

Iran, U.S. swap prisoners amid tensions

Chinese-born American Xiyue Wang had been imprisoned in Iran over spying charges

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
TEHRAN

An Iranian held in the U.S. and an American held in Iran have been freed, the two sides said on Saturday, in an apparent prisoner swap at a time of heightened tensions. Tehran announced the release of Iranian scientist Mas-soud Soleimani from the United States shortly before Washington declared American researcher Xiyue Wang was returning home.

“Glad that Professor Mas-soud Soleimani and Mr. Xiyue Wang will be joining their families shortly,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted. “Many thanks to all engaged, particularly the Swiss government,” which has looked after U.S. interests in Iran in the absence of diplomatic ties, Mr. Zarif said.

Three years in detention In a statement issued in Washington, U.S. President Donald Trump said that “after more than three years of being held prisoner in Iran, Xiyue Wang is returning to the United States”. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said



Going back home: U.S. special representative for Iran, Brian Hook, with freed American Xiyue Wang in Zurich, Switzerland, on Saturday; right, Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif with scientist Massoud Soleimani. **AP**



the U.S. was “pleased that Tehran has been constructive in this matter” while also thanking Switzerland for its role. A statement on the Iranian judiciary” Mizan Online website said Mr. Wang had been “freed on Islamic clemency” and handed over to Swiss officials in order to be returned to America.

Mr. Wang, a Chinese-born American, was serving 10 years on espionage charges in Iran. A doctoral candidate in history at Princeton Un-

iversity, he had been re-searching Iran’s Qajar dynasty when he was imprisoned in August 2016.

Iran’s state news agency IRNA said Mr. Soleimani had been “freed moments ago after one year of illegal detention and was handed over to Iranian officials in Switzerland”. Mr. Soleimani, a professor and senior stem cell researcher at Tehran’s Tarbiat Modares University, was arrested on arrival at Chicago airport in October 2018

for allegedly attempting to ship growth hormones, according to Iranian media.

“Going home,” Mr. Zarif said in another tweet. The Twitter post featured photos of the Foreign Minister alongside Mr. Soleimani outside and inside a plane bearing an Iranian flag. It was unclear when the picture was taken.

Arrest of foreigners Iran has over the years arrested several foreign nation-

als, most often on accusations of spying. They include former U.S. soldier Michael R. White, British-Iranian mother Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, French academic Roland Marchal and Australian university lecturer Kylie Moore-Gilbert. Two other Australians, travel bloggers Jolie King and Mark Firkin, were released in October by Iran, in another apparent prisoner swap for Iranian student Reza Dehbashi, who had been wanted in the United States. In September, an Iranian woman sentenced in the United States for violating Washington’s sanctions against Tehran was released and returned home.

Negar Ghodskani was arrested in Australia in 2017 and later extradited to the United States, which said she confessed to participation in a conspiracy to illegally export technology to Iran in breach of sanctions.

Pregnant at the time of her arrest, she was sentenced to 27 months but released after already serving time in custody. An unknown number of Iranians are detained abroad.

Saudis distance themselves from U.S. naval base shooter

King Salman calls Trump, terms the incident as ‘heinous’

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
RIVADH

Saudi Arabia sought to distance itself on Saturday from a student who carried out a fatal shooting at an American naval base, as it seeks to repair its image of being an exporter of Islamic extremism.

The Saudi military trainee reportedly condemned the U.S. as a “nation of evil” before going on a rampage on Friday at Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida, killing three people and wounding eight.

The shooting marks a setback in the kingdom’s efforts to shrug off its long-standing reputation for promoting religious extremism after the September 11, 2001 attacks in which 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis.

‘Saudis with America’ The hashtag “Saudis stand with America” gained traction on social media after King Salman telephoned President Donald Trump to denounce the shooting as



The Pensacola Naval Air Station in Florida, U.S. **AFP**

“heinous” and pledge cooperation with American officials to investigate the incident. The King added in the phone call on Friday that the shooter, who was gunned down by police, “does not represent the Saudi people”.

The family of the shooter, identified as Mohammed al-Shamrani, echoed the same sentiment. The pro-government *Okaz* newspaper quoted one of his uncles, Saad al-Shamrani, as saying that his actions do not reflect the “humanity and loyalty of his family” to the kingdom’s leadership.

Prince Khalid bin Salman, King Salman’s younger son and the Deputy Defence Minister, offered his “sincerest condolences” to the families

of the victims. “Like many other Saudi military personnel, I was trained in a U.S. military base, and we used that valuable training to fight side by side with our American allies against terrorism and other threats,” Prince Khalid said on Twitter.

“A large number of Saudi graduates of the Naval Air Station in Pensacola moved on to serve with their U.S. counterparts in battlefronts around the world, helping to safeguard the regional and global security. (The) tragic event is strongly condemned by everyone in Saudi Arabia.”

