VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. Via remote, I'm Diane Roberts.

Lebanon's embattled leadership, under fire after a massive explosion to large parts of central Beirut, faced public fury Thursday and stern calls to reform from the visiting French president and the International Monetary Fund.

Grief has turned to anger in the traumatized nation where at least 149 people died and more than 5,000 were injured in Tuesday's blast.

French President Emmanuel Macron on a snap visit to the area pledged to lead international emergency relief efforts and organize an aid conference in the coming days, promising that (quote) "Lebanon is not alone." (end quote)

Authorities believe the explosion happened when a huge pile of ammonium nitrate that had languished for years in a port warehouse started a fire.

Top U.S. envoy for Iran Brian Hook is leaving his post and Elliott Abrams, the U.S. special representative for Venezuela, will add Iran to his role (quote) "following a transition period" (end quote) with Hook. That's according to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Hook's surprise departure comes at a critical time when Washington has been intensely lobbying at the United Nations to extend an arms embargo on Iran and as the U.N. Security Council prepares to hold a vote on the U.S. resolution next week.

Thursday, the State Department said the United States has lifted a global health advisory imposed in March, advising U.S. citizens to avoid all international travel because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a statement it said (quote) "With health and safety conditions improving in some countries and potentially deteriorating in others, the department is returning to our previous system of country-specific levels of travel advice." (end quote)

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More countries across Europe imposed new travel restrictions and containment measures Thursday with fears growing over a second wave of coronavirus infections.

Britain has reimposed quarantine for travelers from Belgium, Andorra and Bahamas following a spike in coronavirus cases in those countries.

Norway announced Thursday that France would be considered a red zone due to the resurgence of coronavirus cases there, meaning all travelers arriving from France face a mandatory ten-day quarantine.

Switzerland, Monaco and the Czech Republic were also hit with similar restrictions, the Norwegian foreign affairs ministry said.

Nearly 19 million people worldwide have been infected with the virus. Johns Hopkins University in the United States reports those countries flattening their curve of new cases in the past five days are the U.S., Brazil, Mexico, South Africa and Russia. Those showing a rise with the same measure include India, Colombia, Peru, Iran and Iraq.

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa('s) ruling party Thursday won a key two-thirds majority in vote counting after a parliamentary election that he hopes will clear the way for constitutional changes to make the presidency more powerful.

Rajapaksa hopes to install his older brother, Mahinda Rajapaksa - himself a former president - as the next prime minister. The brothers are best known for crushing the Tamil Tiger rebels fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils during the elder Rajapaksa's presidency in 2009.

Poland's conservative President Andrzej Duda has been sworn in for a second term before parliament members.

Most opposition parliamentarians and some former leaders did not attend the ceremony Thursday both because of COVID-19 restrictions and to show their disapproval of what they call Duda's disregard for the constitution during his first term, and his almost total acceptance of the ruling right-wing party's policies that have put Poland at odds with European Union leaders.

A Polish LGBT protester could be jailed for hanging rainbow flags on statues in the capital of Warsaw, her lawyer said Thursday. This as gay rights divide the Eastern European country.

Three activists were arrested this week for draping flags over five statues, including one of Jesus carrying the cross and the Mermaid of Warsaw, a centuries-old symbol of the city.

LGBT rights have become increasingly divisive in Poland under the ruling nationalist Law and Justice Party, which President Andrzej Duda has dismissed as a foreign (quote) "ideology" (end quote) undermining Poland's traditional Catholic values.

Via remote, Diane Roberts, VOA news.