

WORLD

Eyes on Iran path as Raisi takes reins

Removal of sanctions, future of nuclear deal among president's top concerns

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A light was shone on Iran's domestic and international agendas as the country's new president took the oath of office before lawmakers last week. Much attention is being given to how these agendas under Ebrahim Raisi may influence negotiations on a nuclear deal between Iran and leading powers.

In a ceremony broadcast on state TV on Thursday, Raisi vowed to protect Iran's borders and its political, economic and cultural independence.

Raisi, elected as president on June 18 and viewed as a hard-liner, replaced his moderate predecessor Hassan Rouhani, whose landmark achievement was the 2015 nuclear agreement that Iran struck with six major powers. Raisi was endorsed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Tuesday.

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In his inauguration speech, the president said the new administration would seek to have oppressive sanctions imposed by the United States lifted, but would “not tie the nation's standard of living to the will of foreigners”.

The US' unilateral sanctions and the direction of the Iran nuclear agreement have become the biggest challenges for the Raisi administration, and such issues will run through the country's internal and external affairs.

Raisi's coming to power may “bring positive changes” to the current situation, said Niu Song, a professor at the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University.

Raisi, Niu said, represents a reconciliation of the long-term conservative and moderate views within Iran, as he also “maintains a good relationship” with Iran's Shia community represented by the supreme leader. These ties would contribute to political developments under his administration, Niu said.

“With the support of the

supreme leader, Raisi will speed up the pace of improving relations with the US,” Niu said, adding that the key to the relationship lies in finding an acceptable compromise for both sides during the nuclear talks.

Iran and Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the US have been holding talks in Vienna since April in an effort to revive the nuclear pact.

Iranian and Western officials have said significant gaps remain. A sixth round of indirect talks between Teheran and Washington in the Austrian capital adjourned on June 20, and the parties have yet to announce when they will resume.

Niu said Raisi's rise to the presidency will have a positive impact on the negotiations, and both Iran and the US still have demands for reaching an Iran nuclear agreement, “although there still exist some challenges”.

“The Raisi government has just come to power. He needs to show a relatively tough stance and will not easily compromise during the Vienna negotiations,” he said.

The new president also promised to improve Iran's economic conditions, which have been seriously affected by the US sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic.

“If the US does not lift the sanctions it will be difficult for the Raisi government to reach a nuclear agreement with the country,” Niu said. “For Iran, lifting the sanctions and developing the economy smoothly on this basis are extremely important.”

Looking for opportunity

The US is thought to be looking for an opportunity to break the deadlock after the change in administration that brought Joe Biden to the White House as president in January.

Biden has said he favors the US' return to the nuclear deal. Raisi has also indicated that extensive interactions with neighboring countries are among his administration's main foreign policy principles.

China had extended congratulations to Raisi on his inauguration, and hoped the two countries can “elevate bilateral relations to a new level”, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said on Friday.

“We believe that under the leadership of President Ebrahim Raisi, Iran will achieve greater progress in national and socioeconomic development,” she said.

China stands ready to work with Iran to take the opportunity of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties to further improve relations, Hua said.

Xinhua contributed to this story.

Briefly

UNITED STATES Cuomo may face charges, sheriff says

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo could face misdemeanor charges if investigators substantiate a criminal complaint accusing him of groping an aide last year, the Albany County sheriff said. Sheriff Craig Apple promised a “very comprehensive” investigation in conjunction with the Albany County district attorney's office but said it would be premature to commit to a timeline or say whether Cuomo himself will be questioned. The complaint, filed last week, is the first known instance of a woman officially complaining to a law enforcement agency over alleged misconduct by Cuomo. A television interview the executive assistant gave was set to air on Monday. Cuomo's lawyer Rita Glavin has said the aide's allegation was fabricated.

Police officer shot dead in Chicago

A Chicago police officer died and another was wounded following an exchange of gunfire during a traffic stop late on Saturday, officials said. The two officers were fired upon after a vehicle carrying two men and a woman had been pulled over, Chicago police First Deputy Superintendent Eric Carter said. The officers returned fire, and one of those in the vehicle was wounded. That person's condition was not made public. The officers were taken to University of Chicago Medical Center where one of the officers, a woman, died. Two of the people who were in the vehicle were in custody, Carter said. A weapon had been recovered from the scene, he added.

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Sacred refuge



People contend with the floodwaters outside a Hanuman temple as the water levels of the Ganges and Yamuna rivers rise in Allahabad, India, on Saturday. SANJAY KANOJIA / AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

UN warns of deadlier phase in Afghanistan

UNITED NATIONS — Afghanistan is at a dangerous turning point as the war enters a new phase, said Deborah Lyons, the UN secretary-general's special representative for Afghanistan.

“Ahead lies either a genuine peace negotiation or a tragically intertwined set of crises: an increasingly brutal conflict combined with an acute humanitarian situation and multiplying human rights abuses,” Lyons told the Security Council in a briefing on Friday.

In recent weeks, the war in Afghanistan has entered a deadlier and more destructive phase. The Taliban campaign over June and July to capture rural areas has achieved significant territorial gains. From this strengthened position, they have begun to attack large cities, Lyons said.

Intensified clashes

In the latest development, Taliban militants overran major parts of Sari Pul city, the capital of northern Sari Pul Province, on Sunday. This is the second provincial capital after Shiberghan, the capital of Nimroz Province, to fall to the Taliban over the past three days, a local official said.

