



European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana (L) and Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani (R) gesture at each other during a press conference after talks at EU headquarters in Brussels yesterday.

Iran, EU start nuclear talks under pressure

US, UK push for early response on offer

AFP, Brussels

Iran's top nuclear negotiator launched fresh talks yesterday with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, amid renewed pressure for Tehran to accept an offer to end its standoff with the West.

A cautiously upbeat Ali Larjani said there was "no reason to be pessimistic" at the talks, which also involved representatives from Britain, France, Germany and Russia.

Iran vowed yesterday not to cave in to international pressure, as its nuclear envoy Ari Larjani warned of a "long road" ahead before Tehran's

atomic standoff with the West can be resolved.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promised Iran would continue sensitive nuclear fuel cycle work and would not back down "one iota", even as Larjani held fresh talks with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana on the high-stakes impasse.

But the United States and Britain warned of a return to the UN Security Council if the Islamic republic takes too long to respond to the offer of economic and political incentives for Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. Iran maintains that it is develop-

ing nuclear energy, but its lack of cooperation with the UN's nuclear watchdog and enrichment activities have raised suspicions that it is covertly trying to build an atomic bomb.

Larjani, who has been in Europe since last week, insisted that Tehran will take as long as it needs to decide how to respond to the international offer.

"We have already stated our position. We don't usually speak before having reflected," he told journalists shortly before arriving at Solana's office in Brussels' EU district.

World powers want Iran to

respond positively to the offer before a meeting of leaders of the Group of Eight major industrial powers starting in Saint Petersburg this weekend.

But Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad has said Tehran will not respond before August, and a member of the Iranian delegation said Tuesday that "there is no deadline".

Arriving for their talks, Larjani was welcomed by Solana and, amid a swarm of bodyguards, both swept in without speaking to reporters.

Solana's spokeswoman said: "We want to move the process forward and for that we have to know what they think."

Indonesia passes Aceh autonomy bill

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesia's parliament yesterday passed a draft law granting tsunami-lashed Aceh wide-ranging autonomy as part of a peace deal signed last year with separatist rebels, a lawmaker said.

The law clears the way for local elections to be held in the staunchly Muslim province, where 29 years of conflict had left around 15,000 people dead, mostly civilians.

"It has been passed into law and there were no major arguments on sensitive issues, including the creation of local political parties," Prio Budi Santoso told AFP.

The peace pact signed last August by the government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) called for a law giving Aceh partial self-rule that should have been passed by March 31.

N Korea missile crisis stirs up discord

China rejects draft UN resolution

AP, AFP, Seoul

North Korea's missile tests stirred up more discord yesterday among its Northeast Asian neighbours, with South Korea and Japan jousting over Tokyo's suggestions of pre-emptive strikes against the North.

Japan and China, meanwhile, were advocating different strategies for how the United Nations should respond to last week's launches.

The bickering and divisions were likely to please the North, which frequently tries to drive a wedge between the US and its

allies in the campaign to defuse Pyongyang's nuclear threat.

China yesterday rejected a proposed UN resolution on possible sanctions against North Korea, dashing US and Japanese hopes for quick action over Pyongyang's missile tests.

A foreign ministry announcement that the draft Security Council resolution was an "overreaction" came amid another flurry of shuttle diplomacy to address the crisis in the wake of last Wednesday's missile launches.

North Korea sent shivers through-

out the region last week by test-firing seven missiles, believed to include a long-range Taepodong-2 potentially capable of hitting the United States.

The missiles also led to a flurry of diplomatic activity, which continued Tuesday with the US envoy on North Korea wrapping up a Japan visit and flying to China for more talks. A high-level North Korean delegation also travelled to Beijing, while the North and South were to begin a new round of ministerial meetings in the southern city of Busan.

Iraq plagued by signs of looming civil war

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq is developing all the symptoms of looming civil war, with communities feeling victimised, a terrible cycle of tit-for-tat attacks, and Sunnis and Shias alike withdrawing into ghettos.

"The events over the past few days are very alarming," Joost Hiltermann, Middle East director of the International Crisis Group, told AFP.

"To me it is a sectarian conflict in which people are being killed. It is a low-intensity conflict at the moment, or a low-level civil war. It can get much worse."

Sectarian violence in Baghdad hit an unprecedented low on Sunday with the cold-blooded massacre in a largely Sunni quarter of 42 people by masked men in civilian clothes, followed by a double car-bombing on a Shia mosque which killed 19 people and wounded 59.

And the killing continued on Monday.

A triple attack on the capital's most populous Shia neighbourhood of Sadr City claimed 10 lives, and was swiftly followed by a market bombing in the Sunni Sheikh Omar district that wounded 14.

As in all civil wars, each community says it is being victimised by the other.

Shia MP Hamid Rashid Moala called the attacks on his commu-

nity's places of worship "the most crimes", and accused Sunni militants and loyalists of ousted president Saddam Hussein of wanting to plunge the country "into civil war".

