

Iran must respond by Aug, N Korea stop missile test

Bush warns at EU-US summit in Vienna

AFP, Vienna

US President George W. Bush warned Wednesday that Iran must respond before August to a proposed deal on its nuclear program, and urged North Korea not to go ahead with plans for a missile test.

Bush also told a press conference after an EU-US summit in Vienna that he would like to close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp for terror suspects but a way must first be found to send inmates

home or put them on trial.

Amid tight security for Bush's visit, some 1,200 students demonstrated in the north of Vienna, far from the baroque Hofburg palace where the summit was being held, chanting "Bush go home!" and "Mass murderer".

But Bush said "it was absurd for people to think that we're more dangerous than Iran."

"We're a transparent democracy, people know exactly what's on our mind, we debate things in

the open, we have a legislative process that's active."

Bush said Iran should not need until late August 22 -- as suggested earlier Wednesday by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- to respond to the offer by the world's major power of a deal designed to secure guarantees that Tehran is not seeking to make nuclear weapons.

"It seems like an awful long time for a reasonable proposal," the US leader said. "It shouldn't take the

Iranians that long to analyze what is a reasonable deal."

The offer by the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany was delivered to Tehran by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana on June 6.

Ahmadinejad promised Wednesday to study it and give a response "at the end of the Mordad," referring to the Iranian month that ends on August 22.

Bush said Iran had "weeks not months" to answer, while diplomats say Tehran was asked to reply by June 29 when Solana delivered the proposals.

Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel, speaking as the current European Union president, said: "We agree... time is limited. We should not play with time."

"We'll come to the table when they verifiably suspend," Bush added.

The president urged North Korea not to go ahead with a planned missile test that has sharply spiked international tensions.

His comments, urging Pyongyang to honor past international agreements, came as the reclusive Stalinist state offered the United States talks on its launch plans in an indication that it might put off the flight test.

"The North Koreans have made agreements with us in the past and we expect them to keep their agreements, for instance on test launches," Bush said.

"This is not the way to do business in the world," he added, saying missile tests by North Korea make people "nervous."

He said the issue must be dealt with in six-party talks on North Korea and he was "pleased" the Chinese government was speaking out against any test.

He called it a "positive sign," adding that North Korea must realize there were "certain international norms" to live by.

The Stalinist regime test-fired a missile over Japan into the Pacific Ocean in 1998, and reports that it was preparing another test have drawn warnings of a tough response from Japan and the United States.

Iraqi forces capture top rebel in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

A leading insurgent was captured Wednesday by Iraqi soldiers in Baghdad's mainly Shiite Kadhimiyah district in a raid during the ongoing security clamp-down in the capital, the US military said.

Nuri Abu Haider Al-Oqabi, an alleged "leader of an assassination cell in Baghdad", was captured from the district's Shuala neighborhood, the military said.

Oqabi "recently became the head of a punishment committee that executes judgement on perceived enemies of his organisation," the military said.

The military said he was responsible for the kidnapping and murder of 14 Iraqi army soldiers last month, plus many other such abductions and murders.

Another person was also detained during the early morning raid.

Tens of thousands of Iraqi and US troops are patrolling the streets of Baghdad as part of the new security plan ordered by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to restore stability in the violent Iraqi capital.

Despite the massive security crackdown, dozens of people have been killed in a series of insurgent attacks in Baghdad since the start of the operation on June 14.



PHOTO: AFP
Kuwaiti candidate for the June 29 parliamentary elections, Hind Mohammad Salah bin al-Sheikh (C), works with her daughters before addressing her supporters at her election center in Adileyya in Kuwait City yesterday. Thirty women are among 343 candidates running for the 50-seat parliament.



PHOTO: AFP
Students demonstrate yesterday in Vienna, Austria against capitalism, war and US President George W. Bush's visit for the EU-US summit.

40 killed as violence rages in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

There will likely be more significant fighting in southern Afghanistan in the coming months, the US-led coalition said Wednesday as 40 people, mostly Taliban, were killed in fresh violence.

The rebels were operating in larger groups and "fighting hard" against security forces penetrating new areas, coalition spokesman Colonel Tom Collins told reporters in the capital Kabul.

The past weeks have seen some of the biggest battles in Afghanistan since the Taliban were removed from power by a US-led coalition in late 2001 for sheltering the Al-Qaeda terror network.

The surge in violence coincided with the launch of the biggest yet coalition and Afghan operation in the south, Mountain Thrust.

The operation had resulted in the killing of more than 90 militants since it kicked off in mid-May in four southern provinces, Collins said.

"People should expect significant fighting in certain areas of the south over the coming months," he

said.

"Clearly the enemy is resisting the coalition and the Afghan national army's efforts in the areas that they haven't previously operated in," he said.

"We're seeing the enemy operate in larger groups. They're fighting hard, they're clearly trying to stop our efforts to move into certain areas."