Close ties The incident is unlikely to affect Washington’s close relations with Riyadh, with both governments seeking military and diplomatic cooperation to counter Iran. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis suggested Riyadh should offer compensation to the victims. Saudi citizens strongly rejected the view on social media.

India hires lobbying firm Cornerstone to reach out to Democrats

This comes after several lawmakers criticised New Delhi’s decision to dilute Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

At a time when its legislative changes to Jammu and Kashmir’s status have been criticised by U.S. lawmakers, especially Democrats, the Government of India has hired lobbying firm Cornerstone Government Affairs, which has strong ties to the Democrat side, to represent its interests in Washington.

Cornerstone will provide “strategic counsel, tactical planning and government relations assistance on policy matters before the U.S. Go-

vernment, the U.S. Congress, and select State governments, as well as academic institutions and think-tanks,” the letter of engagement attached to the FARA (Foreign Agent Registration Act) form said.

Strong ties to Democrats The firm has strong ties to the Democrat side of the aisle and is the government’s solution to fill a lobbying gap on that side, particularly by reaching out to a section of Democrats who have strongly criticised the govern-

ment’s policy’s in Kashmir.

Cornerstone will be paid \$40,000 per month under the contract, which started on December 1 and runs through the end of February.

The Indian government continues to employ lobbying firm BRG Group, to work on the Republican side of things. However, the gap on the Democrat side became more apparent after Democrats took charge of the House in January this year.

Since India brought legislative changes and restrictions in Jammu and Kashmir

in early August, a number of lawmakers, mostly Democrat, had written letters to the State Department and U.S. President Donald Trump on the issue, or spoken about it publicly.

Hearing on Kashmir This culminated in an October 22 hearing by the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia that focused on Kashmir. There was another hearing by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission – a caucus-like group on Capitol Hill in November.

Earlier, for lobbying the Democratic side, India had hired the Podesta Group. This firm was run by Tony Podesta, who founded the company with his brother John Podesta, who worked in the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama White Houses and famously ran Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign against Mr. Trump.

The firm shut shop in November 2017 as it came to light (due to Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S.

elections) that the Podesta Group had not declared that it was hired by former Trump campaign manager Paul Manafort to work for a Ukrainian non-profit.

Since August 5, India’s envoy to Washington, Harsh Shringla and his team have been meeting U.S. lawmakers both in Washington and at the State level to explain India’s position on the Kashmir situation and the dilution of Article 370, after which the erstwhile State was demarcated into two Union Territories.

Denuclearisation is off the table, says N. Korea

REUTERS
UNITED NATIONS

North Korea’s Ambassador to the UN said on Saturday that denuclearisation is off the negotiating table with the United States.

Ambassador Kim Song’s comment appeared to go further than North Korea’s earlier warning that discussions related to its nuclear weapons programme might have to be taken off the table given Washington’s refusal to offer concessions.

Mr. Kim Song said in a statement that the “sustained and substantial dialogue” sought by the U.S. was a “time-saving trick” to suit its domestic political

agenda, a reference to President Donald Trump’s 2020 re-election bid.

“We do not need to have lengthy talks with the U.S. now and denuclearisation is already gone out of the negotiating table,” he said.

On Friday, Mr. Trump and South Korean President MoonJae-in held a half-hour phone discussion on ways to maintain diplomacy with North Korea, South Korea said. It said the two leaders agreed that the situation has become “severe” and that “dialogue momentum should be maintained to achieve prompt results from denuclearisation negotiations.”

Drone targets Iraqi cleric Sadr’s home

This comes a day after armed men attacked anti-govt. protesters, killing 17

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BAGHDAD

An armed drone targeted the home of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr on Saturday, hours after his supporters deployed in Baghdad in response to an attack that left 17 protesters dead. The developments marked a worrying turn for the anti-government protests rocking Iraq since October, the country’s largest and deadliest grass-roots movement in decades.

The mostly young protesters in the capital’s iconic Tahrir Square had long feared a spiral into chaos, and on Friday it appeared their apprehensions were well-placed.

After nightfall, armed men on pick-up trucks attacked a large building where protesters had been camped out for weeks near the capital’s Al-Sinek bridge.

Attack creates panic Security forces deployed on the bridge itself did not intervene, witnesses said, as the attackers ousted protesters from the building in a volley of gunfire.

At least 17 people were killed and dozens more wounded, medics said, with ambulances shuttling teenagers suffering gunshot and stab wounds to nearby field clinics.

Panicked demonstrators



A supporter of Iraqi cleric Moqtada Sadr at a rally in Najaf on Saturday. **AFP**

rushed out into the street, sending out calls through social media for people to come to their main gathering place in Tahrir Square.

By Saturday morning,

hundreds had arrived. Many of the new arrivals were suspected to be members of Saraya al-Salam (Peace Brigades), the paramilitary group headed by Mr. Sadr.

