

Schism in EU

Spain, Ireland call for 'urgent review' of EU-Israel agreement over human rights in Gaza

International Desk Spain and Ireland have asked the European Commission to "undertake an urgent review" of the EU-Israel agreement over worsening human rights situation in Gaza in the wake of Israel's onslaught on the Palestinian territory.

In a letter to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, both countries have expressed deep concern at the deteriorating situation in Gaza and seeking an "urgent review" of whether Israel is complying with human rights obligations under its trade agreement with the European Union.

The letter from Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar and Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez also asked that the commission propose "appropriate measures" that could be taken if Israel is found to be in breach of the obligations in the EU/Israel Association Agreement.

Rafah ground invasion

The request from the European Commission comes amid fears that Israel will launch a ground invasion of Rafah where more than a million Palestinian refugees are taking shelter from the ongoing war.

The Irish Times reported earlier this month that Ireland was seeking the support of fellow EU member states for a review of the trade agreement with Israel.

The two leaders wrote that they are "deeply concerned at the deteriorating situation in Israel and in Gaza, especially the impact the ongoing conflict is having on innocent Palestinians, especially children and women."

They added that the expanded Israeli military operation in the Rafah area poses a grave and imminent threat that the international community must urgently confront.

When several Western countries froze their funding for the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) after Israel last month claimed that 12 staff members of the UN organization were involved in Hamas's October 7 attack, Spain and Portugal decided to go in the opposite direction. They responded with promises to raise their funding. For years, but especially in the past few months, they have been part of a grouping of countries across Europe that have consistently sought to strike a different note when it comes to conflict in the Middle East. Others include Ireland, which has called for a review of the EU's treaties with Israel, and Slovenia, which said it expected Israel to swiftly implement provisional measures ordered by the International Court of Justice in a case looking into allegations of genocide.

'Gazans staring death in face'

A top UN official declared that "a million Gazans are staring death in the face" and warned catastrophic human consequences could occur should Israel press on with an assault on the city of Rafah.

Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin

Griffiths said the Palestinian people have been subjected to an "assault that is unparalleled in its intensity, brutality and scope" following months of incessant bombing by Israeli forces.

But now he believes an Israeli invasion of Rafah – a town in the southern Gaza Strip, where huge numbers

of Palestinians have fled to escape Tel-Aviv's bombing campaigns – would "leave an already fragile humanitarian operation at death's door" and lead to a "slaughter".

Since October 7, Israel's strikes on Gaza have killed more than 28,000 people, mostly women and children.



Iran's judiciary chief: Muslim world should stand up against Israel

Iran's judiciary chief called on the Islamic world to stand up against Israel and use all leverage available to stop its "war machine" in the Gaza Strip.

"The entire Islamic world must stand up against the Zionist war machine and it is necessary to activate all levers to stop the Zionists' ferocious and blind killings in Gaza," Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejeie said in a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani in Baghdad on Wednesday, IRNA reported.

He also stressed the need for the full implementation of a security agreement that Iran signed with Iraq last March to combat the threat of terrorism.

The Iraqi prime minister expressed his government's willingness to strengthen cooperation with Iran in all areas, and detailed the steps that have been taken to implement the joint projects between the two countries.

Iran, Afghanistan discuss border issues



National Desk

Taliban's Defense Ministry said Iranian and Afghan officials discussed issues related to the common border and bilateral relations between the two neighboring countries.

Taliban's Defense Ministry in a post on its X account on Wednesday said the coordination meeting was held at Islam Qala crossing in Afghanistan's eastern province of Herat.

According to the statement, Taliban officials assured the Iranian side that they are ready for any joint cooperation and establishing good relations with the neighboring countries.

The ministry added that the Iranian delegation expressed its satisfaction with the cooperation of Afghan border guards with the Iranian side.

Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban group in 2021, several clashes have erupted between the countries' border guards over different issues.

In May 2023, two Iranian border guards and one Taliban fighter were killed after a shooting broke out near a border post between Iran and Afghanistan.

Campaigning begins in Iran for Assembly of Experts elections

Candidates running for seats in Iran's Assembly of Experts began election campaigns on Wednesday.

Members of the assembly are directly elected to office by the people for an eight-year term. The body holds biannual meetings to review major national issues and every other year to appoint a new chairman. The Assembly of Experts is tasked with electing, supervising

and, if necessary, dismissing the leader of the Islamic Revolution. IRNA reported on Wednesday that the "elections campaign for the Assembly of Experts began today and will last for 15 days".

A total of 500 hopefuls submitted applications for membership in the 88-member assembly, although jurists in charge of vetting the candidates only approved 144.

The elections for the assembly,

which are held every eight years, will take place on March 1 along with the parliamentary elections.

The assembly is currently headed by the 96-year-old Ahmad Jannati.

In January, Iran's former president Hassan Rouhani said after 24 years of membership he had been barred from seeking re-election to the Assembly of Experts.



People walk past a campaign banner for the 2024 Iranian elections scheduled for March 1, on a main road in central Tehran on February 14, 2024. **● ATTA KENARE/ AFP**

Mohammad Ali Rajabi
Cartoonist



Blast hits major gas transmission pipelines in southern Iran

Two explosions struck gas pipelines in Iran early Wednesday in an act of "terrorism and sabotage" that disrupted gas supplies in three of the country's provinces.

"This act of terrorism and sabotage was carried out in two locations at around 1 a.m.," National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) manager Saeed Aghli said, according to Shana News Agency.

The saboteurs hit pipelines in the cities of Borujen in the southwestern province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Safashahr in the southern province of Fars, Aghli said, adding that there were no casualties in the explosions or the ensuing fires.

The sabotage disrupted gas supplies in at least three provinces – North Khorasan in the northeast, Lorestan in the

west, and Zanjan in the northwest. No group has so far claimed responsibility for the attacks.

Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji also confirmed the attacks, saying the attacks caused a massive explosion and a subsequent fire.

Speaking on the sidelines of a cabinet session in the capital Tehran on Wednesday, Owji said that saboteurs blew up the transmission lines at around 1 a.m. local time on Wednesday (2130 GMT Tuesday).

He said that the NIGC has well managed to bring the situation under control. The Iranian oil minister highlighted that repair work on the affected pipelines is underway, and hopefully the flow on the pipelines will resume within 12-14 hours.