Iran confronts U.S. at nuclear talks over GOP letter

By BRADLEY KLAPPER
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LAUSANNE, Switzerland — Iranian diplomats twice confronted their American counterparts about an open letter from Republican senators who warned that any nuclear deal could expire the day President Barack Obama leaves office, a senior U.S. official said Monday.

The official, noting the administration's warnings when the letter first surfaced, said the GOP intervention was a new issue in the tense negotiations facing an end-of-month deadline for a framework agreement.

The letter came up in nuclear talks Sunday between senior U.S. and Iranian negotiators, the official said, and the Iranians raised it again in discussions Monday led by Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.

Zarif was quoted by Iranian state media after the meeting as saying the topics included the potential speed of a softening of U.S. economic sanctions and the new issue of the letter from the senators. "It is necessary that the stance of the U.S. administration be defined about this move," he was quoted as saying.

Kerry and Zarif met for nearly five hours in Lausanne, the start of several planned days of discussions. Most of the Iranians then departed for Brussels, where they were to meet with European negotiators.

In Brussels, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said that "we are entering a crucial time, a crucial two weeks." And German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that after "more than 10 years of negotiations, we should seize this opportunity."

"There are areas where we've made progress, areas where we have yet to make any progress," British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said. "But the fact that we're all here talking shows the commitment on both sides to try to reach an agreement."

In Lausanne, the U.S. official wouldn't say how much time the sides spent talking about the letter drafted seven days ago by freshman Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas and signed by 46 other GOP senators. The Iranians have called the letter a propaganda ploy, and Zarif joked last week that some U.S. legislators didn't understand their own Constitution. The Obama administration has called the letter "ill timed" and "ill advised," coming weeks before the deadline for a preliminary agreement with Iran on its nuclear program.

Cotton isn't backing down. In his maiden speech in the Senate, Cotton reiterated his view that the deal being discussed would pave Iran's path to a nuclear bomb.

"Iran is an outlaw regime. ... Unsurprising, Iran is only growing bolder and more aggressive as America retreats from the Middle East," Cotton said, adding that Iranian leaders continue to call for Israel's elimination and that Iran is meddling in other nations, including Syria and Iraq.

The U.S. official in Lausanne, who briefed reporters only condition of anonymity, said that in the end, the talks and a potential agreement depend on Iran showing the world that its nuclear program is exclusively peaceful.

The goal for a full agreement is the end of June.

AP Photo/Dave Hunt, Pool

Samuel, only his first name given, kicks a ball through the ruins of their family home as his father, Phillip, at back, picks through the debris in Port Vila, Vanuatu in the aftermath of Cyclone Pam Monday.

24 dead in Vanuatu after Cyclone Pam

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — The United Nations reported Monday that 24 people are confirmed dead and 3,300 have been displaced by Cyclone Pam in the South Pacific archipelago of Vanuatu.

Radio and telephone communications with outer islands have not yet been established two days after what the country's president called a "monster" storm, the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said.

It said 3,300 people are sheltering in 37 evacuation centers on the main island of Efate and in the provinces of Torba and Penama. "Basic emergency rations are being provided to evacuees, including water, rice, tinned fish or meat, coffee, tea, sugar, Milo, biscuits and other items," the report said.

Military aircraft from New Caledonia, Australia and New Zealand have been conducting aerial assessments of the damage.

The latest report came as Vanuatu's president rushed back to his country, which has repeatedly warned it is already suffering devastating effects from climate change with coastal areas being washed away.

Looking weary and red-eyed, Baldwin Lonsdale told The Associated Press that Cyclone Pam destroyed or damaged 90 percent of the buildings in the capital alone. Lonsdale was interviewed in Sendai, in northeastern Japan, where he had been attending a U.N. disaster conference when the cyclone struck.

> "After all the development that has taken place, all this development has been wiped out."
> **— Baldwin Lonsdale,** Vanuatu's president

"This is a very devastating cyclone in Vanuatu. I term it as a monster, a monster," he said. "It's a setback for the government and for the people of Vanuatu. After all the development that has taken place, all this development has been wiped out."

Lonsdale said because of a breakdown in communications infrastructure, even he could not reach his family. "We do not know if our families are safe or not. As the leader of the nation, my whole heart is for the people, the nation," he said.

Officials in Vanuatu were struggling to determine the scale of devastation from the cyclone, which tore through the nation early Saturday, packing winds of 168 miles per hour. Bridges were down outside the capital, Port Vila, making travel by vehicle impossible even around the main island of Efate.

Paolo Malatu, coordinator for Vanuatu's National Disaster Management Office, said officials had dispatched every plane and helicopter they could to fly over the hard-hit outer islands.

"The damage to homes and infrastructure is severe," Malatu said. "The priority at the moment is to get people water, food and shelter."

The damaged airport in Port Vila has reopened, allowing some aid and relief flights to reach the country. Lonsdale said a wide range of items were needed, from tarpaulins and water containers to medical supplies and construction tools. Those on the ground pleaded for help to arrive quickly.

The city's hospital was overwhelmed with patients, and some beds were moved outside due to fears the building is no longer safe.

"The wards have all been evacuated because of structural damage," surgeon Richard Leona told Australia's Channel 7. "We are badly needing this help. We need to get an urgent drug supply and food and also set up a mobile hospital to deal with the influx of patients coming in."

