

NUKE CRISIS

Iran warns against radical measures

AFP, Tehran

Iran battled yesterday to head off international action following its refusal to halt its disputed nuclear drive, promising "maximum cooperation" if it manages to avoid the UN Security Council.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi nevertheless warned that any step towards sanctions would meet with tough retaliation from the Islamic republic, which is suspected of using an atomic energy drive as a cover for weapons development.

"We have said that we are ready to solve the questions through dialogue. If the IAEA and the Security Council

commit for the case to remain at the IAEA, we are ready for maximum cooperation," Asefi told reporters.

"But if they take radical measures, we will take measures as a consequence. If their decisions are reasonable, ours will be too. If their decisions are radical, ours will be too," he warned.

On Friday the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed Iran had not complied with a Security Council demand to freeze enrichment -- which makes civilian reactor fuel but can also be extended to make the explosive core of an atom bomb.

The United States and European powers are now poised to seek a Security Council resolution legally

obliging Iran to halt the work.

Unlike the IAEA, the Security Council has enforcement powers and its involvement in the crisis could pave the way for sanctions or even military action.

"The Islamic republic of Iran has no intention to stop or to suspend uranium enrichment," the deputy head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation, Mohammad Saidi, also told official media.

Foreign ministers of the five permanent Council members and Germany plan to gather in New York on May 9 to discuss the crisis.

Representatives of these countries are also due to meet in Paris Tuesday ahead of the talks.

Tens of thousands join anti-war protest in NY

AP, New York

Tens of thousands of protesters marched Saturday through lower Manhattan to demand an immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, just hours after this month's death toll reached 70.

Cindy Sheehan, a vociferous critic of the war whose soldier son also died in Iraq, joined in the march, as did actress Susan Sarandon and the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

"End this war, bring the troops home," read one sign lifted by marchers on the sunny afternoon, three years after the war in Iraq began. The mother of a Marine killed two years ago in Iraq held a picture of her son, born in 1984 and killed 20 years later. One group marched under the banner "Veterans for Peace."

The demonstrators stretched for about 10 blocks as they headed down Broadway. Organisers said 300,000 people marched, though a police spokesman declined to give an estimate. There were no reports of arrests.

"We are here today because the war is illegal, immoral and unethical," said the Rev. Al Sharpton. "We must bring the troops home."



PHOTO: AFP

Three-year-old Eila Mattson from New York City carries a US flag with a peace sign as she marches in an anti-war rally Saturday in New York. Thousands gathered to protest the war in Iraq and the policies of US President George W Bush.

US rhetoric on Iran resembles pre-Iraq war rumblings

AFP, Washington

Alarm bells over an emerging nuclear threat in the Gulf, UN credibility at stake, a fervent call to a coalition of the willing: the United States has been there before.

As Washington presses its drive to thwart Iran's suspected efforts to build a nuclear bomb, it is turning increasingly to the same diplomatic rhetoric used in the runup to the Iraq war.

Nobody here is talking seriously about a full-scale invasion of Iran like the 2003 move to oust Saddam Hussein for allegedly developing weapons of mass destruction that were never found.

When asked about the possibility, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has a stock answer: "Iran is not Iraq. I know that's what's on people's minds. The circumstances are different."

Nevertheless, US officials appear in much the same position as they were in 2002: stalwart defenders of the nuclear order scouting world support

for their cause, uncompromising souls in a compromising multilateralist universe.

With the latest nuclear crisis coming to a head after Iran blew off a UN Security Council injunction to halt uranium enrichment, the United States is again showing signs of frustration with the world body.

Nearly four years after President George W. Bush warned the United Nations it risked becoming "irrelevant" unless it dealt with Saddam, his administration is billing the showdown with Iran as a new test of UN mettle.

"Iran is openly challenging the United Nations," deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said Friday. "That challenge should have consequences in order to sustain and to reinforce the credibility of the UN as an institution."

Faced with stubborn resistance from veto-wielding Security Council members Russia and China to punitive measures against Iran, Washington is working on an alternative to UN action as it did for Iraq.

US, Iraqi forces kill 20 insurgents

AP, Baghdad

American and Iraqi forces have killed more than 20 insurgents during raids in areas used by militants to stage attacks in Baghdad, the US military said yesterday.

In violence Sunday, a roadside bomb hit a US military convoy in central Tikrit, the hometown of Saddam Hussein, said police Maj. Ahmed Awad said. He said the blast set a Humvee on fire and caused US casualties, but the US

command could not immediately confirm that.

The US military said the raids have taken place in and around Youssifiyah, a town about 20km south of Baghdad, where an American helicopter apparently was shot down by insurgents nearly a month ago, killing the two soldiers aboard.

In the latest operations Saturday, US and Iraqi forces attacked buildings used by foreign insurgent groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq, capturing seven

militants and detaining more than 50 suspects, the US command said.

Insurgents have been using the Youssifiyah region as a staging ground for suicide attacks Baghdad, the command said. Several of the 20 insurgents killed in the last few weeks were wearing suicide vests, it said.

Twelve of the militants, at least five of them foreign, were killed Tuesday when US troops backed by a helicopter and jets struck a suspected safe house in Youssifiyah, the US military said.

Sudan accepts AU peace plan for Darfur

REUTERS, Abuja

The Sudanese government accepted the African Union's proposal for peace in Darfur yesterday, a government statement said.

"The government ... wishes to confirm its decision to formally accept this document and its readiness to sign it," said a statement from Majzoub al-Khalifa, head of the government's negotiating team at peace talks in Abuja, Nigeria.

"The government wishes to confirm its full commitment to implement the agreement in good faith. The delegation is also fully convinced that any difficulties that might come up in the implementation stages can be resolved by consensus between all the parties."

The rebels have yet to respond officially to the 85-page document but several of their leaders complain that it does not meet their key demands, in particular on powersharing.

The government statement was the latest in a series to try to convince them to drop some of their demands and rely on conflict resolution mechanisms embedded in the agreement.

Sunday was the deadline set by the African Union for the parties to wrap up two years of talks to end the conflict in western Sudan.

Tens of thousands of people have been killed since rebels took up arms against the government in 2003 and more than 2 million have been forced from their homes.