VOA NEWS

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From Washington, this is VOA news. I'm Anne Ball reporting.

U.S. President Donald Trump will increase sanctions on Iran in the coming hours, news agencies are reporting. But he will stop short of reimposing sanctions intended to push Tehran regime to give up nuclear weapons research. The president was meeting with his national security team on the Iran question late Thursday.

The administration must certify whether Iran is complying with a 2015 agreement it signed with the international community to limit its nuclear program by Friday.

Earlier today, White House press secretary Sarah Sanders said "The president still strongly believes this is one of the worst deals of all time."

"One of the single greatest flaws is that its restrictions leave Iran free, in the future, to openly develop their nuclear program and rapidly achieve a nuclear weapons breakout capability. Obviously, we see a big problem with that. The administration is continuing to work with Congress and with our allies to address those flaws."

Reports also say that President Donald Trump used profane language to disparage African nations in a meeting with lawmakers about a proposed bipartisan deal on immigration. That's according to two people briefed on an Oval Office meeting held Thursday.

Trump made the remark after Democratic Senator Richard Durbin told Trump that under the proposal, a lottery for visas would be ended. Durbin said that in exchange, people from African countries that have benefited from the lottery would be given other access to visas. People say Trump questioned why the U.S. would want to admit more people from an expletive deleted countries. They say Trump said the U.S. should allow more immigrants from places like Norway.

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European Union foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said the international agreement on Iran's nuclear program is working, and while there are concerns about Iran's development of ballistic missiles and other activities in the Middle East, [there] those should be dealt with as a separate issue.

"The European Union has had and expressed a very clear position on the nuclear deal, as it was stated by the 28 European Union member states' ministers, already in October last year, and repeated again today."

In Tunisia, Matthew Larotonda reports that violent demonstrators are defying threats of a crackdown. They are angry with economic hard times which include new government price hikes.

Those prices hikes were aimed at tackling their deficit and foreign debts. Now Prime Minister Youssef Chahed says enough is enough. The state won't bow to violence.

Some lawmakers have called for an increase to the minimum wage, but it's likelihood is unclear.

There is also concern that small numbers of radical Islamists may be trying to take advantage of the crisis. The Interior Ministry says at least two have been found among those detained.

More than 500 people have been arrested during the protests.

U.N. Human Rights Chief Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein condemned the recent escalation of fighting in Syria.

Lisa Schlein reports from Geneva.

The U.N. Human Rights office says 85 civilians, mostly women and children, have been killed and at least 183 injured in the besieged city of Eastern Ghouta, a suburb of the Syrian capital Damascus.

The High Commissioner's spokeswoman, Liz Throssell, tells VOA she does not know what the Syrian government and allies hope to achieve by escalating the fighting.

"What we are really concerned about is the effect and the effect is a terrible upsurge in civilian casualties - the deaths and injuries - and absolute terror amongst the civilian population. There are airstrikes and ground strikes day and night and this means people are having to hide in their basements to escape, to shelter from possible attacks."

Zeid also expresses grave concern about the worsening situation in Idlib governorate. Throssell says an estimated two million civilians are at risk of getting caught in clashes between government forces, together with their allies, and an alliance of armed opposition groups.

Lisa Schlein, for VOA news, Geneva.

I'm Anne Ball reporting from Washington Studio 24.

That's the latest world news from VOA.