

# Iran tops agenda at G8 FMs' meeting

AFP, Moscow

Foreign ministers of the Group of Eight countries began talks here yesterday expected to raise pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme, as Moscow sought to prevent next month's G8 summit becoming a magnet for criticism of Russia's democratic credentials.

The meeting at a mansion in central Moscow was seen as one of the last opportunities to iron out differences ahead of the July 15-17 summit in Saint Petersburg of leaders of the G8, which comprises Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States.

Arriving at the talks, European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana said he would meet Iranian officials, probably next Wednesday, to discuss proposals by the UN Security Council members plus Germany aimed at allaying Western concerns about Tehran's nuclear programme.

In Tehran, Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani said he would meet Solana in Spain.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said that Iran must reply to the international plan before the July 15-17 G8 summit.

"It seems clear to me that Iran must say yes. Then there will be negotiations," Douste-Blazy said.

The ministers were also expected to address the escalation of hostilities in the Middle East prompted by the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier and a massive Israeli military operation in the Palestinian territory.

Douste-Blazy said France condemned the overnight arrest by Israeli troops of 64 members of the Palestinian governing party Hamas.

"We condemn of course all the arrests of political personnel," Douste-Blazy said. France "condemns all the violence, particularly the latest, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict... There is no other solution than a political process."

Russia has played a significant role in the standoff over Iran's nuclear programme, being a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a close ally of Tehran, as well as constructing Iran's first nuclear power station.

President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday underlined his differences with the West on the Iran issue, saying Russia did not intend "to join any sort of ultimatum, which only pushes the situation into a

dead end".

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said earlier that in addition to Iran and the Middle East, the G8 ministers would talk about democracy in Russia and Belarus.

Speaking to CNN in the Afghan capital, Rice expressed a desire for Russia to "enhance its commitment to democratic development" and referred to Belarus and other "places that have yet to see a democratic future".

Amid reports that Moscow wants to limit discussion of its human rights record or commitment to democracy at next month's summit, a senior Kremlin official defended Russia's role in ex-communist Europe.

"Moscow has done much more for democracy in central Europe than Washington or London," said the deputy head of Putin's office, Vladislav Surkov, on Wednesday. "It's Moscow which democratised this immense space."

But if Russia hopes to avoid discussion of accusations that it is back-sliding on democracy and media freedom, the British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett said that Britain had concerns about human rights and the rule of law in Russia.

## Iran, EU official to talk nuclear crisis next week

AFP, Tehran

Top Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani will meet EU foreign policy Chief Javier Solana next week to discuss an international plan to resolve the standoff over Iran's nuclear program, with the West demanding a response in two weeks.

"In the next two weeks there will be discussions with Mr Solana about our nuclear case, and next week I will go to Spain and I will meet with Mr Solana," Larjani was quoted by state news agency IRNA as saying.

Solana, meeting with Group of Eight foreign ministers in Moscow at talks expected to cover the Iran crisis, said the meeting would probably be Wednesday and would be "in Europe, probably in Brussels."

On June 6, Solana handed Iran a proposal from the five permanent UN Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany.

It promises incentives and multi-lateral talks if Iran agrees to temporarily halt uranium enrichment, something Tehran has so far refused to do.

The enrichment work is at the centre of international concerns that Iran is using a Russian-backed civilian nuclear power programme to pursue a secret weapons plan.

Tehran vehemently denies such allegations, saying it wants nuclear technology only to generate electricity.

Diplomats say Iran was asked to reply by June 29, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said last week Tehran would take until August 22 to answer.

French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said in Moscow Thursday that Iran must reply before the G8 summit, which begins on July 15.

"We expect their reply before July 15... It seems clear to me that Iran will say yes. Then there will be negotiations," he said.

"If the response is negative between now and July 15, then it is clear that the international community will be firm and that, in particular, we will continue what we have begun in the (UN) Security Council," he added, referring to discussions over potential measures against Iran.

## 9 injured in Iran quake

AFP, Tehran

Nine people were injured in a moderate quake which hit southern Iran early Thursday, causing a power blackout on a tourist island, state television reported.

Residents spent the night outdoors after the quake and a series of aftershocks, reports said.

"Nine people were lightly injured in the quake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale which hit the Persian Gulf Island of Qeshm, and the port city of Bandar Abbas area (southern Iran) at 00:32 am (2102 GMT)," the head of a provincial natural disaster office, Masoud Dalman, told Iranian media.

