

Iran now ready to talk nuke issue

AFP, Tehran

Iran's foreign minister said yesterday his country is ready to discuss suspension of its sensitive nuclear enrichment work, a point categorically rejected by senior officials in the past.

"Even the proposal to suspend enrichment, which we regard as illogical, can be discussed in negotiations," Manouchehr Mottaki told a press conference.

The minister did not elaborate on just what Iran might be prepared to discuss.

The UN Security Council has adopted a resolution requiring Iran to suspend all activities related to uranium enrichment by August 31 or risk possible sanctions.

The five UN Security Council members, plus Germany, expect Tehran's response on August 22 to a package of incentives in return for suspending enrichment.

Mottaki said any negotiations should "guarantee obtaining the Iranian people's rights as well as clearing up any questions, ambiguities and concerns regarding the Islamic republic's peaceful nuclear activities."

"We will not back down on our legitimate rights under any conditions," he vowed.

Iran has repeatedly insisted its nuclear programme is for civil purposes only despite Western concerns that it may be cover for an attempt to develop the bomb.

Mottaki described the UN resolution as "political" and "of no value for Iran."

Since the UN Security Council's resolution on July 31, Iran has repeatedly stressed that it will not accept suspending enrichment as a pre-condition for talks on the incentive package.

As recently as Tuesday, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad rejected the resolution by saying: "If they think they can use a resolu-

tion as a stick against us, they should know that Iranian people do not bend to language of force."

But in the event Iran sticks to its current position and defies the resolution, the country may have to deal with the consequence of sanctions.

The Islamic republic for its part has said it is ready for the challenge, said Deputy Foreign Minister Alireza Sheikh-Attar.

"The government has considered necessary measures to confront any sanction. Under the worst conditions, we have the capability to face threats and find foreign and domestic alternatives," the official news agency IRNA quoted him as saying.

"Playing games with Iran's economy by creating restrictions will be very costly for the West," he warned, alluding to probable economic shocks. "They will lose Iran's market for Western goods. Besides Iran is OPEC's second oil producer."

5 'infiltrators' shot dead in Srinagar

AFP, Srinagar

Five Islamic rebels were shot dead in Indian Kashmir by Indian soldiers yesterday after they sneaked across the de facto border from the Pakistani zone, the Indian army said.

The deaths came a day after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh vowed to "neutralise and smash" militants and urged Pakistan to crack down on "cross-border terrorism" in his Independence Day address to the nation.

"By killing the five, we've foiled a major militant infiltration attempt," an army spokesman said in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian Kashmir where a revolt has raged against New Delhi's rule since 1989.

Soldiers were still battling militants in Kashmir's northern Machil sector after the fighting erupted late Tuesday, the spokesman added.

India accuses Pakistan of arming rebels and pushing them into Indian Kashmir across the Line of Control dividing the Himalayan region.

Pakistan likely to extradite key British air plot suspect

AFP, Islamabad

The alleged key planner behind an airline bombings plot foiled last week may face extradition to Britain, Pakistani authorities say.

Britain has not yet officially requested that Rashid Rauf, who is being interrogated in Pakistan, be extradited but Pakistan said he could be sent to London.

"Rashid Rauf is a British national. We do not have any extradition treaty at the moment, but yes because he is a British national the possibility of his extradition remains there," said foreign ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam.

"We have not received any request for extradition, so it would be hypothetical at this stage. But we have arrangements for mutual legal assistance."

She added: "We will continue to cooperate closely."

Rauf, a Al-Qaeda suspect,

allegedly gave breakthrough details of the conspiracy after his arrest in early August, she said.

Britain last week arrested around two dozen people, reportedly including Rauf's brother Tayib, 22, in connection with the alleged plot to bomb US-bound passenger jets.

Toughened security caused chaos at airports worldwide.

Pakistan said last week that Rauf was a "key man" in the conspiracy and had connections to the Al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan. Security officials said another Briton and five Pakistanis had been arrested.

"He (Rauf) is being interrogated," Aslam said without elaborating.

The British Foreign Office said it was waiting for a response from the Pakistan government concerning the arrests of two reported Britons.

"We actually sent a 'note

verbale' to the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs asking for an official status on the two individuals that were arrested, i.e. nationality and things like that," a Foreign Office spokesman said in London.

