VOA NEWS

January 11, 2020

This is VOA news. I'm David Byrd.

Iran is denying that it was responsible for the deadly downing of a Ukrainian jet that left 176 people dead.

As AP's Sagar Meghani reports, the United States, meanwhile, joined other nations in blaming Tehran for that fatal crash.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says it's likely an Iranian missile brought down the plane. He is the highest level American official directly blaming Iran a day after Canadian, Australian and British leaders did the same while noting it appears to have been unintentional.

Pompeo says an investigation will continue. "It's important we get to the bottom of it." And he is confident the U.S. and world will take appropriate action as a response.

His Ukrainian counterpart's urging caution as the probe goes on. "We will come to our conclusions. We don't want to come to them right now."

Iran denies any missiles hit the plane.

Sagar Meghani, at the White House.

Meanwhile, the wife of the pilot of the doomed jetliner that crashed in Iran says she urged her husband not to fly that night. We get more from AP's Jackie Quinn.

With escalating tensions in the region between the U.S. and Iran, widow Kateryna Gaponenko tells Sky News she urged her husband to cancel his shift but he said if he didn't fly the plane, who would?

Ukraine's foreign minister says the pilots were on a proper course. "There was nothing to indicate that this flight was in danger."

Across the globe, there is mourning for all 176 victims. More than 60 from Canada, including a dentist in Halifax whose husband spoke on CTV. "This tragedy was very, very hard for all the passenger's families."

I'm Jackie Quinn.

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The United States placed more sanctions on Iran Friday in response to its missile attack on U.S. military troops in Iraq last week. Washington threatened further action to weaken Iran's economy if Tehran continues to carry out what it considers terrorist actions.

Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin said at a White House news conference the new sanctions target Iran's construction, manufacturing, mining and textile industries.

"The president has been very clear: We will continue to apply economic sanctions until Iran stops its terrorist activities and commit that it will never have nuclear weapons."

The Trump administration believes the sanctions will force Tehran to negotiate a new nuclear agreement, downsize its missile development program and end its support of militias in the Middle East.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says the House will take steps next week to send articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump to the Senate. We get details from AP's Ed Donahue.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell says the impeachment trial could start next week. He's anxious to get started.

The president was impeached in the House three weeks ago. Pelosi has been in a standoff with McConnell over how the trial will be handled.

Wyoming Republican Liz Cheney says impeachment was based on assumptions and no direct evidence.

"It is not the job of the Senate to try to fix the completely false and improper process that the House Democrats conducted over here."

But Washington Democrat Adam Smith says Pelosi is doing this the right way. "... pressure on the Senate to have a fair trial, shine a light on the fact Mitch McConnell is not being fair."

McConnell wants a speedy trial without new witnesses.

Ed Donahue, Washington.

The U.S. Navy said Friday that a Russian ship had made what it called aggressive approaches on a U.S. destroyer in the North Arabian Sea.

Video from the USS Farragut captured five internationally recognized horn blasts signaling a danger of collision.

The U.S. destroyer requested that the Russian ship alter its course and ultimately it did. But Moscow denied Friday that one of its vessels had come dangerously close.

The government's latest employment record shows that the job market remains strong but wages have slowed. AP's Ben Thomas reports.

The Labor Department says U.S. job growth slowed in December, with employers adding a relatively modest 145,000 jobs, with consumer spending appearing to spur gains in the retail and hospitality sectors.

The unemployment rate held steady at 3.5 percent.

The job growth has so far failed to spur upward pressure on hourly pay, with wages increasing at a 2.9 percent annual rate.

That's AP's Ben Thomas.

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