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USD	01	GBP	01	INR	1000	PKR	1000	EUR	01	IRR	1000	AED	01
AFN	78.50	AFN	110.04	AFN	1067	AFN	500	AFN	95.82	AFN	0.37	AFN	21.22

Putin says US wants to 'hold back' Russia as Biden meeting looms

Russian President Vladimir Putin has said he wants to improve Moscow's ties with Washington when he holds his first summit with US counterpart Joe Biden later this month, but he set a tough tone ahead of the meeting and said the US wants to "hold back" Russia's development.

The face-to-face meeting scheduled to take place in Geneva on June 16 comes amid deeply strained relations between the United States and Russia.

Tensions are running high over a litany of issues including the jailing of Kremlin critic Alexey Navalny and the conflict in Ukraine, as well as allegations of hacking and election meddling.

"We need to find ways of looking for a settlement in our relations, which are at an extremely low level now," Putin told the Saint Petersburg International Economic Forum on Friday.

Putin said that disarmament, the coronavirus pandemic and environmental issues will also be on the agenda.

The 68-year-old said Russia had "no issues with the United States".

"But it has an issue with us: they want to hold back our development, they talk about it publicly," he said.

Both Russia and the US have downplayed expectations of any breakthrough at the Geneva meeting.

The Kremlin has said that differences between Moscow and Washington run too deep for a major "reset" in relations, with Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov warning earlier this week that Russia would send what he described as "uncomfortable" signals to the US ahead of the summit.

Ryabkov's comments on Monday came a day after Biden said he would press Putin to respect human rights when the two leaders meet.

Since taking office in January, Biden has imposed new sanctions on Moscow over alleged election meddling and cyberattacks.

Putin on Friday said the measures were driven by domestic political competition in the US and were an "enigma" to Moscow.

Speaking on other issues, Putin announced that the laying of pipes for the first of two lines of the prospective Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline to Germany has now been fully completed, leaving only welding works to finalise its construction. He said the second line will follow suit soon.

The Russian leader hailed the project as a better economic option than an existing pipeline via Ukraine, rejecting Ukrainian and Western criticism that it is designed to rob Ukraine of transit fees.

Putin said Russia will continue pumping 40 billion cubic metres of gas via Ukraine a year in line with the existing five-year contract, and could continue doing so after it expires if Ukraine shows "goodwill".

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a tense tug-of-war following Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and its support for separatists in the country's east.

The US has strongly opposed construction of the new Russian pipeline, but last month waived some sanctions on the project – a move Biden justified by saying that the project was nearly complete, and that continuing sanctions could have harmed ties with Europe.

aljazeera

Saudi Arabia draws hundreds at first Riyadh concert since COVID-19 outbreak

Hundreds gathered Thursday for the first concert in the Saudi capital since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to watch performances by Syrian diva Assala Nasri and Kuwaiti singer Nabil Shuail.

"This is the first concert to take place in Saudi for a very long time," said one spectator at the concert, held in a restaurant of a large Riyadh hotel.

"We are delighted to come from Kuwait to attend the concert," said a Kuwaiti tourist.

Saudi Arabia has officially recorded more than 454,000 coronavirus infections, including 7,408 deaths.

It was not the first concert - Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli sang in April at the ancient Saudi city of Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Bocelli performed alongside his family members the site, a long-isolated area seen widely as an open-air museum.

In February 2020, award-winning American singer-songwriter Lionel Richie performed some of his top hits to a sold-out crowd at the Winter at Tantora dfestival, also in Saudi Arabia's al-Ula. The "Modern Legends" performances also saw British singer Craig David perform as a special guest. Both performed their songs at the newly created Maraya Concert hall in al-Ula, which has already seen Greek pianist, composer and music producer Yanni and Spanish opera legend José Carreras perform to their Saudi Arabian and regional fans.

Facebook suspends Trump accounts for two years

Facebook Inc has suspended former US President Donald Trump's Facebook and Instagram accounts for two years.

