

US says downed multiple Iran drones as both insist deal closer

AFP:: The United States said it downed multiple Iranian drones targeting commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz early Saturday, hours after both sides said a deal to end the Middle East war was closer than ever.

The interception came after weeks of halting talks between Tehran and Washington, mediated by Pakistan, that have been marked by threats and exchanges of fire despite a fragile truce agreed in April.

US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees operations in the region, posted on X that Iran had “launched multiple one-way attack drones in an attempt to strike commercial ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz”.

“US forces have downed all of them in recent hours as traffic flow through the strait continues unimpeded,” it said.

CENTCOM added that the Strait of Hormuz – a key maritime trade route for oil and gas from the Gulf – “remains open for transit”, despite an Iranian-enforced blockade since the start of the war.

Disagreements between the two sides have persisted, with Iranian state media publishing a breakdown of what was purportedly on the table that was at odds with Washington’s account.

“The Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding has never been closer,” Iran’s foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, wrote in a social media post, referring to the Pakistani capital that hosted previous US-Iran talks.

Trump – who on Friday morning accused the Iranians of

negotiating in bad faith and misrepresenting the terms that had been agreed – posted a screenshot of Araghchi's message on his own feed just hours later.

But state broadcaster IRIB reported Araghchi as saying that until a complete agreement was reached on all issues, "it cannot be said with certainty that an understanding has been achieved with the United States".

Araghchi provided some details on the agreement in an interview with state television, saying it calls for the lifting of the US naval blockade of Iran's ports and unspecified changes to the administration of the Strait of Hormuz.

He also said the only way to deal with the country's enriched uranium – which Washington alleges is part of a nuclear weapons programme – "is to dilute it inside Iran".

– 'Not 100 percent' –

Disputing Trump's "bad faith" accusation, Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei said an agreement had now been reached with Washington "on most points".

Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, whose country has been a key mediator since the initial talks, confirmed that "a final, agreed-upon text of the peace deal has been reached".

"Peace has never been as close as it is now," Sharif said, while acknowledging "incessant misinformation" surrounding the deal.

A senior US official also voiced optimism that the parties would be "signing this agreement over the next few days".

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"If I were to give you a confidence that we were going to be signing this agreement, I maybe would have said 75 percent this morning, it's probably more like 80-85 percent now, but

it's not 100 percent," the official told reporters in a call.

The Swiss foreign ministry on Friday said it had been in contact with both the United States and Iran, and had "proposed Switzerland as the venue for a possible signing, should the parties agree to it".

But Araghchi said that upon finalisation, a draft deal with the United States would be signed "remotely", adding that this could happen "in the coming days".

US ally Israel has said that Trump had promised it that any agreement would see Iran stripped of its enriched nuclear material, but Tehran's official IRNA news agency said this was not even on the table.

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– 'Benefits will flow' –

According to IRNA's account, after an initial agreement is signed, Iran and the United States would hold 60 more days of talks and "Iran's right to enrich uranium and the retention of enriched material... will be emphasised with a view to their inclusion in the final agreement".

Beyond this, according to IRNA, Iran would insist on managing traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, which Tehran has blockaded since the outbreak of the war, causing major disruptions to the global economy.

On Friday, Iran's Mehr news agency, quoting a source close to the country's negotiating team, said the deal would also see the release of \$24 billion in frozen Iranian assets.

But those details clashed with a summary offered by a senior White House official, who told AFP Iran had agreed to dismantle its nuclear programme, destroy its enriched uranium stockpile and reopen the strait – and that Tehran would not see any of its frozen funds returned until it had honoured

these commitments.

US Vice President JD Vance likewise said Iran was “not receiving any cash, and no funds are being released for simply signing a deal or attending a meeting”.

But, he added, if “Iran meets its obligations, then economic benefits will flow to them and to the entire region”.

AFP