

NUCLEAR STANDOFF

Iran, Russia reach a preliminary accord

AFP, Bushehr/ Moscow

Iran and Russia have reached a preliminary agreement on a plan aimed at easing fears the Islamic republic could acquire nuclear weapons, a senior Iranian official said yesterday.

Speaking at a joint news conference, Russia's atomic energy head Sergei Kiriyenko and Iranian vice president Gholam Reza Aghazadeh announced that negotiations will continue in Moscow in the coming days.

"We have reached an agreement in principle for the creation of a joint company," said Aghazadeh, who is also the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organi-sation.

Moscow has proposed a compromise plan involving Iran's uranium being enriched on Russian soil.

This would keep sensitive

enrichment work -- which can be extended to make the fissile core of a weapon -- outside Iran, yet at the same time guarantee its access to reactor fuel needed to generate electricity.

"We have discussed the elements of this proposal and our common position on this matter is that we have made progress," Aghazadeh said.

"We think we can get an outcome which will be satisfying for the March 6 meeting," he added, referring to the next session of the 35-nation board of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The March meeting could lead to action by the UN Security Council.

Kiriyenko only confirmed that the talks would continue in the coming days, without elaborating.

"We are awaiting a decision

from Iran guaranteeing the right to nuclear energy and the non-deviation of nuclear material," he told reporters.

"This solution asks for decisive measures. The negotiations will continue in Moscow in the coming days," added the official.

Iran warned yesterday that diplomatic efforts surrounding its disputed nuclear drive would be scuppered if the Islamic republic is targeted for more tough action from the UN's atomic watchdog.

Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi also repeated the regime's refusal to return to a full freeze of sensitive nuclear fuel work that lies at the heart of fears the country could acquire a nuclear arsenal.

Kiriyenko was in Bushehr for talks on the ongoing construction of Iran's first nuclear power plant,

which is being built with Russian assistance.

Earlier Russia said it will maintain "contacts" with Iran over the Islamic republic's nuclear plans ahead of a March 6 meeting of the board of governors of the UN's nuclear watchdog, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Sunday.

"Contacts on this subject will continue until the meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on March 6 in Vienna," Lavrov told journalists.

Russia, as a veto-wielding member of the Security Council with close ties to Iran, is seeking to mediate in the dispute over Iran's atomic energy programme, which the West suspects is a cover for developing nuclear weapons.

Militants take over Afghan prison wing

REUTERS, Pul-i-Charkhi

Taliban and al-Qaeda militants took control of a wing of the Afghan capital's main security prison and at least 30 prisoners were wounded in attempts to quell the riot, officials said yesterday.

The unrest erupted on Saturday night after prisoners led by Taliban and al-Qaeda militants took two female guards captive during a row over attempts to implement a new rule requiring inmates to wear prison uniforms, government officials said.

"As far as we know, some 1,500 prisoners are involved in this incident," a security official told Reuters on condition he was not identified. "It went out of control and a clash broke out between the prisoners, including many Taliban, and the police, in which 30 people have been wounded," he said.

Bursts of gunfire were heard from within the sprawling prison compound on the eastern outskirts of Kabul on Saturday night and Sunday morning.

Heavily armed police and troops backed by tanks and armoured personnel carriers took positions outside the perimeter and security forces prevented journalists from approaching.



Colonel Ariel Querubin (C) links arms with his supporters as he makes his way towards the headquarters in Manila yesterday. Querubin, who was sacked over an alleged coup plot against Philippine president Gloria Arroyo, was holed up inside a military camp in Manila with several dozen other marines and urged the public to rally round him. Querubin said he was taking the action in protest at the unexplained resignation earlier in the day of marines commandant, Major-General Renato Miranda.

PHOTO: AFP



Thai protesters march towards the venue of mass rally while shouting slogans against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in Bangkok yesterday. Tens of thousands of protesters staged third mass demonstration in less than a month demanding resignation of Thaksin over allegations of corruption.

PHOTO: AFP

90,000 checked for bird flu in India

AFP, New Delhi

Indian officials battling a bird flu outbreak culled hundreds of thousands of chickens and checked around 90,000 people for symptoms in Gujarat state as authorities ordered tests on dead birds at the other end of the country.

"More than 88,900 persons have been surveyed by the team. Of these 10 human cases have been kept under observation in isolation wards at the referral hospital," said an official in the western state of Gujarat who declined to be named.

Another official, Vatsala Vasudev, said officials were going house to house and checking on people. "Anyone with symptoms is being referred to the government hospital in Surat where a special isolation ward has been created," said Vasudev, Surat district's top civil administrator.

But 95 people suspected of infection tested negative over the weekend, easing fears the disease

might have spread to humans in the country of more than one billion people where many live in close proximity with poultry.

However the government of the northeastern state of Assam sounded a health alert after some 1,000 chickens died over the weekend, ordering tests on the dead birds.