Mountain Thrust involves thousands of coalition troops, mainly Americans, British and Canadians, and Afghan forces and is being conducted in southern Kandahar province -- the birthplace of the Taliban -- and Helmand, Uruzgan and Zabul.

An Afghan army commander said that Afghan and coalition forces had killed 20 Taliban Tuesday evening when they raided a Taliban hideout in southern Helmand province's Musa Qala district, which sees a lot of action.

"Their bodies with their weapons were left at the site," General Rahmatullah Raufi, commander of the army's southern corps, told AFP. An Afghan army soldier was

also wounded.

About 3,300 British are deploying to Helmand to help Afghan forces build security and work on reconstruction.

A senior British commander also told embedded reporters in the province Tuesday that the arriving British deployment had met greater numbers of Taliban rebels than expected.

British troops were however still more than a match for the militants as seen in clashes earlier this month, the commander told reporters on condition of anonymity at a British base in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand province.

The Taliban have claimed to have 12,000 fighters in southern Afghanistan alone but an army officer has said the number was more like 5,000 fighters in the whole country.

In other incidents a bomb fixed to a tanker supplying fuel to US forces exploded in eastern Nangarhar province on Tuesday as it crossed over from Pakistan, killing six people and gutting 10 trucks, a border police commander told AFP.

East Timor PM likely to resign

AFP, Dili

East Timor's Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri will "most probably" resign after receiving a demand to do so from the president, a senior official from Alkatiri's office said Wednesday.

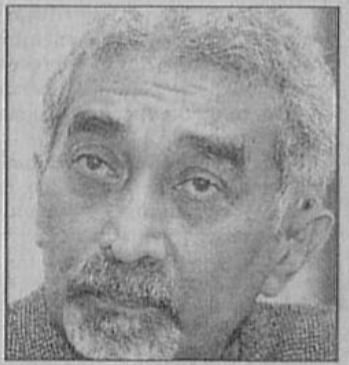
Alkatiri has been under pressure to step down since the tiny nation descended into violence a month ago, leading to the deaths of 21 people and more than 2,200 foreign peacekeepers arriving to restore calm.

His political opponents and critics have charged that he failed to prevent the unrest and was also linked to the violence himself.

"I can confirm the letter that President Xanana Gusmao sent yesterday (Tuesday) to Prime Minister Alkatiri. The letter is asking him to step down from office," the official, who is close to Alkatiri, said on condition of anonymity.

He said the premier would meet his council of ministers on Thursday to discuss the president's request. Asked if the prime minister will resign he said: "Most probably, he will resign."

The Portuguese LUSA news agency, which saw a copy of the letter, said Gusmao wrote that he



Mari Alkatiri had lost confidence in the prime minister after watching a documentary accusing him of supplying weapons to civilians.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation program "makes serious accusations on your involvement in the distribution of arms to civilians," LUSA cited the letter as saying.

"After seeing the 'Four Corners' program, which enormously shocked me," the letter continues, "there is nothing left for me to do except give you the choice: either you resign, or, after hearing the State Council, I will fire you, because you no longer deserve my confidence."

N Korea offers US missile talks

AFP, Seoul

North Korea offered the United States talks on its missile launch plans Wednesday, indicating it might put off a flight test that has raised tension and drawn sharp international warnings.

The number two diplomat at North Korea's UN mission was quoted saying the secretive state was open to talks with Washington, where there were reports that the US missile defence shield had been activated in case of a launch.

"The United States says it is concerned about our missile test launch," Han Song-Ryol told South Korea's Yonhap news agency. "Our position is, 'Okay then, let's talk about it.'"

But he underlined the North's position that it had every right to develop, deploy and test-fire missiles.

"It is not right for others to tell us what to do about our sovereign rights," said Han, whose country last year announced it had developed an atomic bomb.

North Korea test-fired a missile over Japan into the Pacific Ocean in 1998, and reports that it was preparing another test have drawn warnings of a tough response from Japan and the United States.

Former South Korean president

Kim Dae-Jung, who made engagement with the estranged North a cornerstone of his policy while in office, cancelled a trip to Pyongyang next week.

"The trip is technically impossible right now because of the situation over the missile," said Jeong Se-Hyun, a former unification minister who was to accompany Kim.

A series of reports have said North Korea is preparing to test-fire a Taepodong-2 missile with a range of up to 6,700 kilometres (4,200 miles), far enough to hit targets in Alaska and possibly Hawaii.

Indications that the North had been fuelling a missile -- a process that experts say is dangerous and difficult to reverse -- have caused concern.

Japan and South Korea agreed their nations would have to cooperate to prevent a missile launch, the Japanese foreign ministry said in a statement.

"If the missile were to be launched, it would threaten the regional security. It is important that countries concerned would cooperate in urging North Korea to use its restraint," the ministry said.

