

Russia, China want talks, not sanctions on Iran

US, EU fail to strike consensus among UNSC members

REUTERS, Moscow/London

Russia and China made clear yesterday they did not favour UN sanctions to induce Iran to scale back its nuclear programme, and Tehran urged the European Union to return to the negotiating table.

A senior British official dismissed as "vacuous" the Iranian offer, contained in a letter from Javad Vaeedi, deputy head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Tehran should first halt all uranium enrichment work.

"Talks presuppose an obligation. The Iranian obligation was to stick to the moratorium," Lavrov said. "Now Iran (has departed from) the moratorium on scientific research."

Britain, France and Germany called off the talks last week after Tehran resumed uranium enrichment research, deepening Western

suspicion that it is bent on acquiring the bomb.

Washington and its EU allies say it is time the UN nuclear watchdog agency sent Iran's case to the UN Security Council, which could eventually decide to impose sanctions on Iran.

A senior Iranian official said Tehran's decision to resume nuclear fuel research was legal and "irreversible."

Ali Asghar Soltaniyeh, Iranian representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), also told the students news agency ISNA that he would meet the agency's chief Mohamed ElBaradei later on Tuesday to discuss Iran's plans.

An IAEA spokesman could not confirm a meeting was planned.

Soltaniyeh reiterated Iran's threat to halt snap IAEA inspections of its nuclear sites if its case goes to the Security Council.

The senior British official said

referral to the Council would not automatically lead to punitive measures.

"We don't see this leading straight into sanctions," the official told reporters under condition he not be named. "We want to build gradual, sustained pressure over time. We are not going to New York to impose punitive economic sanctions."

Lavrov also said talk of sanctions was premature.

"The question of sanctions against Iran puts the cart before the horse. Sanctions are in no way the best, or the only, way to solve the problem," he told a news briefing.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman said Beijing favoured diplomacy, urging all parties to "keep patient and make utmost efforts to resume the negotiations between the EU3 and Iran."

Germany earlier said Council members remained at odds on the

Iranian nuclear issue after Monday's talks in London among the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany.

However, participants did agree to call an emergency meeting of the IAEA board on February 2.

An Iranian source in Vienna said Iran had written to the EU trio proposing that talks resume immediately and saying Tehran was ready to "remove existing ambiguities regarding its peaceful nuclear program through talks and negotiations."

Iran's letter also said it wanted to pursue scheduled talks with Russia over Moscow's proposal to enrich uranium for Iran in a joint venture to prevent any diversion for military use.

"Iran believes that negotiations with Russia will continue seriously and constructively, and as planned, they will be on February 16 in Moscow," Vaeedi wrote.



Norway's ambassador to Sri Lanka, Hans Brattskar (L) meets with Tamil Tiger political wing chief S. P. Thamilselvan in the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi yesterday. Brattskar moved to lay the ground for a high level visit by Norwegian envoy Erik Solheim who is expected to attempt to salvage the island's faltering peace process.

Iraq accuses Iran of seizing coastguards

Tehran denies

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq demanded yesterday the release of coastguards it said were seized by Iran during a clash involving suspected oil smugglers on their tidal frontier, but Iran's Baghdad embassy denied all knowledge of the incident.

The affair, in which Iraqi officers said one of their men was badly wounded, is a test for the new warmth in relations between Baghdad and Tehran since pro-Iranian Shias took control in Iraq following the U.S. ousting of Saddam Hussein.

Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari was raising the issue with Iranian charge d'affaires Hasan Kazemi-Qomi at a meeting called in part to discuss the incident, a Foreign Ministry spokesman said.

Iraqi officials, in confusing statements, have said nine or 10 coastguards were seized on Saturday or Sunday in the Shatt al-Arab estuary between Basra and the Gulf. The tidal frontier between the two states has been long disputed.

But Kazemi-Qomi said through

a spokeswoman: "The reports of this incident are untrue." He made no further comment.

