

Iranian boats tried to block our tanker in the Gulf, says U.K.

Forced to back off by a British warship, Defence Ministry says; Tehran denies it

DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK
LONDON

A British warship forced three Iranian boats to back off after they sought to block a British tanker from passing through the Strait of Hormuz, the Defence Ministry said on Thursday, in the latest escalation of tensions between Tehran and the West.

"Contrary to international law, three Iranian vessels attempted to impede the passage of a commercial vessel, *British Heritage*, through the Strait of Hormuz," the British government said. "We are concerned by this action and continue to urge the Iranian authorities to de-escalate the situation in the region."

Iran denied any attempt to stop the tanker, according to Iranian news agencies.

The dispute on Thursday is the latest complication in a three-way drama involving Iran, the United States and Europe that has played out since last year, when President Donald Trump abandoned the 2015 nuclear deal



Keeping watch: A file photo of the H.M.S. Montrose, which was accompanying the British tanker. • NPT

with Iran and restored sanctions that had been suspended under the deal.

Last week, British forces seized an Iranian tanker off the coast of Gibraltar bound for Syria, on suspicion that it was violating European Union sanctions, which Iran called an act of piracy. Some Iranian officials spoke of retribution, and an officer in Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard, Mohsen Rezaei, wrote on Twitter that if the tanker were not released, Iran "will be duty-bound to take reciprocal action and seize a British oil tanker."

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani derided Britain as recently as Wednesday for its decision to send its warships to escort commercial vessels through the Gulf. Calling Britain "scared" and "hopeless," Mr. Rouhani warned that, "You, Britain, are the initiator of insecurity and you will realize the consequences later."

In its statement on Thursday, the British government said three Iranian boats had attempted to stop the *British Heritage* in the early morning as it headed toward the Strait of Hormuz, a vital

Police arrest Indian captain of Iran tanker

GIBRALTER

The police have arrested the Indian captain and chief officer of *Grace 1*, the seized Iranian tanker, Royal Gibraltar Police said on Thursday. The Gibraltar police are interviewing both men, who have "been accorded their legal entitlements and access to consular representation," a statement said. AFP

channel for international oil supplies.

A British warship, the *Montrose*, had been escorting the tanker to guard against Iranian interference. After a short standoff, the British warned the three Iranian boats to back away and they did, the British government said in its statement. "*H.M.S. Montrose* was forced to position herself between the Iranian vessels and *British Heritage* and issue verbal warnings to the Iranian vessels, which then turned away," the Defence Ministry said in a statement.

Bill to relax green card cap passed

House removes country-wise cap, increases annual limit of family-based cards

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

The U.S. House of Representatives on Wednesday passed (365-65) the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act of 2019, which increases the annual limit of family-based green cards offered to citizens of each country and eliminates the country-wise cap on employment-based green cards.

This will have a significant impact on nationals of countries such as India, in whose case demand for immigrant visas (which convert to green cards upon admission to the U.S.) exceeds the number of visas available each year, resulting in wait times that could run into decades.

Indians to benefit

Indians account for an overwhelming majority (around 75% in fiscal year 2017) of H-1B visas, which are a pathway to green cards.

The version of the Bill passed by the House increases the per-country cap on family-based green cards from the current 7% of all green cards issued in any year to 15%.

The Bill altogether elimi-



Next step: The Senate will now need to pass a comparable Bill before it can become law.

nates employment-based green card caps. As of November 2017, China, India and the Philippines, in that order, accounted for the top three countries whose nationals got approved for employment-based green cards.

The House Bill also provides a transition period from fiscal year 2020 to 2022 by reserving a percentage of employment visas – in the EB-2 (exceptional ability), EB-3 (skilled workers) and EB-5 (investors) categories – for individuals who are not from the two countries whose nationals claim most of these visas.