The spokesman said he was "not aware" that there has been a response yet. The gist of the note was to find out whether the two were indeed British nationals and whether British consular officials can visit them.

Pakistan's Aslam said Rauf had "nothing to do" with any charities involved in operations after last October's South Asian earthquake, which left 73,000 people dead and three million homeless.

She denied an "absurd" reports, including one in Tuesday's Washington Post, that an unidentified Pakistani charity which received 10 million dollars from Britain for disaster relief had helped finance the plan.

"These are all absurd baseless stories. The objective is to malign Pakistan and to cast a shadow on the efforts made by Pakistan to uncover and foil this terrorist plot," Aslam said.

Following reports that Rauf's father Abdul had worked for a quake relief charity in Britain, she said: "If one person is involved in a criminal act it does not mean that the entire family is criminal."

Separately a Pakistani official said that authorities had previously probed the transfer of 20 million pounds from Britain to Pakistan but it was in a money-laundering case and was "not even remotely linked" to the bomb plot.

A Briton of Pakistani descent sent the money via Dubai between May and November 2005 into three Pakistani bank accounts operated by four Britons of similar ethnicity, the official told AFP.

Fighting erupts in Iraq cities

Car bomb kills eight in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi security forces fought with Shiite militias in several southern cities yesterday as the embattled government tried once more to impose its authority on the divided country.

Government troops regained control of the holy city of Karbala after killing ten members of a Shiite cleric's private army, arresting 281 more and imposing a strict curfew on the town.

But soldiers clashed with militia fighters elsewhere, including in Iraq's second city of Basra, where masked gunmen fired rocket-propelled grenades at the governor's headquarters, an AFP corre-

spondent witnessed.

At the same time, deadly violence continued in the capital, where a car bomb killed eight people and wounded another 28 near the main bus station.

Checkpoints were thrown up around Karbala, with only local people allowed in or out, after local cleric Ayatollah Mahmud al-Hasani's armed supporters killed at least six soldiers and civilians in clashes on Tuesday.

"On Tuesday, August 15, a group of gunmen attacked a police station and government offices in Karbala with the aim of destabilising it," Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said, in a statement issued as head of Iraq's armed forces.

"The 4th Corps managed to kill 10 of them and arrest 281 others before calming the situation... The situation is now under control," he added.

Hasani spokesman Dhia al-Musawi said the militia was switching to passive resistance. "Followers from Hilla and Basra are going to come to Karbala. They will hold a sit-in wherever they are stopped by the police," he said.

Police in Kut, 150 kilometres from Karbala, said Hasani's supporters there had ambushed a patrol and killed one officer.

Meanwhile, in Musayyib, 55 kilometres south of Baghdad, police said they had arrested 25 pro-Hasani militants after fighting there.

In Basra, black-clad fighters fought an hour-long gunbattle with Iraqi troops after firing on the governor's headquarters. They were dispersed and five of them arrested, a police officer told said.

The fighting reflects growing tension between Iraq's US-backed security forces and increasingly confident Shiite militias, some of them followers of local preachers, others linked to parties in the fragile coalition government.

Shiite leaders such as radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, head of the powerful Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), have called for communities to form self-defence units.

NEW YORK TIMES REPORT

Bush frustrated by lack of support for US in Iraq

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush is frustrated by Iraq's slow progress and lack of support for the US military effort, The New York Times said yesterday quoting people who attended a private meeting with Bush at the Pentagon this week.

In particular, from the questions he posed several non-government experts at the 90-minute lunch, Bush appeared to be uncertain of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's effectiveness, said some of the participants, who pointed out that Bush never expressed a personal view of the Iraqi leader.

"I sensed a frustration with the lack of progress on the bigger picture of Iraq generally -- that we continue to lose a lot of lives, it continues to sap our budget," said one person who attended the meeting this week.

"The president wants the people in Iraq to get more on board to bring success," added the source, who like several others at the meeting spoke with the newspaper on condi-

tion they would not be identified.

Bush also voiced frustration at the Iraqi people's lack of appreciation of the US sacrifices in their country, noting especially an huge anti-American and pro-Hezbollah rally held in Baghdad recently.

"I do think he was frustrated about why 10,000 Shiites would go into the streets and demonstrate against the United States," said another person who attended the meeting.