"Fortunately there were no reports of any deaths even after the area was hit by five aftershocks, only the electricity in the Qeshm Island was cut and we are working on it now," he added.

Dalman said Iranian Red Crescent groups have been sent to the area.



Kuwaiti women queue at a polling station in Kuwait City to vote for the first time in parliamentary elections yesterday. Twenty-eight women are among 249 candidates running for the 50-seat legislative body.

# Kuwaiti women flock to historic polls

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwaiti women turned out in force yesterday to vote for the first time in parliamentary elections in the oil-rich Gulf state after a heated campaign focused on electoral reform and corruption.

Women voters, who represent 57 percent of the eligible electorate, started queuing in front of their designated polling stations from early in the morning.

Outside Nafissa bint al-Hassan school, in Sabah al-Salem tribal district -- dubbed the "mother of all districts" as the biggest in the number of eligible voters, women clad in black abaya robes lined up under a blazing sun.

"I insisted on being the first to vote. I am so happy that I could not sleep last night," said Zahra Ramadan Benbehani, 54, who arrived in a wheelchair pushed by her daughter.

But Benbehani said she had voted in favour of two "more capable" male candidates, although two of the competing 10 candidates in her constituency were women.

"It is my choice and that of my family. No one dictated my choice of candidates," she said.

Twenty-eight women are among 249 candidates running for a four-year term in the 50-seat legislative body, according to an interior ministry list.

Female candidate Fatima al-Mutairi arrived in the polling station wrapped with a Kuwaiti flag-coloured scarf over her black abaya.

"Even if I get only one vote, it will still be a testimony to tell the men and women of my country that I took on the challenge and that I have entered history," she said.

In Al-Jabirya district, 12 kilometers (seven miles) south of the capital, Buthaina Madi, a single businesswoman in her late twenties, was the first to cast her ballot although she was flying out of Kuwait one hour later.

"I did not want to miss this historic chance despite my trip

since 1976.

The elections followed the fiercest campaign in 44 years of Kuwaiti parliamentary democracy, as the opposition bids to boost its reformist agenda, which includes slashing the number of constituencies as a way to eradicate corruption.

Opposition candidates charged during the campaign that vote-buying by their pro-government rivals was rife.

The 340,000-strong electorate was voting at 94 polling stations in public schools, 47 each for men and women who vote separately under the election law. Of the total of 341 voting booths, 182 were reserved for women.

Polling is due to close at 20:00 (1700 GMT), with the first results expected by midnight (2100 GMT), as votes are still counted manually.

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# 7 killed in US floods, 200,000 evacuated

AFP, New York

Flooding killed at least seven people and forced hundreds of thousands across northeastern United States to evacuate Wednesday in what the New York governor called the area's worst natural disaster of a lifetime.

Emergency officials from across the coast said the toll could climb to 11 or higher as other deaths recorded during the flooding are evaluated to see whether they had been caused by the storms.

In one of the hardest hit areas in eastern Pennsylvania, county officials ordered the evacuation of up to 200,000 people from low-lying areas around the Susquehanna River amid fears that the river would spill over the dykes as waters crest.

Evacuation efforts stretched from Virginia -- which declared a

state-wide emergency -- to New York as up to a foot (40 centimeters) of rain fell through parts of the region and forced residents to rooftops in scenes reminiscent of last year's Katrina disaster.

"We were afraid of a New Orleans-type situation where we just couldn't get people out," said Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell said.

A state of emergency was declared in 46 Pennsylvania counties and Rendell said helicopters had already been brought in to fly search and rescue missions, plucking stranded residents from their rooftops.

"The next 12 to 14 hours will tell whether this is a full-scale disaster," Rendell told CNN.

New York Governor George Pataki said he would ask the federal government to declare a state of emergency for his state and warned that he was bracing for the

worst because waters had not yet crested.

"We have never seen a natural disaster this bad in the state of New York," Pataki told CNN.

"It's not over," Pataki cautioned. "We know that a part of the rivers in the state have not crested."

The mayor of Washington, D.C., also declared a state of emergency of the US capital.

Meanwhile coast guard officials across the east coast urged residents to carefully follow evacuation warnings as water continued to rise.

"We're hoping that people heed officials' warning and get out of the way" of the floods, David McBride of the Virginia Coast Guard told the television station.

The fatalities from the regional floods included three dead in Maryland, three in New York state and one in Pennsylvania.



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