

IRAN

Britain reopens embassy closed in 2011 protest

Foreign secretary says ties have improved 'step by step' since Rouhani elected as Iranian president in 2013

By REUTERS in Teheran

Britain reopened its embassy in Teheran on Sunday, a striking signal of how Western ties with Iran have thawed since protesters ransacked the ambassador's residence and burned the Union Jack nearly four years ago.

British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond watched the British flag being raised in the garden of the opulent 19th century building while the national anthem played.

"Today's ceremony marks the end of one phase in the relationship between our two countries and the start of a new one," he said.

The attack that forced the embassy to close was a low point in diplomacy between the two countries, he said, but the relationship had improved "step by step" since the election of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in 2013.

Hammond said the nuclear deal that Iran struck with six major world powers last month was also an important milestone.

The agreement prompted a flurry of European visits — including from German and French ministers — aimed at positioning for the end of Iran's long economic isolation.

Britain had operated without an embassy since Iranian protesters stormed its two main diplomatic compounds in Teheran on Nov 29, 2011. The protesters slashed portraits of British monarchs, torched a car and stole electronic equipment.

Graffiti reading "Death to England" still adorns the doors to a

grand reception room in memory of the storming.

British Prime Minister David Cameron called the attack a "disgrace", closed Britain's embassy and expelled Iran's diplomats from London. Iran will simultaneously reopen its embassy in London on Sunday and both will initially be run by charge d'affaires, but ambassadors will be agreed upon within months, Hammond said.

He is only the second British foreign minister to visit Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution that toppled the US-backed shah. The last visit was by Jack Straw in 2003.

Major opportunity

After more than a decade of casting the Islamic Republic as a rogue power seeking to sow turmoil through the Middle East, Britain has sought to improve ties with Iran.

"In the first instance, we will want to ensure that the nuclear agreement is a success, including by encouraging trade and investment once sanctions are lifted," Hammond said.

Under the deal, sanctions imposed by the United States, European Union and United Nations will be lifted in exchange for Iran agreeing to long-term curbs on a nuclear program the West suspected was intended to make a nuclear bomb. Teheran has denied seeking nuclear arms.

While the nuclear deal is seen as a major opportunity by some, including US President Barack Obama, hard-liners in Washington and Teheran have opposed it, as has Israel.



Visit stirs protest

Russia's Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (left) inspects a machine-gun regiment on Saturday during his visit to Iturup Island, one of the four Southern Kuril Islands in Russia and Northern Territories in Japan. Japan lodged a protest over his visit to the island. The territorial dispute has strained relations between the two countries since the end of World War II. DMITRY ASTAKHOV / REUTERS

KOREAN PENINSULA

DPRK subs unaccounted for as talks resume

By XINHUA in Seoul

Almost 70 percent of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's submarines were undetected on Sunday, with the second round of high-level contact under way in the truce village of Panmunjom, a Defense Ministry official of the Republic of Korea was cited as saying.

Some 50 DPRK submarines, which left bases in the western and eastern coasts, have been out of detection range of the ROK military, which estimated the DPRK had a total of 70 submarines.

The 70 percent was 10 times the

rate under normal situations and also the highest since the three-year Korean War ended in 1953.

The ROK military sees the submarine departure rate as one of the major signals for the DPRK's provocation, stepping up efforts to trail DPRK submarines by dispatching patrol aircraft and destroyers.

The ROK and the United States raised their joint reconnaissance level toward the DPRK to the second highest, and the ROK forces have been on maximum alert.

Pyongyang more than doubled its artillery forces in the front-line areas, which were ready to fire at any time, the ROK official said.

Kim Kwan-jin, chief security adviser to ROK President Park Geun-hye, and Hwang Pyong-so, top military aide to DPRK leader Kim Jong-un, held nearly 10 hours of talks that adjourned at 4:15 am on Sunday, but they failed to narrow differences over the "recently formed situations".

Propaganda broadcasts

ROK Unification Minister Hong Yong-pyo and his DPRK counterpart Kim Yang-gon, director of the United Front Department, accompanied Kim and Hwang to the highest-level meeting since President Park took office in February 2013.

The meeting was held to defuse the escalated tensions caused by the cross-border exchange of artillery on Thursday over the ROK's propaganda broadcasts. Seoul said it fired back a volley of artillery after the DPRK's shelling, but Pyongyang said it was a fabrication.

The cross-border shelling, which caused no casualties, intensified the already elevated tensions. On Aug 4, three land mines detonated on the southern section of the DMZ, wounding two ROK soldiers on a patrol duty. Seoul claimed that they had been deliberately planted by DPRK forces, but Pyongyang denied any involvement.

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