American University professor Carole O'Leary said Bush expressed the view that Iraq's "Shia-led government needs to clearly and publicly express the same appreciation for United States efforts and sacrifices as they do in private."

The White House refused to comment on the lunch, which the daily said included Bush's war cabinet in addition to the outside experts and was part of the government's efforts to counter criticism it is out of touch with public opinion.

SYRIA WARNS ISRAEL

Golan occupation won't be allowed to last forever

AFP, Damascus

Syria warned Israel yesterday that the occupation of the Golan Heights "cannot last forever" and said Syrians would emulate Hezbollah to recover their land.

"We say to the forces occupying our land that our people warn you that they will not allow our land to be occupied forever," the government's daily Ath-Thawra said.

"You must understand that our people will fight the way the Lebanese resistance (Hezbollah) fought you," it added.

"Our people will fight you ... on every inch of the Golan," it said.

However, the newspaper urged decision-makers in Israel "to open up to new perspectives", noting that some in the Jewish state were in favour of making peace with Syria.

"The leaders of this expansionist entity have a choice: either they heed the voice of reason that prohibits them from violating other

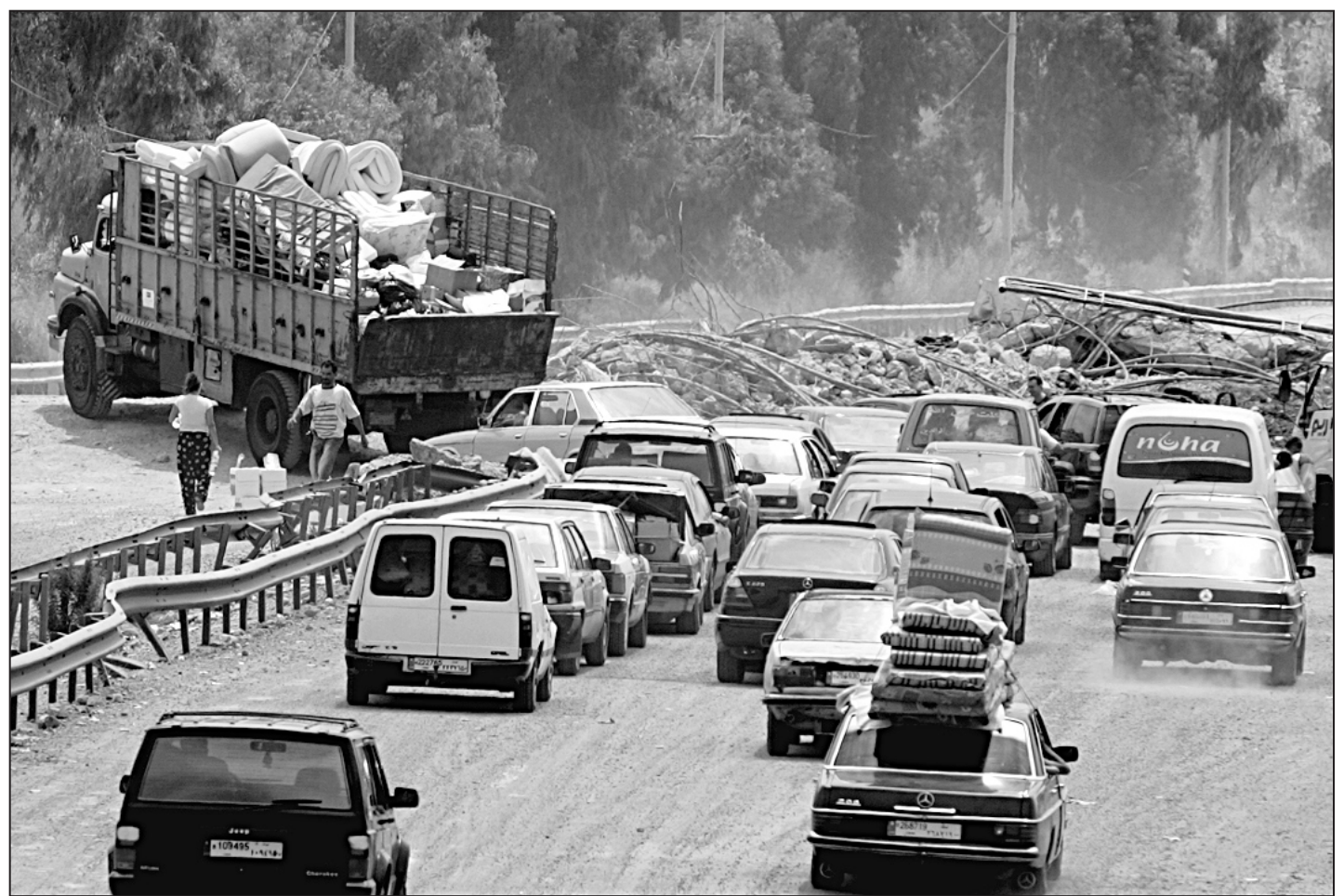
people's rights or they will face action similar to that carried out by the Lebanese resistance."