He was barred indefinitely from both sites in January in the wake of posts he made on the US Capitol riots, but last month Facebook's Oversight Board criticised the open-ended penalty.

Facebook said Mr Trump's actions were "a severe violation of our rules".

Mr Trump said the move was "an insult" to the millions who voted for him in last year's presidential election.

Facebook's move comes as the social media giant is also ending a policy shielding politicians from some content moderation rules.

It said that it would no longer give politicians immunity for deceptive or abusive content based on their comments being newsworthy.

Mr Trump's ban was effective from the date of the initial suspension on 7 January, Facebook's vice-president of global affairs Nick Clegg said in a post.

"Given the gravity of the circumstances that led to Mr Trump's suspension, we believe his actions constituted a severe violation of our rules which merit the highest penalty available," it added.

On his return, Mr Trump will be held to "a strict set of rapidly escalating sanctions," for any violations, Mr Clegg's statement noted.

How has Mr Trump responded?

In a statement issued from his Save America political action committee, Mr Trump said: "Facebook's ruling is an insult to the record-setting 75m people, plus many others, who voted for us..."

"They shouldn't be allowed to get away with this censoring and silencing, and ultimately, we will win. Our country can't take this abuse anymore!"

In a second statement on the two-year ban, Mr Trump attacked Facebook's founder.

"Next time I'm in the White House there will be no more dinners, at his request, with Mark Zuckerberg and his wife," the former president said. "It will be all business!"

The move by Facebook allows Mr Trump to return to the platform before the 2024 presidential election.

It also comes as he prepares to again hold the large scale in-person rallies that were a signature of his campaigns and presidency. One of his first is planned for Dallas, Texas, in early July, according to local media.

Earlier this week, it emerged that the communications platform set up by Mr Trump in the wake of his social media bans - From the Desk of Donald J Trump - has been permanently shut down.

In addition to Facebook, which has over two billion monthly users, Mr Trump has also been banned from Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Twitch and other social media platforms over the January riot.

Last month, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican Trump ally, signed the first law in the US that punishes tech companies for de-platforming politicians.

bbc

Leader: Revolution of Imam Khomeini is stronger than ever

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says Iran is stronger than ever as the country marks the 32nd anniversary of the passing away of its revolutionary founder Imam Khomeini.

"I start the discussion from here that among the revolutionary systems and establishments that have been formed in the last one or two centuries, I do not know of any system that has been predicted as much as the Islamic Republic to collapse," the Leader said Friday in a televised address.

"From the first day of the revolution, the ill-wishers and those who could not digest and tolerate this great phenomenon, both inside and outside the country, said that the Islamic Republic would not last for another two months, six months or a year," the Leader said.

"It was one or two years ago when the esteemed Americans said the same thing and a high-ranking American official stated that the Islamic Republic would not see its 40th anniversary. I do not remember so many predictions of decay and collapse to have been made about any other system," he added.

Ayatollah Khamenei was apparently referring to former US national security advisor John Bolton's infamous prediction while addressing a terrorist MKO convention in Paris in 2017.

At the conference Bolton said, "The outcome of the president's policy review should be to determine that the Ayatollah Khomeini's 1979 revolution will not last until its 40th birthday. And that's why, before 2019, we here will celebrate in Tehran."

"But, thank God, the revolution and the system of Imam Khomeini not only did not collapse and did not stop, but became stronger day by day," Ayatollah Khamenei said Friday.

"It did not surrender, did not give up and rather showed its independence day by day. It achieved great success and overcame obstacles."

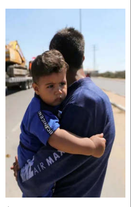
The Leader said despite many successive political, security, economic obstacles created for Iran, "the Islamic Republic today is more developed than 40 years ago and is ahead in all respects by the grace of God."

"The question arises, what is the secret of this permanence? Why did the Islamic Republic not face the fate of other revolutions in spite of all this hostility? Here I announce that the glorious and proud secret of this system is two words: the Republic and Islam. The existence created from these two words has every right to remain permanent, because it includes both people and Islam."

