

**Israel says two Gaza flotilla activists brought in for questioning**



AFP | Jerusalem

Two activists who participated in a Gaza-bound aid flotilla have been brought to Israel for questioning, the foreign ministry said yesterday, after the vessels were intercepted by Israeli forces.

The flotilla of more than 50 vessels had set sail from ports in France, Spain and Italy with the aim of breaking an Israeli blockade of Gaza and bringing supplies to the devastated Palestinian territory.

They were intercepted by Israeli forces overnight Wednesday to Thursday.

Israel said it had removed around 175 activists from the flotilla, but organisers accused Israeli personnel of "kidnapping" 211 people.

Two of the activists, Saif Abu Keshek, from Spain, and Thiago Avila, a Brazilian, were in Israel and would "be transferred for questioning by law enforcement authorities", the foreign ministry said on X.



US soldiers stand in front of military tanks at the United States Army military training base in Grafenwoehr, southern Germany (file photo)

# NATO seeks details as US slashes Germany troops

Washington's troop cut and tariffs strain ties with Europe amid security concerns

● **US to withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany**

● **Trump-Merz tensions escalate**

● **EU faces new auto tariffs**

AFP | Washington

NATO said yesterday it was working with the United States to understand Washington's decision to withdraw 5,000 troops from Germany as a rift in transatlantic ties deepens over the Middle East war.

The Pentagon's announcement of the troop withdrawal follows a spat between US President Don-

ald Trump and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, who said on Monday Iran was "humiliating" Washington at the negotiating table. Trump fired back by saying that Merz "doesn't know what he's talking about."

It also came as Trump announced that tariffs on cars and trucks from the European Union will increase to 25 percent next week over accusations that the bloc did not comply with a trade deal signed last summer.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said on Friday the withdrawal of around 5,000 troops from Germany was expected "to be completed over the next six to twelve months."

"This decision follows a thorough review of the Department's force posture in Europe and is in recognition of theater require-

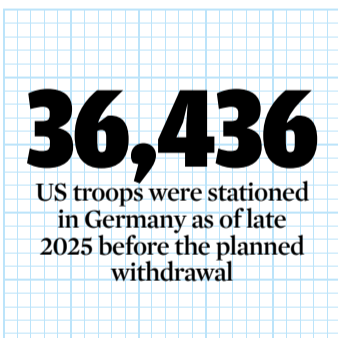
ments and conditions on the ground," Parnell said in a statement.

There were 36,436 active-duty US troops in NATO ally Germany as of December 31, 2025, compared to 12,662 in Italy and 3,814 in Spain.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said yesterday the US troop withdrawal "from Europe and also from Germany was to be expected."

NATO said it was "working with the U.S. to understand the details of their decision on force posture in Germany."

"This adjustment underscores the need for Europe to continue to invest more in defense and take on a greater share of the responsibility for our shared security," NATO spokeswoman Allison Hart wrote on X.



'Why shouldn't I?'

Trump has made a number of threats to slash US troop numbers in Germany and other European allies during both his terms in office, saying he wants Europe to take on greater responsibility for its defense rather than depending on Washington.

He now appears determined to

punish allies who have failed to back the Middle East war or contribute to a peacekeeping force in the crucial Strait of Hormuz waterway, which Tehran's forces have effectively closed.

Trump also accused German automakers such as Mercedes-Benz and BMW of ripping off Americans, saying on Friday that Germany and "other European nations have not adhered to our trade deal."

Germany would likely be hit hard by a sharp vehicle tariff because it is responsible for a significant portion of EU auto exports.

Such tariffs would impose "enormous costs on the German and European automobile industry," the head of Germany's VDA lobby group for the sector, Hildegard Mueller, said in a statement.

**Illegal rave draws 20,000 to 'dangerous' military site in France**

AFP | Paris

Around 20,000 partygoers gathered yesterday for an illegal rave at a military site in France, defying warnings about the risk of unexploded ordnance and possible blasts.

The rave near the town of Bourges in central France kicked off on Friday and organisers expect as many as 30,000 people from France and neighbouring countries to arrive at the peak of the event this weekend.

"Despite its illegal nature, the government has mobilised to ensure the safety of this event and limit any disturbances, particularly for nearby residents," the prefecture said in a statement.

Speaking to AFP, Philippe Le Moing Surzur, the top regional official, said the site was "extremely dangerous due to the unexploded ordnance it may contain."

**Trump says US Navy acting like 'pirates' during Iran blockade**

AFP | Washington

President Donald Trump said on Friday the US Navy was acting "like pirates" as he described an operation seizing a ship amid the tit-for-tat American blockade of Iranian ports.

"We... land on top of it and we took over the ship. We took over the cargo, took over the oil. It's a very profitable business," Trump said at a rally in Florida. "We're like pirates," he added to cheers from the crowd. "We're sort of like pirates. But we're not playing games."

Trump's comparison of US



US forces patrolling the Arabian Sea near the Iranian-flagged cargo ship Touska

naval activity to piracy comes as legal experts raise alarms about Iran's blockade of the vital Strait of Hormuz and its plans to charge a fee for ships passing through it.

Tehran effectively closed the waterway -- a key route for oil and gas shipments -- after the start of the US-Israeli air campaign against Iran on February 28.

The United States announced a blockade of Iranian ports last month after peace talks in Pakistan failed to achieve a breakthrough.

The US Central Command,

responsible for US forces in the Middle East, said it has redirected 45 vessels to "ensure compliance" with its blockade as of Friday.

Pentagon chief Pete Hegseth told reporters in April that the blockade will last "as long as it takes," while top US military officer General Dan Caine said it "applies to all ships, regardless of nationality, heading into or from Iranian ports."

Meanwhile Iran has vowed to maintain its chokehold on the strait as long as Washington continues to blockade its ports.