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Iran seizes ships in strait after Trump halts attacks

Iran wants the war to end, sanctions to be lifted, reparations for wartime damage and recognition of its control over the strait.



A Luojiashan tanker sits anchored in Muscat on March 7. Iran yesterday seized two similar ships from the Strait of Hormuz, as the US-Israeli conflict continues. PHOTO/REUTERS

BY REUTERS

Iran seized two ships in the Strait of Hormuz yesterday, tightening its grip on the strategic waterway after President Donald Trump called off attacks indefinitely with no sign of peace talks restarting.

Iran's semi-official Tasnim news agency said the Revolutionary Guards had seized two vessels for maritime violations and escorted them to Iranian shores. It was the first time Iran has seized ships since the beginning of the war.

Earlier, a British maritime security agency reported three ships had come under fire.

Trump said in a statement on social media late on Tuesday that the US had agreed to a request by Pakistani mediators "to hold our attack on the country of Iran until such time as their leaders and representatives can come up with a unified proposal... and discussions are concluded, one way or the other."

But even as he announced what appeared to be a unilateral ceasefire extension, Trump also said he would continue the US Navy's blockade of Iran's trade by sea. The United States fired on and seized an Iranian cargo vessel last Saturday and boarded a huge Iranian oil tanker on Tuesday in the Indian Ocean.

Iran considers the US blockade an act of war and has said it will not lift its closure of the strait, which has caused a global energy crisis, as long as the U.S. blockade continues.

Pakistan, acting as mediator, had cleared out a luxury hotel in the capital Islamabad for last-ditch peace talks on Tuesday, in the hopes of reaching a deal in the final hours before a two-week-old ceasefire expired.

But Iran never confirmed it would attend and a US delegation led by Vice President JD Vance never departed Washington, leaving an apparent stalemate in the nearly two-month war with no clear solution to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

There was no response early yesterday to Trump's ceasefire announcement from senior Iranian officials, although some initial reactions from Tehran suggested Trump's comments were being treated skeptically.

Tasnim said Iran had not asked for a ceasefire extension and repeated threats to break the US blockade by force. An adviser to Iran's lead negotiator, the speaker of parliament Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, said Trump's announcement might be a ploy.

Just hours before Trump called o... attacks, he had repeated threats to resume them, declaring that his military was "raring to go".

CASUALITIES

The US and Israel began the war on February 28 and the conflict quickly spread to Gulf states that host US military bases and to Lebanon, which Israel invaded after the Iran-allied militant group Hezbollah joined the fighting. More than 5,000 civilians have been killed across the region. Overnight, an Israeli drone strike killed one person and wounded two others in Lebanon. The Israeli military said it was unaware of the reported strike.

Container ship damaged

Throughout the war, Iran has effectively shut the strait to ships other than its own by attacking vessels that attempt to transit without its permission. Around a fifth of global oil and liquefied natural gas normally passes through the waterway.

Yesterday, Britain's maritime security agency UKMTO said that at least three container ships had reported being hit by gunfire in the strait.

The master of one ship reported being approached by an Iranian gunboat northeast of Oman on Wednesday, the agency said. The vessel came under fire from guns and rocket-propelled grenades and its bridge was heavily damaged, although there were no repo... casualties or environmental damage.

Two other ships had said they came under fire about eight nautical miles west of Iran with no reported injuries. The UKMTO did not specify in initial reports who had fired in those incidents.

Iran has condemned the U.S. Navy intercepting Iranian ships at sea as part of its blockade, including a huge tanker bound for Singapore that was boarded in the Indian Ocean on Tuesday hours before peace talks had been due to resume. Iran's foreign ministry accused the U.S. of "piracy at sea and state terrorism".

Next peace talks uncertain

With his announcement on Tuesday, Trump again pulled back at the last moment from warnings to bomb Iran's power plants and bridges, a threat condemned by the United Nations and others as potentially constituting war crimes. Iran had said it would strike its Arab neighbours if its civilian infrastructure was hit.

US stock futures rose, the dollar wavered and oil prices fell below $100 (about Shs 370,430) per barrel yesterday following the ceasefire announcement, even as the tentatively scheduled peace talks in Islamabad seemed on the verge of falling apart. Before Trump's latest announcement, a senior Iranian official had told *Reuters* that Iran's negotiators had been willing to attend another round of talks, but only if the US abandoned a policy of pressure and threats.

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