This mechanism has pre-

This time there's momentum in the Senate, though, because certain Senators wrote in some tighter H-1B rules they have wanted for a long time

DOUG RAND
Former White House official

sumably been incorporated to help ensure that no person who is already in line for a green card is going to be made any worse off with the passage of this law. For instance, those in line from countries that do not use up their yearly cap, will wait longer once the per country caps are adjusted or re-

moved. This transition mechanism presumably allows those already in line from countries with lower green card demand to be cleared before caps are liberalised or eliminated.

Critics of a cap-free system argue that caps keep a few countries from dominating the employment-immigration route.

Now that the House has passed a law changing or eliminating caps, the Senate will need to pass a comparable Bill before it can become law.

"This isn't the first time this Bill passed the House of Representatives by an overwhelming bipartisan majority – it happened in 2011, but the Senate did nothing. This time there's momentum in the Senate, though, because certain Senators wrote in some tighter H-1B rules they have wanted for a long time. So supporters of this Bill can be cautiously optimistic," Doug Rand, formerly an immigration policy official at the Obama White House and co-founder of Boundless, a firm specialising in green cards and U.S. citizenship, told *The Hindu*.

IN BRIEF



16 killed, over 80 injured in Pakistan train collision

LAHORE/ISLAMABAD

At least 16 passengers were killed and more than 80 others injured on Thursday when an express train ramed into a stationary freight train in Pakistan's Punjab province, officials said. The Quetta-bound Akbar Express collided with the freight train at the Walhar railway station in Sadiqabad tehsil of the province, *Dawn* quoted officials as saying. The freight train was on the loop line when the speeding passenger train, instead of running on the main line, entered the wrong track. PTI

Merkel sits during anthems after shaking spells

German Chancellor has suffered three episodes in public in less than a month

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BERLIN

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday insisted she took care of her health after remaining seated during national anthems at an official ceremony, in a rare change of protocol apparently to prevent a repeat of uncontrollable shaking.

With questions swirling about Ms. Merkel's health after she suffered three episodes of shaking in public in less than a month, the veteran leader opted to play safe.

After greeting Denmark's new Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen at the portico of the chancellery, a smiling Merkel



Playing safe: Chancellor Angela Merkel and Danish PM Mette Frederiksen sit during the anthems. • AP

walked her over to a podium where both leaders took their seats before the anthems played.

Asked by journalists if she had seen a doctor over the shaking incidents and about the results of any medical checks, Ms.

Merkel declined to give specifics.

"You can assume that firstly, I know the responsibilities of my office and that I therefore act accordingly with regard to my health," Ms. Merkel said at the joint news con-

ference with Ms. Frederiksen. "And secondly, you can also assume that as a person, I have a strong personal interest in being in good health and that I take care of my health."

Standing next to her at the press conference, Ms. Frederiksen said she found the Chancellor "as strong and competent as before I came to Berlin today."

'Live with it'

The unusual decision to use seats came a day after a similar ceremony when the German Chancellor was seen shaking involuntarily for the third time. On Wednesday, Ms. Merkel began trembling

as national anthems were being played at the reception of Finnish Prime Minister Antti Rinne. Just over an hour later, she attended a press conference as planned and told journalists that her health was no cause for concern.

She explained that she was simply still in a phase of "processing" a previous shaking spell, but that "there has been progress". "I will have to live with it for a while," added Ms. Merkel, who turns 65 next week. "Just like how it has come, one day it will go away too." The shaking on Wednesday was visible although less severe than during the first episode in June.

No-confidence motion against Sri Lanka govt. defeated

JVP moved the vote, saying it failed to stop terror attacks

MEERA SRINIVASAN
COLOMBO

A trust vote on the government presented by the Opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in Sri Lankan Parliament was defeated on Thursday with a majority of 119 legislators in the 225-member House voting against it.

The leftist JVP or Peoples' Liberation Front, an Opposition party, on Wednesday submitted a motion accusing the ruling coalition of failing to prevent the April 21 Easter terror attacks despite the "fact that proper information had been made available regarding suicide terrorists." Its leader Anura Dissanayaka said the attacks occurred because of the government's failure to fulfil its responsibility, adding: "people have no confidence in this government."