"All preventive measures are being adopted in view of the bird flu scare prevailing across the country," the magistrate of Tinsukia district, Sanjay Kumar Lohia, told AFP.

Last week India reported its first cases at Navapur in Maharashtra state south of Gujarat.

Over the weekend new cases were reported from the neighbouring Uchhal area of Surat district in Gujarat, prompting officials to slaughter tens of thousands of chickens.

"So far about 90,000 birds have been killed in Uchhal area from where the new cases were reported," Vasudev told AFP.

Nuke, terrorism issues to hog Bush in S Asia trip

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush leaves on a maiden visit to South Asia this week determined to clinch a landmark nuclear deal with India and prod Pakistan to move more rapidly against al-Qaeda leaders believed to be hiding in the country.

"In this vital region, the stakes are high and the opportunities are unprecedented," Bush said ahead of Tuesday's departure to what is home to the world's most bitter nuclear rivals, the most dreaded terrorists, the largest democracy and a rapidly growing region and vast market.

In India, Bush wants to seal an elusive agreement for the United States to share civilian nuclear technology as part of a strategic partnership initiative launched with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last summer.

It may be an irony that the United States, which saw India as an ally of the Soviet Union and imposed many sanctions on New Delhi after its

defiant 1974 nuclear tests, now wants to embrace the Asian giant.

"The nuclear agreement attempts to cut through this past history, and offer to India a tailor-made regime outside of the NPT," said Stephen Cohen, a South Asian expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington.

Although still outside the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT), India has become vital to the United States. It is the world's largest democracy, set to surpass China as the most populous nation and fastest growing economy, and a vibrant market. The atomic pact will acknowledge India's military nuclear status and allow the energy-starved nation to accept help for its civilian nuclear programme.

Key to the agreement is a requirement for New Delhi to separate its civil and military programmes to ensure that India's military facilities do not benefit from nuclear technology transfers.

But India is reluctant to be fully transparent because it is worried

Bush may not be able to influence the powerful US Congress to give mandatory approval to the plan, said former US Defence Secretary William Cohen.

"This Gordian knot must have to be cut, cut very soon because if the civilian nuclear agreement unravels, it is going to have a major impact on the relationship," Cohen said, suggesting that both parties make major compromises.

While the nuclear deal seems to be the focus of Bush's three-day visit to India, his tightly-guarded day-long trip to Pakistan is expected to be dominated by talks on the "war on terror."

The US leader is expected to nudge Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in Bush's anti-terror campaign, to commit more resources to capturing al-Qaeda kingpin Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, reportedly hiding in Pakistan's northwest frontier province on Afghanistan's border.

Iraqi leaders call for calm

Bomb attacks kill 2 GIs, 5 Iraqis

REUTERS, Baghdad

A bomb killed five people at a bus station south of Baghdad yesterday, breaking a relative calm after Iraqi and US leaders appealed for an end to days of sectarian bloodshed that have pitched Iraq toward civil war.

A bomb in the washroom of a Shia mosque in the second city of Basra caused minor injuries, police said, it went off shortly after a rally in another part of the city by visiting young Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, a fiery militia leader.

The Hilla bomb destroyed a minibus as it drove out of a bus garage. Hilla is a mainly Shia town surrounded by Sunni villages, and the attack came two days short of the anniversary of the bloodiest single al-Qaeda bombing, which killed 125 people there a year ago.

Another bomb killed two US soldiers overnight in Baghdad.

Hours earlier, following a round of calls to Iraqi leaders by US President George W. Bush, Shia Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari made a midnight televised appeal, flanked by Sunni and Kurdish politi-

cians, to Iraqis not to turn on each other after Wednesday's suspected al-Qaeda bomb at a Shia shrine.

A three-hour meeting produced a commitment from the main political groups to form a unity coalition, although Sunni leader Tareq al-Hashemi said he was not yet ready to end a boycott of the US-sponsored coalition talks.

Four days of tit-for-tat attacks have left over 200 dead and many mosques damaged, despite a daytime curfew on Baghdad that went into its third day on Sunday; the defence minister warned of the risk of a civil war that "will never end."

A traffic ban intended to help stifle the violence remained in force in the capital. But in addition to the attack on the US soldiers, a mortar round landed near a Shia mosque in the east of the city, though without causing injury.

Near Madaen, another flashpoint for Sunni-Shia violence just to the southeast, a policeman was killed and two were wounded when their patrol was hit by roadside bombs.

In Hilla, police said it was not clear if the bomb was inside the

minibus or exploded in the road as it passed, just as it was leaving the bus station.

Jaafari, under US pressure to forge a national unity government after an election in December, the first that the once-dominant Sunni minority had taken part in, said he was hopeful that Iraqis would step back from sectarian strife.

"The Iraqi people have one enemy; it is terrorism and only terrorism. There are no Sunnis against Shias," he said.