Many of the city's residents spent Monday clearing away downed trees and cleaning up what was left of their houses. Those left homeless were generally staying with loved ones whose houses had withstood the storm, or sleeping in temporary shelters provided by aid agencies, said UNICEF spokeswoman Alice Clements.

Netanyahu promises no Palestinian state if he is re-elected

JERUSALEM (AP) — In a frenzied last day of campaigning, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday ruled out the establishment of a Palestinian state and vowed to keep building east Jerusalem settlements as he appealed to hard-line voters on the eve of Israel's closely contested general election.

The moderate opposition, meanwhile, announced a dramatic last-minute machination of its own, removing one of its two joint candidates for prime minister.

Netanyahu, who has governed for the past six years and has long been the most dominant personality in Israeli politics, has watched his standing plummet in recent weeks.

Recent opinion polls show his Likud Party lagging behind Isaac Herzog's Zionist Union. Herzog, who has vowed to revive peace efforts with the Palestinians, repair ties with the U.S. and reduce the growing gaps between rich and poor, confidently predicted an "upheaval" was imminent.

Late Monday night, it was announced that Herzog's main partner, former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, had given up an agreement to rotate the prime minister post with him if their alliance wins. It was widely thought that the unusual arrangement was driving away voters.

Tuesday's election caps an acrimonious three-month campaign that is widely seen as a referendum on Netanyahu.

While his comments Monday appeared to be election rhetoric, they nonetheless put him further at odds with the international community, boding poorly for already strained relations with the U.S. and other key allies if he wins a third consecutive term.

The hard-line leader has portrayed himself as the only politician capable of confronting Israel's numerous security challenges, while his opponents have focused on the country's high cost of living and presented Netanyahu as imperious and out of touch with the common man.

As Netanyahu's poll numbers have dropped in recent days, he has appeared increasingly desperate, stepping up his nationalistic rhetoric in a series of interviews to local media to appeal to his core base. Netanyahu has also complained of an international conspiracy to oust him, funded by wealthy foreigners who dislike him, and on Sunday night, he addressed an outdoor rally before tens of thousands of hard-line supporters in Tel Aviv.

The strategy is aimed at siphoning off voters from nationalistic rivals, but risks alienating centrist voters who are expected to determine the outcome of the race.

BRIEFLY

A documentary prompts a murder charge of millionaire Robert Durst

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Robert Durst, a troubled millionaire from one of America's richest families, agreed Monday to face trial for murder in the Los Angeles shooting 15 years ago of a woman who some believe knew too much about the disappearance of his wife in 1982.

Monday's extradition hearing came only hours after Sunday's finale of a six-part HBO documentary detailing Durst's life of privilege and links to three deaths: his friend in Los Angeles, Susan Berman; his wife in New York, Kathleen Durst; and Morris Black, an elderly neighbor in Texas.

Durst is heard muttering that he "killed them all, of course," at the end of "The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst."

His trip to California trip may be delayed by new charges in Louisiana, one of his lawyers said. A police report said the heir to a New York real estate fortune was carrying a revolver when FBI agents arrested him without incident at a New Orleans hotel before the final episode. It wasn't immediately clear if Durst had the required gun permit. Christopher Bowman, a spokesman for the Orleans Parish district attorney's office, declined to comment.

Durst shuffled into a courtroom with his hands shackled at his waist, wearing sandals and an orange jumpsuit, and appeared to fall asleep before Magistrate Harry Cantrell struck his gavel down. Then he answered "yes" to questions about waiving extradition. The judge also agreed that Durst could get pain medication meanwhile; defense attorney Dick DeGuerin said Durst had undergone "neurosurgery."

Suspect accused of shooting Ferguson officers says he was aiming for someone else

CLAYTON, Mo. (AP) — A man charged in the shooting of two police officers during a demonstration in Ferguson told investigators he was not targeting law enforcement and had been aiming for someone with whom he was in dispute.

St. Louis County Prosecutor Robert McCulloch said he believed the 20-year-old suspect attended last week's protest before the shooting happened. Activists said Williams was not a consistent fixture in their tight-knit group.

"We're not sure we completely buy that part of it," McCulloch said of Williams' contention that he did not fire at the officers.

Williams is charged with two counts of first-degree assault, one count of firing a weapon from a vehicle and three counts of armed criminal action. He made a brief court appearance Monday, and the case was scheduled for a later date. Court officials said he did not yet have an attorney.

Suicide bombers kill 15 people in Pakistan

LAHORE, Pakistan (AP) — A pair of suicide bombers attacked two churches in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore on Sunday as worshippers prayed inside — killing 15 people in the latest assault against religious minorities in this increasingly fractured country, officials said.

A spokesman for the Pakistani Taliban, Ahsanullah Ahsan, claimed responsibility for the assault in a statement emailed to reporters, and warned, "There will be more of such attacks."

Afterward, an angry Christian mob blocked a major highway, ransacked a bus terminal and burned two people to death who they suspected of being involved in the attacks. Christian demonstrators blocked roads in other major Pakistani cities as well.

The explosions occurred in quick succession in the Christian neighborhood of Youhanabad at two churches while parishioners worshipped at Sunday morning services. The churches are about 650 yards apart. At least 70 people were wounded, said Zahid Pervez, the provincial director general of health, who gave the death toll.