Those in the opposing camp feel equally victimised. The main Sunni Arab parliamentary bloc, the National Concord Front, charged that Sunnis were being chased out of the largely Shia main southern city of Basra and that Sunni teachers were being "systematically targeted".

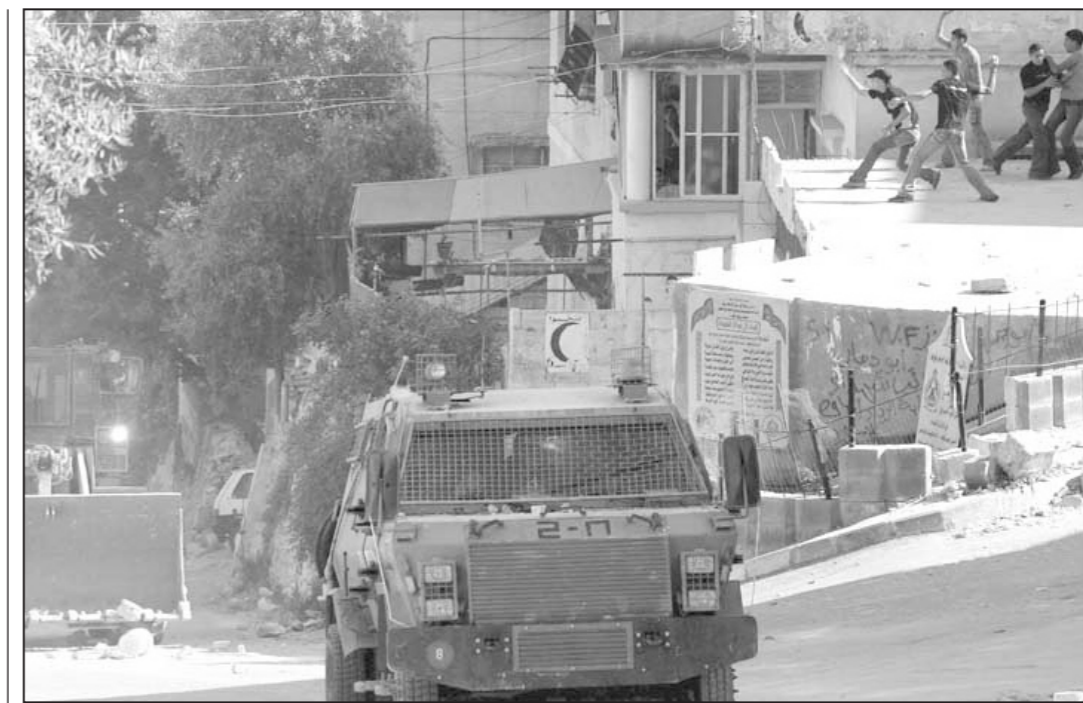
"If these divisions are allowed to spread they will burn the fertile and barren land alike," said the bloc's leader Adnan al-Dulaimi.

Another Sunni Arab MP, Iyad al-Samarrai, talked of a "conspiracy to divide Iraq by creating a civil war." But for Nabil Mohammed Yunis, professor of international studies at Baghdad University, "this is not a civil war -- it is a war of the militias."

"It is the militias who are fighting each other and not common people who are neighbours or those walking on the streets of Baghdad who are killing each other."

"It is very difficult to get the common people involved in a civil war," he insisted, but "the militias are definitely pushing them into it".

Discussion forums on the Internet have begun dispensing advice on how to survive the sectarianism now plaguing the country.



Palestinian youth throw stones at passing Israeli troops during an incursion into the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.

Palestinians on edge without power, fuel

AFP, Gaza City

"What it took six years to build was bombed in a week," seethes Mustafa Mahmud, telling customers he has no generators left, two weeks after Israel bombed the only power station in the Gaza Strip.

"Never could I have imagined that the situation would get so complicated," the 60-year-old shopkeeper mused. For days, Gaza has survived on electricity generators but the fuel necessary for their operation is increasingly rare.

For Mahmud at least, business has been booming since Israel took out the only power station in Gaza on June 28, the opening night of a two-week air offensive designed to force

the release of a soldier captured by militants on June 25.

Since then, the Palestinian territory has been deprived of electricity and rationing imposed. If generators were a stop-gap solution, now fuel supplies are becoming increasingly difficult to find with many petrol stations shut.

"I have electricity about six hours a day and the rest of the time, I depend on my generator, which eats up 10 litres of diesel oil an hour," said Suheil Abbud, proprietor of Gaza City's Al-Quds Hotel.

"I only have reserves for two days. If nothing changes, I am going to have to close."

The Gaza Strip's 1.4 million residents are totally dependent for

fuel oil supplies on Israel, which controls the Nahal Oz pipeline into the territory.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last week demanded immediate access for UN relief supplies to Gaza and "urgent action" to alleviate the "desperate humanitarian situation" in the territory.

