

## Muslims rally in Europe amid cartoon protests

AFP, Paris

Muslims were set to rally across Europe yesterday to vent their anger over satirical images of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM), a day after Denmark's ambassador to Syria temporarily left the country over security fears.

In the west German city of Duesseldorf several hundred Muslims joined a protest march to the Danish consulate but police did not expect any violence.

Protest rallies were also planned in Berlin and other German cities; Paris and Strasbourg in France, and in Amsterdam.

In Britain where demonstrations were due to start in London at 1300 GMT, Prime Minister Tony Blair said Friday he regretted the offence caused to Muslims by the caricatures reprinted by European papers, but added that nothing justified the violent backlash.

"I understand the offence the cartoons have caused, we all regret that," Blair said at the opening of his Labour Party's spring conference in Blackpool, northern England.

## AHMADINEJAD WARNS Iran may quit NPT

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad warned yesterday the Islamic republic could leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if forced by the West to limit its disputed nuclear programme.

In a strongly worded speech to huge crowds marking the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution, the outspoken hardliner also repeated his view that Nazi Germany's mass killing of Jews was a "myth" and argued that Palestinians and Iraqis were suffering from "the real Holocaust".

"Until now, the Islamic republic's policy was to use nuclear technology for peaceful ends," the president said, a week after Iran was reported to the UN Security Council amid fears it is seeking nuclear weapons.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has continued its nuclear drive within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the NPT, but if we see that you want to deprive us of our right using these regulations, know that the people will revise their policy in this regard," he

warned.

Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami warned Saturday that world oil prices will rise if the United Nations imposes sanctions on Tehran over its disputed nuclear programme.

"Currently the price of each barrel of oil is 70 dollars and this high price has created many difficulties for the industrialised world," Khatami told reporters on the sidelines of an international conference on Islam and the West.

"The first effect of a sanction against Iran will be that this high price will even increase higher."

Hundreds of thousands of Iranians were out in Tehran, answering a call from supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to put on a show of force in the face of mounting international pressure.

The West wants Iran to abandon uranium enrichment work, which can be extended from making reactor fuel to the fissile core of a nuclear weapon. Iran maintains that it only wants to generate electricity and that its fuel cycle work is permitted by the NPT.

But the reporting of its case to

the Security Council exposes Iran to the danger of sanctions unless it returns to a nuclear freeze and cooperates more with the IAEA. So far Iran has reacted by doing the opposite.

"The Iranian people will never renounce their nuclear rights," Ahmadinejad said, drawing deafening chants from the crowd of "We will not give in!"

"Your threats will not get you anywhere. Don't push us to the limit. Don't make us change our policy," said Ahmadinejad, raising the threat that Iran could follow the course of North Korea by abandoning the NPT.

The NPT is the cornerstone of the global battle against the spread of nuclear weapons. It prohibits the development of nuclear weapons and subjects a country's nuclear programme to IAEA inspections.

Ahmadinejad also used the speech to lash out at arch-enemy Israel.

"Questioning the myth of the Holocaust and the creation of the phoney Zionist regime has haunted them," said Ahmadinejad, who appeared composed and determined.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian protesters burn Danish and Israeli flags during a rally to mark the 27th anniversary of Iran's Islamic Revolution in Tehran yesterday. Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad implicitly warned that the Islamic republic would leave the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if forced by the West to limit its disputed nuclear programme.

## UPA govt to amend Foreigners' Act

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With fresh assembly polls in India's Congress-ruled northeastern state of Assam round the corner, the Congress-led UPA government has decided to amend the Foreigners' Act to make it mandatory for a person booked in the state to be referred to a tribunal before being declared a foreigner and deported.

The amendment to the Act was approved by the Indian cabinet's committee on political affairs at its meeting here on Friday ahead of Congress chief Sonia Gandhi's visit to the state, which has many migrants allegedly from Bangladesh, where she kicked start the party's election campaign yesterday.

Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee told reporters after the meeting that once the Foreigners Act is amended, every case to determine a foreigner will be referred to a tribunal set up by the government to ensure "fair hearing".

The cabinet decision came less than a year after the Indian Supreme Court had struck down the controversial Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunals) Act of 1983 saying there was no need for a

separate law for Assam and that law had been threatening the demography and security of the state.

Under the IMDT Act, struck down by the apex court in July last year, the onus is on the state to prove if someone is a foreigner or not while the Foreigners' Act put the same on the accused to prove his nationality. Tribunals for determination of foreigners was part of the IMDT Act.

Muslims in Assam constitute nearly 30 percent of the total electorate in the state and are a key factor in 40 of the total 126 constituencies.

The Congress, which faces elections in the middle of this year, has been under pressure to come out with an alternative to IMDT Act, to woo minority community voters particularly after 13 Muslim groups came together to form a United Democratic Front to take on the ruling party in the state whose government is headed by Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi.

There is a view within the party that it must do something to overcome the constraints imposed by the apex court ruling IMDT Act to help circumvent the anti-incumbency factor, Congress sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian army soldiers work to rebuild the Kaman Bridge along the Indo-Pak defacto border in Uri, some 120km from Srinagar yesterday. The bridge connecting divided Kashmir was damaged in the devastating earthquake which struck the region on October 8, 2005.

## Nepal rejects foreign criticism of polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal yesterday rejected as "insolent" international criticism of local elections earlier this week that were boycotted by opposition parties.

The foreign ministry statement came after the United States, India, Britain and Japan condemned the polls called by King Gyanendra as part of his "roadmap" to restore democracy.

Gyanendra seized power a year ago in what he said was a bid to end a deadly Maoist insurgency in the impoverished Himalayan nation.

The criticism is "totally objectionable and thus unacceptable," the ministry said, asking other

countries "to refrain from making such insolent comments on matters that fall essentially within domestic jurisdiction."

Washington had slammed Wednesday's elections, won by pro-royalists and independents who analysts say back the king, as a "hollow attempt to legitimise power" by Gyanendra. India, Nepal's biggest trading partner, said the polls lacked credibility and would not help restore democracy.

Just 21 percent of Nepal's electorate turned out to vote.

But the foreign ministry said "the elections were held against the backdrop of the killing of some candidates and persistent threats to kill more..."

## Hindu seer, 7 followers shot dead in India

AFP, Lucknow

A Hindu religious leader and seven of his disciples were shot dead by unknown killers in northern India, police said yesterday.

The seer, 60-year-old Sant Gyaneshwar, was a revered figure in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh.

"Swami Sadanand Sant Gyaneshwar and seven of his followers were shot dead by unknown killers on Friday night," a police spokesman told AFP in the state capital of Lucknow.

"The killers intercepted Sant's car near a petrol pump. He died on the spot," spokesman Mukul Saxena said.

## 9 killed in clash with cops in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Nine people were killed in a clash with police in India's revolt-hit northeast over the death of a rebel suspect allegedly in army custody, police said yesterday.

Shoot-at-sight orders and a curfew were imposed after the clash in Tinsukia district in Assam state late Friday in which 35 people were hurt, some critically, police said.

The clash in which police opened fire on thousands of protesters erupted after the family of the suspected militant found his body last Sunday in a hospital morgue in Tinsukia, police said.

Protests had been building all

week over the death of the man the demonstrators said was a father of two and had no links with separatist rebels.

"Seven civilians and two paramilitary soldiers have died in the clash and at least 35 more are wounded, including two dozen policemen," Debojit Hazarika, police chief of Tinsukia district, told AFP.

Among the victims was a paramilitary trooper lynched by the mob when police fired at the crowd in Tinsukia, 520km from Guwahati, Assam's main city.

"The crowd became very restive and police first burst teargas shells and fired in the air," Hazarika told AFP by phone, adding the crowd numbered about 20,000.