In Basra, Sadr appeared at a rally to call for Muslim unity against US occupation and summoned his many followers to hold joint prayers next Friday at Sunni mosques, especially those damaged in the past days' violence.

Shortly afterwards, journalists heard a loud blast that turned out to have been in a Shia mosque a few miles away. Police said they suspected three men wounded in the blast had been planting the bomb when it exploded prematurely.

Abbas may resign if Hamas limits policies

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas has hinted he may resign should Hamas limit his policies as Israel's acting premier and a US envoy were set to discuss ways yesterday to extend aid that bypass the Islamists.

In an interview with British television ITV1, to be broadcast Sunday, Abbas hinted he may resign if Hamas prevents him from advancing peace efforts.

The broadcast came as Hamas prime minister designate, Ismail Haniya, gave a separate interview with Newsweek and the Washington Post, talking about the possibility of a staged peace in exchange for further Israeli withdrawals.

"We could reach a point where I cannot perform my duty. Then I will not continue sitting in this place, against and in spite of my convictions," Abbas said according to an advance transcript of the interview released on Saturday.

"The presidential chair is not a goal and is not an end -- rather it is a means to implement a mission and to achieve something for my people," he said, when asked if he would resign if Hamas blocked his agenda on peace with Israel.

"My convictions are important, as well as the work. If I can do something then I will continue, otherwise I won't," said Abbas.

The radical Islamist faction Hamas, blacklisted as a terrorist organisation by the European Union and United States, is preparing to draw up a new Palestinian government with Haniya charged for putting together the new-look cabinet.

Hamas does not recognise Israel's right to exist, its charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state and its armed wing has been responsible for some of the deadliest suicide attacks since the formation of the Palestinian Authority in 1994.

Pakistan detains 19 ahead of cartoons protest

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani authorities detained 19 militants in the eastern city of Lahore after they vowed to defy a ban on rallies over cartoons lampooning Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM), police said yesterday.

The government banned public rallies in the central province of Punjab following last week's violent protest in the provincial capital Lahore in which two people were killed.

But, leaders of the main Islamist alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), said they would stage a protest rally in Lahore later on Sunday despite the ban.

"We will hold the protest. It will be a peaceful rally," Shahid Shamsi, a spokesman for MMA said.

Punjab Law Minister Raja Basharat said the government had banned the entry of MMA secretary-general Fazal-ur-Rehman, a fiery orator, into Lahore to prevent him from leading the protest.

Authorities detained MMA head Qazi Hussain Ahmed in his party office in Lahore on Friday.

Tigers put Lanka on notice after talks

AFP, Culligny

Embattled Sri Lanka may have borrowed time after talks at this serene Swiss village where the South Asian nation's warring sides agreed to stop the killings till summer.

A top leader of the Tamil Tiger rebels, S. P. Thamilselvan, told AFP here that they gave the Colombo government two months to make good on the promises made during two days of talks or risk a return to hostilities.

Thamilselvan, head of the political wing of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), one of the world's most ruthlessly efficient guerrilla outfits known for suicide bombings, said he had little confidence that Colombo will deliver.

"The declarations and words should be translated into action," Thamilselvan said at the Chateau de Bossey, an 18th century building surrounded by woods and vineyards, overlooking Lake Geneva.

"Two months is amply sufficient (for the government) to demonstrate its sincerity," he said adding that the hostilities could result unless the government moved to rein in paramilitary groups.

Thamilselvan maintained that the Tigers were not responsible for a spike in violence between December and January when some 153 people, mostly security personnel, were killed in the island's restive northern and eastern regions.

"We did not carry out the attacks, it was the work of civilian groups that were unhappy about the government's support to paramilitary groups," Thamilselvan said.

Thamilselvan added that the Tigers will engage Tamil "civilian groups" to ensure there will be no more attacks against security forces, at least until the next round of three-day talks starting April 19.



Pakistani security officials inspect a damaged room after militants fired rockets on the official residence of a Baluchistan provincial minister in Quetta yesterday. Suspected tribal rebels fired rockets on the residence of the Livestock Minister Mir Qudoos Biznejo in the southwest Pakistan early yesterday, killing a guest and injuring eight others.

PHOTO: AFP

Rockets hit Pakistani minister's home

AP, AFP, Quetta/ Miranshah

Assailants fired rockets yesterday at the home of a provincial Cabinet minister in Pakistan's restive southwestern Baluchistan province, killing a guest and wounding eight other people, police said.

Two rockets struck the home of Abdul Qudus Bezinjo, the province's minister for livestock and dairy, after midnight in a western neighbourhood in Quetta, Baluchistan's capital, said Ghulam Mohamood Dogar, a senior Quetta police officer.

The minister was not at home at the time of the attack.

The first rocket hit a wall surrounding the minister's home and second slammed into a guest room, killing a guest, Dogar said.

The injured included some of Bezinjo's relatives and a private security guard, he said.