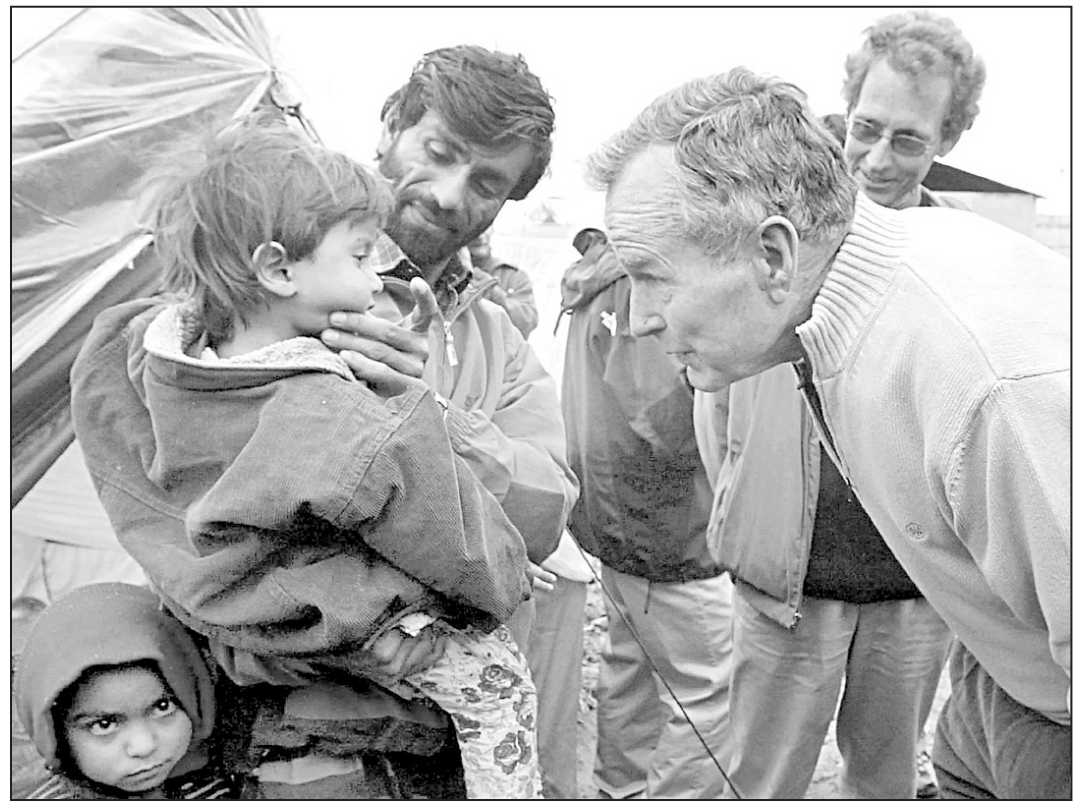
A spokeswoman for Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said eight men from the coastguard and an officer had been taken prisoner by Iranian coastguards.

A senior officer running Iraqi patrol boats on the Shatt al-Arab waterway, between the city of Basra and the open waters of the Gulf, said one coastguard had been badly wounded by gunfire when Iranian forces intervened as an Iraqi patrol was attempting to search a ship suspected of smuggling oil.

The local governor said an Iraqi coastguard had been killed.

Iraq and Iran have a long history of disputes along their tidal border. Iran seized three British naval patrol boats in the same area on its border with Iraq in June 2004, at a time when British forces were responsible for policing there.

But relations between Baghdad and Tehran are at the warmest in decades with the arrival in power of Shia leaders since the fall of Saddam's Sunni Arab-dominated government.



Former US president and UN special envoy for Pakistan earthquake relief George H.W. Bush (R) talks with a Pakistani family during a visit to a camp for those left homeless by the October 8 earthquake in Islamabad yesterday.

Shia named new chief judge in Saddam trial

AFP, Baghdad

Said al-Hammashi, a member of the five-judge Iraqi panel trying Saddam Hussein, will replace the chief judge who has resigned when the trial resumes, the main prosecutor in the case said yesterday.

"At the next hearing on January 24, Said al-Hammashi will be the chief judge of the trial as he is the oldest of the five judges," said Jaafar al-Mussawi.

Hammashi, a Shia, will only hold the post on a temporary basis until the judges at the Iraqi High Tribunal elect a new permanent replacement for Rizkar Mohammed Amin he told AFP.

"The election should happen in about one month," Mussawi said. He was unable to say whether Amin would remain on the panel of judges at the trial of Saddam and seven former aides.

Amin, a Kurd, tendered his resignation more than a week ago because of strong criticism of his way of running the court, an official close to him had said at the weekend.

UN warns Lanka against return to war

Violence continues, peace envoys meet Tigers

AFP, Colombo

The United Nations yesterday asked Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels to resume their stalled peace talks and said a return to war was not the answer to decades of ethnic conflict.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan expressed concern for the Norwegian-backed peace bid in Sri Lanka where at least 135 people, including 78 security personnel, have been killed in an upsurge in violence since December.

"The Secretary General stresses that a return to conflict will not resolve outstanding differences between the parties," his office said in a statement.

Annan's statement came as another mine blast wounded seven people Tuesday in the island's north-east where suspected Tiger rebels also fought a gun battle with troops and lost two of their cadres,

according to the military.