The UN Relief and Works Agency has put the Gaza Strip "on the brink of a public health disaster" since the power plant strike, with less than a quarter of the fuel needed to run backup generators.

"For seven days, we've been without a drop," said Mahmud Ahmed Ishawa, who heads the Gaza association of petrol station owners.

Somali Islamists scour Mogadishu for arms

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali Islamists scoured southern Mogadishu for arms yesterday as the city's last secular warlord fled after deadly clashes that killed at least 77 since the weekend, witnesses and militia said.

Heavily-armed Islamists seized at least 28 blood-stained battlewagons -- pick-ups mounted with heavy machine guns also known as "techicals" -- from the warlord and his allies and searched the capital for weapons, they said.

The trucks were taken from the compound of Abu Shukri, an aide to warlord Abdi Hassan Awale Qeydiid, the lone holdout from a vanquished US-backed alliance who left the city after surrendering late Monday, they said.

Some 500 of Qeydiid's fighters turned over their weapons overnight after elders mediated the surrender that came after two days of fighting in which the two sides had pounded each other with artillery and mortar fire, they said.

Saddam boycotts trial

REUTERS, Baghdad

Saddam Hussein and his defence counsel boycotted his trial for crimes against humanity for a second day on Tuesday, forcing a two-week adjournment to give court-appointed lawyers time to prepare final arguments.

The former Iraqi leader's half-brother and intelligence chief Barzan al-Tikriti, his former vice president, Taha Yassin Ramadan, and Revolutionary Court judge Awad Hamed al-Bander and their lawyers were also absent from the court.



Polish President Lech Kaczynski (L) congratulates his identical twin brother Jaroslaw Kaczynski (R) just after he nominated him as a new Polish Prime Minister in Presidential Palace in Warsaw on Monday.

Polish president names identical twin as PM

AFP, Warsaw

Polish President Lech Kaczynski on Monday nominated his brother Jaroslaw as prime minister, paving the way for a world-unique double act, which would see identical twins holding the top two state posts.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the ruling conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, now has two weeks to name his new cabinet and put forward an agenda for governing Poland.

The widely expected announcement that the president wants his brother to lead the government came shortly after Prime Minister Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz submitted his resignation -- just nine months after being nominated for premier -- and it was accepted by Lech Kaczynski.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski quickly pledged he would pursue a tough line in the EU, focusing on Poland's interests as a nation state.

At the same time, he sought to reassure markets, vowing he would continue public finance reforms.

If lawmakers confirm Jaroslaw, 57, as premier, he will be breaking a vow he made during his brother's successful presidential election campaign last year.

Jaroslaw said then that he would not take up the post of prime minister if Lech were elected presi-

dent, because neither the Polish people nor Poland's international partners would tolerate a fraternal double act in the two key positions of Polish politics.

Born 45 minutes apart -- Jaroslaw first -- in Warsaw, the Kaczynski twins were inseparable growing up, and their lives continued to follow parallel paths as adults.

Both studied law at the University of Warsaw. They were together in the anti-communist opposition and when the Solidarity trade union was born.

In 2001, they co-founded the conservative PiS party, which scored the best result in Poland's general election last September.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski has said that his new government will be the same as that of Marcinkiewicz, apart from a new finance minister.

On Sunday, Kaczynski said he had invited deputy finance minister Stanislaw Kluzka, 34, a former chief economist for Polish bank BGZ, to take up that post, replacing Pawel Wojciechowski, who was appointed by Marcinkiewicz.

The Polish zloty regained ground Monday on news of the likely change at the head of government, trading at 4.05 to the euro and 3.180 to the dollar at 4:30 pm (14:30 GMT).

Tape claims 3 GIs killed over rape-murders

AP, Baghdad

An al-Qaeda-linked group posted a Web video yesterday purporting to show the mutilated bodies of two US soldiers, claiming it killed them in revenge for the rape-slaying of a young Iraqi woman by American troops from the same unit.

The Mujahedeen Shura Council previously claimed responsibility for killing the two soldiers, who were snatched in a June 16 attack near the town of Yousiffiyah, southwest of Baghdad. A third soldier was killed in the attack.

But the statement was the first time the group linked the slaying to the rape case.

A statement by the group said the video was released as "revenge for our sister who was dishonoured by a soldier of the same brigade."

It said that as soon as fighters heard of the rape-slaying, "they kept their anger to themselves and didn't spread the news, but were determined to avenge their sister's honour."

Other 'major powers' deserve UNSC seats

Says Annan

AFP, Bonn

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said yesterday certain "major powers" should play a bigger role in the world body but declined to name favourites for any new permanent seats on the Security Council.

"I have always maintained that no reform to the UN will be complete without a reform of the Security Council. We definitely need to bring the structure of the Security Council in line with today's reality," Annan said at a press conference here with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

"It is no longer acceptable the major countries and major regional powers are not at the table and these are the powers we turn to when we have problems in regions. But when it comes to the centre where these decisions are taken they are absent."