

MIDDLE EAST

TALKS SET AS DEAL FACES FRESH STRAINS



REUTERS

A child stands Saturday next to the rubble of a building damaged in an Israeli strike in Qennarit, southern Lebanon.

Iran declares Hormuz closed, citing attacks in Lebanon

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Reuters

ZURICH, Switzerland — A high-level Iranian team arrived Saturday in Switzerland for peace talks with the United States, Iranian state media reported, as U.S. Vice President JD Vance departed Washington for meetings that Pakistan said will begin Sunday.

Though the U.S. and Iran agreed to a 60-day ceasefire while negotiations take place, Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on Saturday declared the Strait of Hormuz closed. This could complicate talks in which both sides seek to advance an interim deal brokered by Pakistan that U.S. President Donald Trump and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian signed Wednesday to end the war that began Feb. 28 with U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran.

The Revolutionary Guard warned ships would be at risk if they approached the waterway, a vital conduit for about a fifth of the world's oil and gas supplies. Iran cited

what it called Israeli "crimes" in Lebanon and a U.S. violation of commitments to establish a ceasefire.

U.S. Central Command said 55 merchant ships transited the strait earlier in the day, moving large amounts of cargo and more than 17 million barrels of oil to global markets, and that U.S. forces would ensure the flow of ships continued.

Trump wrote in a social media post that no toll will be charged for passage through the strait during or after the 60-day ceasefire, but left open the possibility of a toll levied by the U.S. "for services rendered as the Guardian Angel to the countries of the Middle East" if a peace deal is not completed.

Mohammad Mokhber, an adviser to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Mojtaba Khamenei, accused the U.S. on social media of failing to implement the first clause of its 14-point interim deal with Iran, which includes a ceasefire "on all fronts," including Lebanon. He said as long as the agreement was only on paper, the flow of Middle

East energy would remain halted.

The Lebanon truce appeared fragile as Israeli forces and the Iran-backed militant group Hezbollah attacked each other.

Momentum builds for US-Iran talks

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said Iran would press in Switzerland for a fulfillment of commitments, citing past failures by the other side to honor agreements.

The Iranian delegation was led by chief negotiator Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and included Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi as well as senior security, central bank and oil officials, Iranian media said.

In an interview earlier with Fox News, Vance said he was confident the ceasefire agreed to in Washington's 14-point deal with Tehran would hold and he saw no evidence the strait was closed.

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OPEN MEETINGS LAW

Conservative group sues DPI over conference

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A conservative group has sued the state Department of Public Instruction over a conference it hosted two years ago to review guidelines for standardized testing, alleging the department violated open meetings laws by closing it off to the public.

In a lawsuit filed in Adams County Circuit Court last week, the Institute for Reforming Government said DPI's standards-setting committees that convened in June 2024 should be considered "governmental bodies" and therefore subject to open meetings laws.

DPI held a four-day conference at Chula Vista resort in the Wisconsin Dells that month that included agency staff, dozens of educators and third-party vendor Data Recognition Corporation at a cost of nearly \$369,000. That figure included costs to revise the state's standardized

testing and resort costs.

Although the committees didn't take a vote on changing standards for the state's Forward Exam, the 88-member group of educators still came to a consensus and forwarded their recommendations to the larger committee, the lawsuit argued.

The lawsuit asks an Adams County judge to void any actions taken by DPI regarding revisions it made to test standards that year. Those changes irked conservative lawmakers, who said the new guidelines lower academic standards and make it impossible to compare progress to previous years.

"DPI cannot lower academic standards in secret and simply expect parents and students to accept the outcome. Taxpayers funded this process, but DPI shut them out," Jake Curtis, general counsel for IRG, said in a statement.

DPI spokesperson Chris Bucher said in a statement that DPI has participated

"openly and transparently" in legislative hearings about the conference, which Rep. Mark Born, R-Beaver Dam, the co-chair of the Legislature's budget committee, called routine.

"Yet, more than two years later, a special interest group with a well-documented political agenda continues to recycle unfounded accusations, diverting public resources and agency time away from the work that matters most: supporting Wisconsin students, educators, and schools," Bucher said.

As part of the conference, Data Recognition Corporation required attendees to sign nondisclosure agreements to protect confidential Forward Exam questions.

In March, the budget committee cut DPI's budget by \$250,000 for the following year after a newsletter published by conservative operative Brian Fraley questioned why the department held the retreat.

In 2024, the department changed what it meant for students to be considered "proficient" in reading and math on the Forward Exam, which also affected how DPI's report cards for schools are calculated. Fraley requested records of the conference under the state's open records law, some of which he said were finally released after he retained IRG to represent him.

The records did not include receipts for the four-day workshop at Chula Vista, Fraley wrote. Of those expenses, \$219,225 went toward hosting the actual workshop, a breakdown from the department showed, slightly less than the overall cut lawmakers approved.

IRG and lawmakers also raised concerns about how long it took DPI to respond to Fraley's request. DPI officials told lawmakers earlier this year that the department's four lawyers expected it would take five weeks to fulfill the records request.