Military officials said members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushed a navy bus by setting off a landmine in the restive northeast port district of Trincomalee Tuesday, leaving six sailors wounded.

The explosive device rigged up to a bicycle went off as the bus passed by, a military official said, adding that the vehicle escaped the full impact.

Annan strongly urged the government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to shore up the ceasefire, ensure respect for the human rights and urgently revive their stalled talks.

Peace broker Norway is sending International Development Minister Erik Solheim next week to try to jump start the peace process.

Norway's ambassador here, Hans Brattskar, to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi Tuesday for talks

with the LTTE leadership on salvaging a ceasefire arranged by Oslo and in places since February 2002.

Brattskar was accompanied by members of the Norwegian-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission, which also suffered a bomb attack last week.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the Tigers were due to take up, among other things, the issue of disarming members of a break-away rebel faction allegedly backed by Colombo, de-escalation of violence and harassment by security forces.

The LTTE, meanwhile, said in a statement that seven Tamil civilians had been killed on Sunday in separate incidents in the northern peninsula of Jaffna.

"Incidents of mindless targeted murders of Tamil civilians by paramilitaries assisted by the Sri Lankan army are on the increase in Jaffna," the statement said.

CNN allowed to resume work in Iran after apology

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran on Tuesday lifted its ban on CNN after the US news network apologised for misquoting President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as saying Tehran wanted nuclear weapons, a top culture ministry official said.

Iran banned CNN journalists from working in the country on Monday after its simultaneous translation of Ahmadinejad's news conference on Saturday included the phrase "the use of nuclear weapons is Iran's right."

In fact, what the Iranian president said was that "Iran has the right to nuclear energy." CNN later apologized for making a mistake.

"Following a request from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the ban on the activities of CNN's stringer in Iran was lifted," Mohammad Hossein Khoshvagt, director of foreign media at Iran's culture ministry, told Reuters.

ANTI-TERROR OFFICIAL SAYS WMD attack inevitable

REUTERS, London

A terrorist attack using weapons of mass destruction in a Western country is inevitable, a senior US anti-terrorism official said in an interview published yesterday.

Speaking to Britain's Daily Telegraph newspaper, Henry Crumpton, the US State Department coordinator for counter-terrorism, said he feared the threat from biological weapons was rising.

"I rate the probability of terror groups using WMD as very high," he was quoted as saying. "It is simply a question of time."

"It is not just the nuclear threat that bothers me. I think, if anything, the biological threat is going to grow."

He said a biological attack would pose far greater problems than an explosion containing radioactive material.

"As catastrophic as a nuclear attack would be, it would be self-contained," Crumpton told the newspaper. "But if you look at a worst-case scenario for a biological attack, it would be difficult to determine whether or not it was a terrorist attack, and it would be far more difficult to contain."

He said that after the war in Afghanistan, the United States had found evidence of an al-Qaeda plot to develop anthrax for use against the West.

He added that US forces and their allies had disrupted al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden since the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States.

"They can't communicate with their supporters unless the odd courier breaks through. They can't get access to money and things like that. We have made life very difficult for them."

Cheney holds talks with Mubarak

AFP, Cairo

US Vice President Dick Cheney and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak held talks yesterday in Cairo to discuss regional developments and bilateral relations, an official at the presidency said.

The two leaders, meeting over breakfast at Mubarak's residence, also discussed the health of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who has been in a deep coma since suffering a massive brain haemorrhage on January 4.

The two men discussed the latest developments in Iraq following the December elections, whose final but uncertified results are due to be announced later this week, the official said on condition of anonymity.

Nepali parties vow to defy protest ban

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's main political parties said yesterday they would go ahead with a planned anti-King rally in Kathmandu on Friday despite a ban on protests by the royalist government.

The seven parties plan the protest to oppose next month's municipal elections and to press King Gyanendra to hand back power to an all-party government.

But on Monday, the government banned rallies anywhere in the capital, saying anti-monarchy Maoist guerrillas could infiltrate such gatherings and spark trouble.

Rallies in the heart of the capital were banned last year.

"It is our right to protest peacefully... We are not going to be cowed down," said Ram Chandra Poudel, a leader of the biggest

party, Nepali Congress.

The parties say the municipal polls are aimed at legitimising the King's absolute power. The rebels -- fighting for a single-party communist republic -- say they will stop the vote.

Last week, the seven parties gathered more than 100,000 people in the southeastern town of Janakpur in the biggest pro-democracy rally since King Gyanendra sacked the government, suspended civil liberties and curbed media freedom last February.

Poudel said thousands were expected to attend Friday's rally.