“Major parts of Sari Pul city have fallen to the Taliban militants today morning and fighting has been continuing between government forces and Taliban fighters,” the official told Xinhua News Agency.

The militants have also gained ground in the strategically important city of Kunduz on the border with Tajikistan amid efforts by government forces to beat them back, a local official said on Sunday.

In the city, the capital of Kunduz Province in the north, 10 civilians died and 42 people with injuries



Afghans view a damaged clinic after airstrikes in the city of Lashkar Gah in the southern province of Helmand on Sunday. ABDUL KHALIQ / AP

“I do believe that the Security Council and the broader international community can help prevent the most dire scenarios.”

Deborah Lyons, UN secretary-general's special representative for Afghanistan

were admitted to a government-run provincial hospital following the clashes early on Saturday, said Ehsanullah Fazli, the director of Kunduz Public Health Directorate.

In the northern province of Badakhshan, dozens of Taliban militants were killed or injured in an attack on the capital, Faizabad, that was repulsed by the army, the military said in statement on Sunday.

“Taliban rebels attacked Faizabad city from four directions at 8 pm local time on Saturday, but faced stiff resistance and fled after leaving 35 bodies behind and 25 others injured,” the statement said.

A few more militants were arrested in the gunbattle that lasted several hours, the statement added.

Taliban militants were yet to comment on the situation in Faizabad.

Lyons called on the Security Council to work to prevent Afghanistan from descending into a situation of catastrophe “so serious that it would have few, if any, parallels in this century”.

She added: “And let me assure you, such a catastrophe would have consequences far beyond the borders of Afghanistan. I do believe that the Security Council and the broader international community can help prevent the most dire scenarios. But it will require acting in unity and acting quickly.”

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Infrastructure bill advances but Republicans play for time

WASHINGTON — The US Senate on Saturday voted to clear a key procedural hurdle to advance a roughly \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill, but the action soon stalled as a few Republican holdouts refused to speed up approval of one of US President Joe Biden's top priorities.

The measure, if passed, would provide a massive injection of federal money for a range of public works programs, from roads and bridges to broadband internet access, drinking water and more. In a rare stroke of bipartisanship, Republicans

joined the Democrats to overcome the 60-vote threshold needed to advance the measure toward final votes. The vote was 67-27, a robust tally. If approved, the bill would go to the House of Representatives.

But momentum fell away as a few Republican senators refused to yield 30 hours of required debate before the next set of procedural votes, which could delay swift passage of the package and result in a dayslong slog.

“We can get this done the easy way or the hard way,” Senate Majori-

ty Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democratic, said as the Senate opened on Saturday.

Despite the overwhelming support for the bill, by evening there was no deal struck to quicken the process for considering amendments and final votes. Schumer said senators would resume at noon on Sunday.

Without an agreement, Republicans are expected to force the Senate to run out the clock for up to 60 hours before a final vote to pass the bill, according to The Hill, a US political website.

Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said on Saturday that Republicans want more amendment votes before a final vote.

“There are many outstanding amendments that are important, and that deserve votes before the Senate is asked to vote on final passage of this bill,” McConnell said on the Senate floor.

“I hope senators can work together in a bipartisan way to get more amendments up and continue improving this important bill,” he said.

After months of negotiations, the White House and a bipartisan group

25 million eyes for US lab petition

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An online petition initiated by Chinese internet users for a thorough investigation of a biological laboratory at Fort Detrick in the United States concluded on Friday, garnering 25 million signatures in just three weeks.

The petition, which a group of Chinese internet users drafted and entrusted the Global Times to post on social media, was launched on July 17 and received 500,000 signatures in 24 hours and 1 million in 48 hours. It concluded at midnight on Friday Beijing time.

The investigation should look at the origins of COVID-19 as related to the Maryland laboratory as well as the laboratory's safety, the organizers said.

Dangerous infectious viruses are stored at Fort Detrick, 80 kilometers northwest of Washington, and there was a leak there in 2019, just before the pandemic broke out, the Global Times said.

As the number of signatories to the petition neared 10 million, the website was subjected to severe cyberattacks whose origins were IP addresses in the US, the newspaper said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian said on July 26 that the US needs to explain why it remains silent on opening the Fort Detrick laboratory to an investigation and why it launched cyberattacks on the website housing the petition, which calls for the World Health Organization to investigate the laboratory's activities.

A Weibo user said: “China won't take the blame and be the scapegoat for the US' egregious mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The US has the most confirmed cases and deaths in the world, yet it has barely done anything good to the international community in fighting the pandemic.”

Another Weibo user, dorelaK, said investigating only one US biological laboratory is insufficient, calling for that all such laboratories, of which there are more than 200 worldwide, to be investigated.

On Thursday a group of Filipino academics, along with Herman Laurel, a political commentator, launched an online petition similar to the Chinese one calling for “the wall of silence” to be broken regarding Fort Detrick.

The campaign, which has amassed hundreds of signatures, also calls on “certain countries” to stop politicizing COVID-19.

Calling on the WHO to investigate Fort Detrick, Laurel, a columnist for the social news website Sovereign PH, said the laboratory “suffered a laboratory incident in July 2019, causing the US Centers for Disease Control to shut down the facility (the following month) due to ‘serious safety violations’”.

Xinhua contributed to this story.



Vice-President Kamala Harris confers with Senator Tom Carper following meetings at the US Capitol on Saturday. KEN CEDENO / REUTERS

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