Every year on the anniversary of the passing away, a commemoration ceremony is held at Imam Khomeini's mausoleum in southern Tehran, with large crowds of mourners attending.

Like last year, authorities scrapped the ceremony and other events across the country this year to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Nevertheless, people in different cities attended local events by observing social distancing, to pay tribute to the late Imam. **presstv**

Egypt sends building equipment to begin Gaza reconstruction



Egypt has sent a convoy of engineers and building equipment to Gaza to begin reconstruction in the Palestinian enclave after the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Egyptian state television reported on Friday.

Dozens of bulldozers, cranes and trucks flying Egyptian flags lined up along the border to begin crossing into the Gaza Strip, television pictures showed.

Palestinians lined the street on the Gaza side of the Rafah crossing to welcome the convoy as it rumbled into the small coastal enclave. A Palestinian border official said 50 vehicles had crossed.

"We rushed with all our money, equipment, and what we owned to join the Palestinians in the rebuilding. Every Muslim and every Egyptian wishes to take part in [the reconstruction]," Egyptian truck driver Mahmoud Ismail told Reuters in Gaza.

Eleven days of conflict between Israel and Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist rulers of Gaza, erupted on May 10. More than 250 Palestinians were killed in hundreds of Israeli airstrikes in Gaza. Rockets fired by Gaza militants killed 13 people in Israel.

Egypt played a major role in brokering a ceasefire between both sides and has said it would allocate $500 million to fund the rebuilding of devastated areas in Gaza.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem on Friday reiterated the group's appreciation of Egyptian contributions to the rebuilding efforts.

Gaza's housing ministry said 1,500 housing units were destroyed during the fighting, another 1,500 housing units had been damaged beyond repair and 17,000 suffered partial damage. A ministry official put the cost of rebuilding at $150 million.

Egypt in February opened the Rafah crossing until further notice after Palestinian factions moved towards reconciliation following talks in Cairo.

It had previously been opening the crossing for only a few days at a time to allow stranded travelers to pass.

The 365-sq km (141-sq mile) Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas, is home to around 2 million Palestinians. An Israeli-led blockade has put restrictions on the movement of people and goods for years.

Iran-backed Houthis refusing to engage 'meaningfully' on a Yemen ceasefire: US

The Iran-backed Houthi militia continues to block progress towards reaching a ceasefire in Yemen, the US State Department said Friday after its top diplomat for the war-torn country returned to Washington.

"The Houthis continue a devastating offensive on Marib that is condemned by the international community and leaves the Houthis increasingly isolated," the State Department said in a statement following Special Envoy Tim Lenderking's sixth publicized trip to the region.

Lenderking was appointed by President Joe Biden shortly after he entered the White House in a sign of the president's ambition to end the war in Yemen.

Last month, the US slapped sanctions on two Houthi officials for their role in the offensive on Marib, one of the last Yemeni government strongholds.

Lenderking also blasted the Houthis for rejecting a meeting with UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths last month.

The Houthis virtually met with Griffiths after the sanctions.

However, after returning from his sixth trip, Lenderking appeared to still be dissatisfied with the Houthis.

"While there are numerous problematic actors inside of Yemen, the Houthis bear major responsibility for refusing to engage meaningfully on a ceasefire and to take steps to resolve a nearly seven-year conflict that has brought unimaginable suffering to the Yemeni people," the State Department said.

During his most recent trip, Lenderking made stops in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Jordan.

Separately, Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke today with his Omani counterpart on Friday to discuss regional issues, including the Yemen war.

"The Secretary and Foreign Minister noted the importance of an immediate, comprehensive ceasefire to help bring the war in Yemen and the humanitarian suffering of the Yemeni people to an end," State Department Spokesman Ned Price said.

Oman is one of the multiple Gulf and Arab countries attempting to facilitate and mediate peace talks on Yemen.

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