Following a two-day debate that ended on Thursday evening, a total of 92 lawmakers from President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which pulled out of government last October, the coalition backing former President and Leader of Opposition Mahinda Rajapaksa, and the JVP voted in favour of the no-confidence motion.

Muslim MPs, who had resigned protesting "demonisation" of the community following the Easter attacks and the Opposition Tamil National Alliance (TNA) voted in favour of the government. From April last year, Prime Minister Ranil Wickre-



A test passed: A December 16, 2018, photo of Sri Lankan PM Ranil Wickremesinghe, centre, with loyal lawmakers. • AP

mesinghe has won multiple trust votes with the support of minority Tamil and Muslim parties, without whom his party may not have been able to garner a majority.

'Cheap triumph'

Intervening in Thursday's debate, All Ceylon Makkal Katchi leader and lawmaker Rishad Bathiudeen said the allegations levelled in the JVP-led no-confidence motion against the government were 'on target', but said he decided to vote with other Muslim MPs, in favour of the government.

Referring to attacks unleashed on him by some MPs backing Mr. Rajapaksa following the Easter bombings, linking him to the terror plot, he said: "Hurling these incriminating accusations at a time when the country was on the brink, the Opposition sought cheap triumph by making me their main prey."

Further, referring to a string of violent incidents targeting Muslims, the former Minister said, "29 mosques were attacked, a Muslim father was murdered

while his entire family watched in shock, 900 Muslim houses were damaged – these took place while law enforcement idly stood by."

Both the Muslim MPs and the main Tamil party appear to have decided to vote for the government, to avoid giving the Rajapaksa camp in Opposition an advantage.

Addressing the House, TNA Leader R. Sampanthan said the minorities had a reason to vote the way they did in the 2015 election, in which former President Rajapaksa was defeated.

"The efforts of this government may not be to our complete satisfaction, but they are certainly better than the former regime," he said.

Further, raising questions about the policy that an alternative government would adopt, Mr. Sampanthan said: "Minorities suffered immensely under the Rajapaksa regime. While voting, we have to be conscious of the fact that we don't know what their policy might be if the government were to change."

North Korea warns of military action against South's F-35A jets

'We'll have to test weapons to shoot them down'

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
SEOUL

North Korea on Thursday said South Korea's planned deployment of new U.S. stealth fighter jets was an "extremely dangerous action" that would compel it to use "special armaments" to shoot them down.

South Korea, a major U.S. ally, received its first two F-35A jets – one of the world's most advanced military aircraft – in March under a \$7 billion contract signed in 2014. The country plans to deploy 40 jets by the end of 2021, with around a quarter of those expected to be operational this year.

South Korean authorities "know well that the bringing-in of the fighters would prove to be an extremely dangerous action which will trigger our reaction," an unnamed researcher at the Institute for Ameri-



The F-35A is one of the world's most advanced military aircraft. • REUTERS

can Studies of North Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement carried by state news agency KCNA.

"We... have no other choice but to develop and test the special armaments to completely destroy the lethal weapons reinforced in South Korea," it said.

Bangladesh charges former Chief Justice with corruption

Surendra Kumar Sinha fled Bangladesh in 2017

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
DHAKA

Bangladesh's anti-graft office has charged the former Chief Justice with corruption nearly two years after he fled the country saying he was forced to resign, an official said on Thursday.

Surendra Kumar Sinha, who had led the South Asian nation's Supreme Court to a landmark verdict on judicial independence that went against the government, left Bangladesh in late 2017 amid widespread allegations he had been pressured to step aside.

Opposition groups raised fears that his departure was a blow to the credibility of the judiciary in the Muslim-majority country, ruled by

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party since 2009.

On Wednesday, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed a lawsuit against Mr. Sinha and 10 others, including a former bank chief executive on charges of graft, money laundering and abuse of power.

They were charged with using fake credit papers to launder 40 million taka (\$475,000) and transfer it to the account of Mr. Sinha, ACC secretary Dilwar Bakht said.

"The case was filed at the district office of the ACC yesterday (Wednesday)," he said.

This is the first time in Bangladesh's history that a former Chief Justice has been charged with any offence.