Syria has repeatedly demanded the return of the Golan Heights which Israel conquered in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war and annexed in 1981.

Peace negotiations between the two neighbours broke off in January 2000 amid disagreement over the strategic heights, which overlooks Israel's northern Galilee region and command approaches to the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gave a hard-hitting speech to the Syrian parliament on Tuesday describing Israel as the "enemy" and stressing that he did not expect peace any time soon with his arch-rival.

"Peace would involve Israel returning occupied lands to their owners and restoring their rights," Assad said. "Israel is an enemy founded on the basis of aggression and hegemony."



Displaced Lebanese carrying their belongings drive through a bombed-out highway in Damur, south of Beirut, yesterday as they continue to return to their homes after the end of Israeli offensive.

Ex-Lashkar chief challenges house arrest

AFP, Islamabad

The former head of the Lashkar-e-Taiba Kashmiri militant group yesterday lodged a challenge in a Pakistani court against a month-long period of house arrest, his lawyer said.

The petition pleaded that the detention order of the Punjab provincial government against Hafiz Mohammad Saeed was unjustified and illegal, lawyer Nazir Ahmed Ghazi told AFP.

Pakistan's foreign ministry said Tuesday that Saeed's detention was not related to a foiled plot revealed last week to blow up airliners flying from Britain to the United States.

The Lahore High Court has called for a report from the provincial government and fixed a hearing date for August 23, Ghazi said.

Saeed was placed under house arrest in Lahore, the capital of Punjab, on August 9, a day before British authorities arrested more than 20 Britons, mainly of Pakistani origin, who were allegedly involved in the bomb plot.

Meat preserved with nitrites may cause cancer

AFP, Washington

The humble hot dog, and other meats preserved with nitrites, may cause genetic mutations known to cause cancer, said a study out Tuesday.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center began their study off-campus.

"We bought at a supermarket large batches of hot dogs," lead researcher Sidney Mirvish told AFP.

"We examined the hot dogs -- wieners, frankfurters or sausages -- because they are a widely consumed nitrite-preserved meat and because of the proposed linkage of such products with colon cancer," the study said.

The researchers used water to extract compounds in the hot dogs, and found apparent N-nitroso compounds, the study said.

The scientists put the water extract in contact with salmonella bacteria, which before long showed a significant mutation of its genetic code.

Manmohan's move to clear air on nuke deal

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister will make a statement to parliament to try to allay concerns about a controversial civilian nuclear cooperation deal with the United States, a spokesman said yesterday.

Manmohan Singh met scientific and national security advisers as well as with the country's top atomic energy official Wednesday in preparation for the statement Thursday, the spokesman said.

Singh is expected to try to allay concerns raised by top scientists and his communist allies that the deal will excessively curtail India's nuclear weapons program.

Eight nuclear scientists issued a

joint statement Monday, saying parliament must "insist on the ground rules for the nuclear deal" that ensure the nuclear arsenal is not endangered.

Under the agreement India will open most of its civilian reactors to international inspection but keep pre-selected military nuclear facilities out of public scrutiny.

The cooperation deal must be approved by the US Senate after passing the House of Representatives: 359-68. Several commentators as well as the communists believe the upper house will attempt to increase restrictions on the Indian nuclear weapons program.

The United States began with-

holding civilian nuclear know-how from India in 1974 after it conducted its first nuclear test.

India tested nuclear weapons in 1974 and 1998 and, as a result, is banned by the United States and other major powers from buying fuel for atomic reactors and other related equipment.

The current deal was reached during a visit in March to New Delhi by US President George W. Bush.