Mr. Sadr has backed the protests, but demonstrators have been wary of his support as they feared it could pave the way for confrontations with pro-government forces.

Early on Saturday, a drone dropped a bomb on his home in the shrine city of Najaf, damaging the exterior wall, said sources within his party.

Mr. Sadr, a notoriously versatile figure, is currently in Iran.

SUDOKU

6		8			7			
	5	2		1			7	
			8					9
9				5			4	1
			1		6			
1	7			4				2
8					1			
	4			9		2	8	
			3			7		5

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★☆☆☆

Solution to yesterday’s Sudoku

2	7	3	9	8	5	6	4	1
4	9	5	3	6	1	2	8	7
8	1	6	7	4	2	9	3	5
6	4	2	1	5	7	8	9	3
5	8	7	4	3	9	1	2	6
3	9	1	8	2	6	5	7	4
7	5	4	2	1	8	3	6	9
3	6	8	5	9	4	7	1	2
1	2	9	6	7	3	4	5	8

ASSOCIATED PRESS
LONDON

The prospect of Russian interference in Britain’s election flared anew on Saturday after the social media platform Reddit concluded that people from Russia leaked confidential British government documents on Brexit trade talks just days before the general U.K. vote.

Reddit said in a statement that it has banned 61 accounts suspected of violating policies against vote manipulation. It said the suspect accounts shared the same pattern of activity as a Russian interference operation dubbed “Secondary Infektion” that was uncovered earlier this year.

Reddit investigated the leak after the documents became public during the campaign for Thursday’s election. Reddit said it believed the documents were leaked as “part of a campaign that has been reported as originating from Russia.”

“We were able to confirm



A lighter moment: Jeremy Corbyn at a coffee shop as part of his campaign in Barry, Wales, on Saturday. **AP**

that they did indeed show a pattern of coordination,” Reddit said.

The British government has not challenged the authenticity of the documents.

Britain’s main Opposition party has argued the documents prove that Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party is seeking a deal with the U.S. after Brexit that would drive up the cost of drugs and imperil the state-funded National Health Service. Labour Party leader

Jeremy Corbyn said the documents, which covered six rounds of preliminary talks between U.S. and U.K. negotiators, proved that Mr. Johnson was planning to put the NHS “up for sale” in trade talks. Mr. Johnson has rejected Mr. Corbyn’s analysis.

When asked about Reddit’s actions while on a campaign stop in Wales, Mr. Corbyn suggested the news was an “advanced stage of rather belated conspiracy theories by the Prime Minister.”

Reddit suspends accounts linked to Russia

Action comes after documents on U.K.’s talks with U.S. were leaked ahead of general election

Johnson, Corbyn face off in final television debate

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
LONDON

The two men vying to be British Prime Minister in December 12’s election exchanged trademark blows on Friday over the familiar fault-lines of Brexit and health care in the final head-to-head TV debate of the month-old campaign.

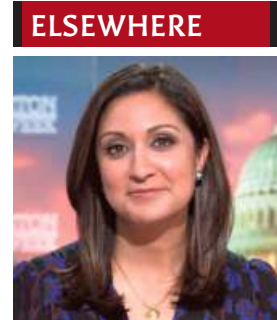
In a lacklustre hour-long battle largely devoid of stand-out moments, Prime Minister Boris Johnson repeatedly criticised Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s failure to say if he supports Britain leaving the EU.

“We have a fantastic plan to get Brexit done,” Mr. Johnson said, referring to a divorce deal he finalised with EU leaders in October. “How can you get... a new deal from Brussels for Brexit, if you don’t actually believe in it?” he added, refer-

ring to Mr. Corbyn’s vow to remain neutral in a second EU referendum he wants to hold within six months.

The Labour leader is proposing to negotiate a softer form of Brexit to put up against remaining in the bloc in the vote. He said Mr. Johnson’s vow to strike trade deals with both the European Union and the U.S. next year were unrealistic, and that Britain’s cherished national health service was under threat.

A snap poll by YouGov found the debate, the second head-to-head between the pair, was a draw, but that those questioned found Mr. Corbyn more trustworthy. Voting takes place next Thursday. The Britain Elects poll aggregator puts the Conservatives on 42%, Labour on 33% and the Liberal Democrats on 13%.



Pak.-American to moderate debate

ISLAMABAD Amna Nawaz, a Pakistani-American journalist who works for PBS, has become the first South Asian-American scribe to be selected to moderate a U.S. presidential debate, media reports said on Saturday. **PTI**

U.S. resumes talks with Taliban in Doha

DOHA Washington resumed talks with the Taliban in Qatar on Saturday, a U.S. source said, three months after President Donald Trump abruptly halted diplomatic efforts. “The U.S. rejoined talks today in Doha. The focus of discussion will be reduction of violence that leads to intra-Afghan negotiations and a ceasefire,” said the U.S. source briefed on efforts. **AFP**