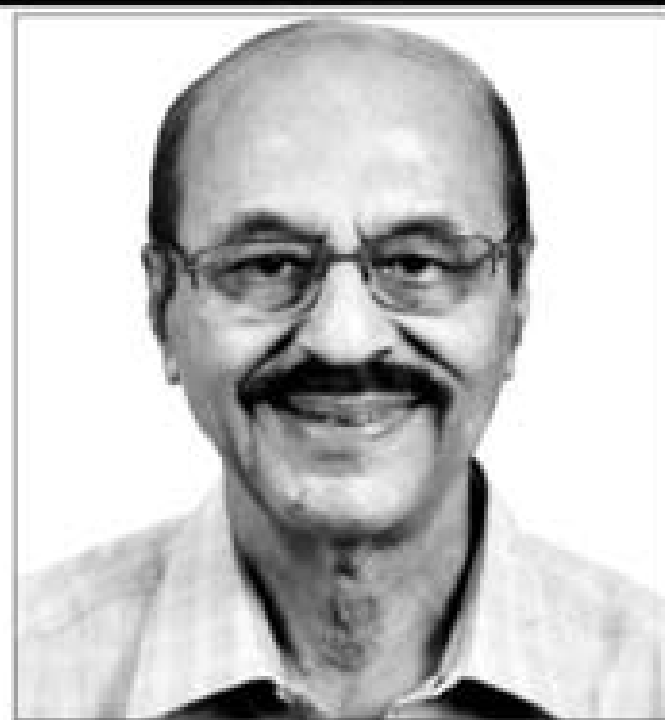
Chinese Vice-Foreign Minister Le Yucheng summoned Robert Ford, the U.S. Deputy Chief of Mission in Beijing, to lodge stern representations over recent U.S. comments and actions on Hong Kong and the extradition law and urged Washington to stop interfering in the city's affairs immediately.

Mr. Le urged Washington not to take any actions that harm Hong Kong's prosperity and stability, the Ministry said in a statement. "We urge the U.S. side to treat the Hong Kong government objectively and fairly and respect its normal legislative process," the statement cited Mr. Le as saying.

OBITUARY & REMEMBRANCE

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