"The ban shows that the government is nervous with the rising tide of our peaceful protests against the King," Poudel said, speaking for all seven parties.

"We'll not call it off and we are prepared to be arrested."

AIRSTRIKE IN PAKISTAN

US-Pak alliance strained

AP, Islamabad

The pre-dawn airstrike purportedly aimed at Osama bin Laden's deputy has strained ties with a key US ally in the war on terror and could provoke more anti-American fanaticism in Pakistan, analysts said Monday.

Friday's alleged CIA mission in the Bajur tribal region, which Pakistani officials say missed its target and killed 17 people including women and children, also undermined the fragile goodwill cultivated in Pakistan by generous US relief in the wake of October's earthquake that killed over 80,000 people.

"This will consolidate anti-American sentiment," said Talat Masood, a retired Pakistani general and political analyst.

Thousands rallied across Pakistan over the weekend against the United States and Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who walks a political tightrope by maintaining close ties with Washington in an Islamic country where the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been

extremely unpopular.

Pakistan's The News newspaper warned in a Monday editorial that the missile strike could stir more extremism -- particularly in tribal areas near the Afghan border, long a recruiting ground for jihadists.

"Episodes such as the Bajur tragedy, for a province where the situation is already delicate, can supply an excellent new cause to the fanatics," it said.

The attack was the third suspected US strike in less than two months inside Pakistan, which says it does not allow American forces based in Afghanistan to cross the border in the hunt for members of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Pakistani intelligence officials have described the latest strike as a CIA attack, probably carried out by missiles from a drone aircraft.

Pakistani intelligence officials say 12 militants may have been killed, but a US counterterrorism official said it's unclear whether Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's No. 2 leader, was among the dead.

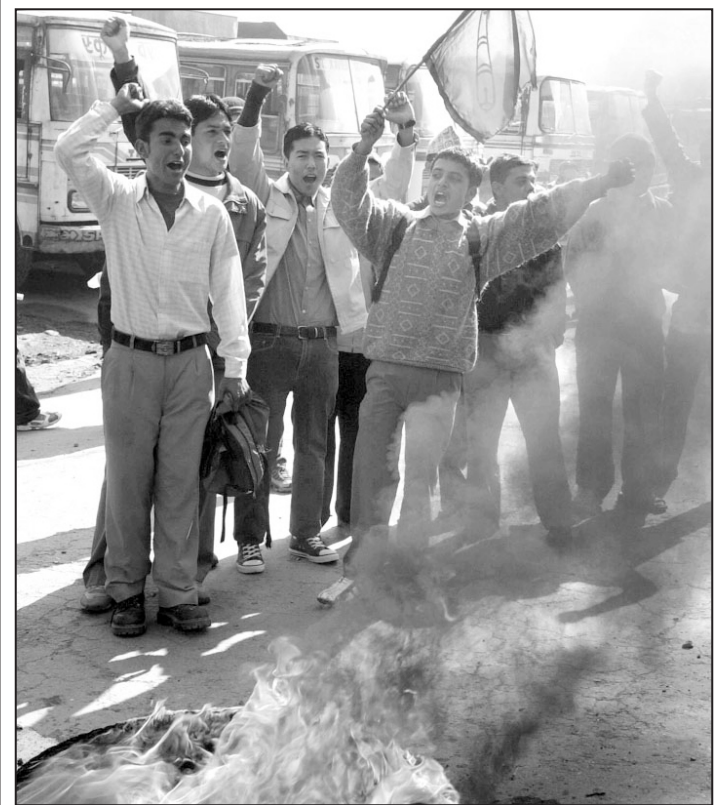
But Pakistan clearly feels the

attack was a step too far. It lodged a diplomatic protest over the incident Saturday, calling it a "loss of innocent civilian lives." The Pakistani government previously issued a protest after tribal leaders claimed US helicopters opened fire on a cleric's home in North Waziristan on Jan. 7, killing eight people.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said Pakistan "cannot accept any action within our country" like the US missile attack, but stressed he would press ahead with an official visit to Washington later Tuesday.

"The relationship with the US is important, it is growing. But at the same time such actions cannot be condoned," Aziz said at a joint news conference in Islamabad with former President George H.W. Bush.

In a speech shown Sunday on state-run Pakistan Television, Musharraf did not address the airstrike directly, but he warned his countrymen not to harbour militants, saying it would only increase violence inside Pakistan.



Nepalese students defy King Gyanendra's ban on protests in Kathmandu yesterday. Opposition parties in Nepal said they would defy a government ban on protests and will go ahead with a demonstration against King Gyanendra's rule as planned this week.