Some US politicians have expressed doubts about extending civilian nuclear technology to India, which has not signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, without first putting the most stringent safeguards in place.

Grass ashamed of his SS past

AFP, Berlin

German Nobel prize-winning author Gunter Grass has admitted he is ashamed of serving in the Nazis' notorious Waffen SS in the final months of World War II.

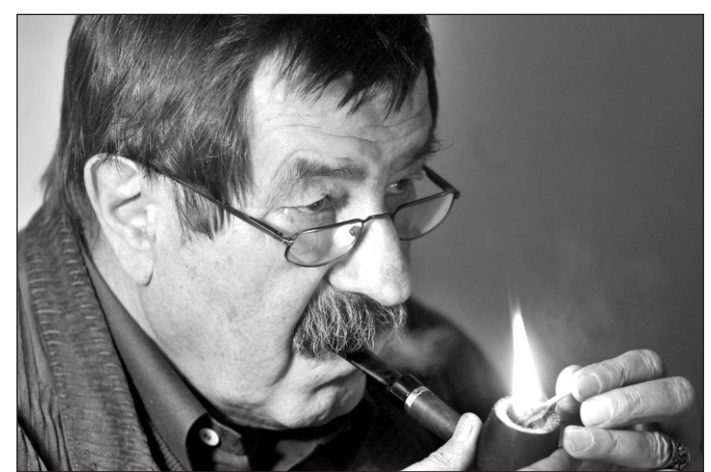
Grass has been severely criticised after revealing at the weekend that he had enrolled in the elite unit in 1945 at the age of 17, although he insists he never fired a shot.

He had previously admitted only that he had served in an air defence unit.

Grass, arguably Germany's greatest post-war writer, said he had felt insulted by the reaction to his admission.

"What I am experiencing is an attempt to make me a persona non grata, to cast doubt on everything I did in my life after that. And this latter life has been marked by shame," Grass said in an interview with ARD television shown in part on Tuesday. The full version is to be broadcast on Thursday.

Grass, 78, said he had waited more than 60 years to reveal his secret because he had wanted to fully explain his past in his autobiography "Peeling Onions", whose release date was moved forward



to Wednesday due to the massive attention the revelation has drawn. "It is the subject of the book, I worked on it for three years, and everything I have to say on the subject is in it. Whoever wants to judge me, may judge me," he said.

Grass achieved worldwide fame when he wrote "The Tin Drum" in 1959, a book examining Germany's Nazi past which established him as a literary giant and icon of the German left.

He has been severely criticised by writers, historians and politi-

records due to be released in the next six months by the former East German secret police, the Stasi.

Some prominent Germans have called for Grass to be stripped of his Nobel prize for literature he won in 1999, but the Nobel Foundation rejected those calls.

"Prize decisions are irreversible," the chairman of the Nobel Foundation, Michael Sohlman, told AFP.

German newspapers have reported that Grass' involvement in the Waffen SS could have been easily checked by consulting other wartime records, including archives stored in Berlin.

The Tagesspiegel newspaper on Wednesday printed a photograph of Grass' imprisonment record compiled by US forces when he was a POW in Marienbad in what is today the Czech Republic.

The Waffen SS was the combat division of Adolf Hitler's notorious elite force which had a reputation for brutality in Nazi-occupied Europe and ran the death camps in which millions of people -- mainly Jews -- were killed.

The Koelner Stadt-Anzeiger newspaper reported on Wednesday that Grass had made his admission now because it would have been revealed in

Most Israeli Jews favour Lebanon war probe

AFP, Jerusalem

Two-thirds of Israeli Jews favour creating a commission to examine the government's handling of the war in south Lebanon, revealed two opinion polls published yesterday.

Between 67 and 69 percent of people polled said they supported a commission of inquiry, according to surveys carried respectively by the country's top dailies, Maariv and Yediot Aharonot.

According to the poll in Yediot Aharonot, only 40 percent of Israeli Jews are satisfied with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's handling of the war, compared to 77 percent just after the offensive was launched last month.

Both opinion polls were conducted on a sample of Israel's Jewish population and have a margin of error of 4.5 percent.

Olmert and the defence establishment have been accused of badly planning the land, sea and air offensive launched in Lebanon following a July 12 border attack in which the Hezbollah militia killed eight soldiers and captured two.