Separately, South Korea warned it could scrap crucial food aid to its impoverished neighbour if the launch went ahead.

Suspect in Pak sectarian killings held

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani police said Wednesday they had arrested a senior leader of an outlawed Sunni Muslim extremist group wanted for killing more than 150 people, mainly rival Shiites.

Usman Kurd, allegedly from the feared Lashkar-e-Jhangvi organisation, was seized in Mauripur district of the southern port city of Karachi, police officer Fayyaz Khan told AFP. Some weapons were also recovered, he said.

"He was among the most dangerous Lashkar-e-Jhangvi militants and was trained in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime," Khan said, adding that police were investigating whether he was still in contact with the Taliban.

Police said Kurd was the group's chief for Pakistan's troubled southwestern province of Baluchistan, where he allegedly orchestrated two deadly attacks on the Shiite community.

A 2003 suicide bombing at a Shiite mosque in Quetta, the provincial capital, left more than 50 people dead while at least 48 were killed in a suicide and gun attack on a Shiite procession in 2004.

Karachi, where Kurd was arrested, is in Sindh province and officials said the suspect may be handed over to police in neighbouring Baluchistan after initial questioning.

A special investigation team from Quetta was also due in Karachi later Wednesday.

No interim govt before Maoists lay down arms

Nepal minister says

AFP, Pokhara

No interim power-sharing government will be formed with Maoists in Nepal until the rebels lay down their arms, Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula said Wednesday.

"Formation of the interim government is not possible without settling the Maoists' arms issues," Sitaula told journalists in the western tourist town of Pokhara.

"The interim government containing the Maoists will be formed only after the management of the rebels' arms."

Nepal's authorities and Maoist rebels clinched a landmark deal on June 16 which will see parliament dissolved and power shared in a new interim government, which is due to come into being within a month.

The question of the rebels laying down arms was not addressed in their eight-point agreement, although the two sides agreed to request UN monitoring of arms by the rebels and Nepal's army during voting for a body to redraft Nepal's constitution.

Sitaula told Wednesday's media conference that the Maoists, who have been fighting to install a communist republic in Nepal for the past decade at the cost of more than 12,500 lives, had agreed to settle the arms issue "before the formation of the interim government."

"The United Nations will be invited soon to manage and monitor the arms of both the state and the Maoists before going for constituent assembly elections," the minister said.

Maoist rebels kill 4 in India

AFP, Raipur

Suspected Maoist rebels killed a ruling party leader with an axe and shot dead another three people in central India, police said Wednesday.

A leader of the state's ruling Bhartiya Janata Party was killed early Wednesday while two tribal people were shot dead late Tuesday. A peace activist was gunned down elsewhere in the state, police said.

State home minister Ram Vihar Netam said the political leader was targeted because he had taken part in a government-sponsored peace campaign, which security experts say has put civilians at greater threat of Maoist violence.

The killings came after the rebels shot dead seven villagers in Dantewada district of central Chhattisgarh state Tuesday. Officials said they were apparently killed when they refused a rebel demand to join them in attacking a government relief camp.

More than 100 dead in Indonesia floods

AFP, Jakarta

Floods and landslides triggered by torrential rain have killed at least 110 people in Indonesia's South Sulawesi province and left a further 100 missing, an official said Wednesday.

The disaster, which has hit at least seven districts in the province after two days of torrential rain, is the latest in a series of similar tragedies to hit the world's biggest archipelago this year.

Saktianto, an officer at the South Sulawesi search-and-rescue agency, said the latest report from Sinjai, the worst-hit district, showed 103 people had been killed and 99 were still missing.

Saktianto said floods killed 64 people while landslides claimed other 39 lives there.

Another two people were killed

in Bantaeng district and another in Bone district, while eight others were missing in total there, the official said.

A police officer in Bulukumba district said four people died there.

At the hospital in Sinjai, some 15 bodies were laid out, including children as young as five, as many relatives cried and some became hysterical.

Police, the military and others were searching for survivors, Muhidin, a search and rescue official in the South Sulawesi capital of Makassar, told AFP. The government on Wednesday dispatched aid for the victims.

Social Affairs Minister Bachtiar Chamsyah said sarongs, blankets, biscuits, medicine, body bags and medical staff were to be flown in.

The minister told reporters he had also ordered local social wel-

fare offices to distribute 100 tonnes of rice to the affected districts.

Official news agency Antara reported the meteorological office in Makassar was warning of more heavy rains over the next three days.

The weather cleared Wednesday morning, however, and many residents were returning to their homes, the agency said.

Flash floods and landslides in Indonesia are not unusual, although monsoon rains typically peak in January.

In April floods and landslides triggered by monsoon rains killed at least 23 people in East Java.

At least 12 people were killed in similar disasters in January on other islands while more than 150 people lost their lives in two separate landslides on Java.

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