

Allies muted as US wages financial offensive on Iran

AFP, Singapore

The United States is taking the financial fight to Iran as it turns up pressure on its allies to get tough over the Islamic republic's nuclear ambitions. But are its partners listening?

Washington, perhaps coincidentally, has intensified sanctions over Iran's backing for "terrorist" groups in the fortnight since the country ignored a UN deadline to suspend its uranium enrichment by August 31.

On September 8, the Treasury Department froze Bank Saderat, one of Iran's largest lenders with some 3,400 branches, from doing any business with US-owned banks on the grounds that it supports terrorism.

Treasury officials accused

Saderat and Iran's central bank of channelling hundreds of millions of dollars -- often through unwitting, "blue-chip" Western banks -- to extremist groups and to the country's missile programme.

They said the outfits include the Lebanese Shia militia Hezbollah and the Palestinian groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

Iran's central bank chief Ibrahim Sheibani has reportedly vowed to take legal action to challenge the US sanctions on Bank Saderat, and threatened to shift some of Iran's currency reserves out of the dollar.

But Treasury officials have been fanning out around the world to ram home the message, especially in Europe and Gulf nations such as

the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson was briefed on the issue after he took office in July. The former boss of Goldman Sachs was said by aides to be shocked at "extensive intelligence" allegedly revealing that Iran was using dozens of front companies to abuse the banking system.

"Protecting the financial system from abuse by terrorists and illicit financiers is integral to international financial stability and global security," he told an International Monetary Fund meeting here Sunday.

After the latest Group of Seven gathering Saturday, Paulson announced an "educational" campaign so that multinational banks can be "vigilant and identify risks".

8 dead or missing as typhoon hits Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A powerful typhoon cut across Japan's southern island of Kyushu yesterday, leaving at least eight people dead or missing amid strong winds and torrential rain, officials said.

A gust of wind blew an express train off the tracks in Nobeoka in the island's south, slightly injuring five of some 45 passengers on board, police said.

Some 100 people had been injured in Kyushu or elsewhere, the public broadcasting network NHK reported while several police officers confirmed at least 50 injured.

Typhoon Shanshan, packing winds of up to 144km per hour, made landfall near Sasebo on Kyushu's west coast shortly after 6:00 p.m. (0900 GMT) on its way from the East China Sea, the Meteorological Agency said.



PHOTO: AFP
An express train that was carrying 45 passengers, lies overturned on the ground as heavy winds from typhoon Shanshan blew the carriages off the track at Nobeoka city in Miyazaki prefecture, Japan's southern island of Kyushu yesterday.

Israel okays probe into Lebanon war

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's cabinet appointed a commission yesterday to investigate the way the government and military handled the Lebanon war, bowing to calls for an inquiry but rejecting veterans' demands for an independent probe.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has come under fire from critics who say he launched an ill-

prepared campaign in Lebanon that failed to crush the Lebanese Hezbollah guerrilla group after it abducted two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid in July.

Hezbollah fired nearly 4,000 rockets into Israel during the 34-day conflict and Israeli reservists who fought in Lebanon have complained of poor planning and tactics.

Serial blasts kill 4 in Thailand

AP, Hat Yai

A series of bomb blasts Saturday in Thailand's restive south killed four people including a 29-year-old Canadian who became the first Westerner to die in the two-year Muslim insurgency, police said.

More than 60 people were wounded, including an American, a Briton, two Malaysians, two Singaporeans and two Indians, Hat Yai hospital officials said.

ANTI-ISLAM REMARKS Pressure on Pope to apologise

REUTERS, Vatican City

Pressure mounted on Pope Benedict to issue a personal apology yesterday when he makes his first public appearance since his remarks about Islam sparked Muslim fury across the world.

The Vatican said on Saturday the Pope was sorry Muslims had been offended and that his comments had been misconstrued, but Muslim countries and religious groups remained angry at what they said portrayed Islam as a religion tainted with violence.

The Pope, leader of the world's 1.1 billion Roman Catholics, is due to give his regular Sunday blessing - known as the Angelus -- at his summer residence Castelgandolfo, an occasion often used to express the church's views on current affairs.

Italian media said security at the castle had been tightened.

In Iran, theological schools

closed on Sunday in protest at the Pope and Etemad-e Melli newspaper said senior clerics demanded an immediate apology. The English-language Tehran Times called his remarks "code words for the start of a new crusade."

Morocco withdrew its ambassador to the Vatican on Saturday, calling the Pope's remarks "offensive," while Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood -- the country's main opposition force -- said the statement issued by the Vatican was not enough.

"We feel he has committed a grave error against us and that this mistake will only be removed through a personal apology," said the Brotherhood's deputy leader Mohammed Habib.

The Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, one of the country's main Shia political parties, also called for the Pope to apologise "clearly and honestly" for his comments.

Nato winds down major anti-Taliban offensive

Suicide blast kills one

AFP, Kandahar

Nato-led troops wound down the military phase of their biggest operation against Taliban in southern Afghanistan yesterday, as a suicide blast struck one of their convoys, killing a civilian and injuring 11 other people.

Afghan and Nato forces announced here that they had driven the Taliban out of southern Kandahar province's Panjwayi, an insurgent stronghold, and that they were starting reconstruction work.

The combat phase of Operation Medusa, which kicked off in southern Kandahar province on September 2, was over, provincial governor Assadullah Khalid told reporters in Kandahar.

The Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) has said the operation, which involved about 2,000 foreign and

Afghan forces, killed more than 500 rebels. Khalid has said 13 civilians were also killed.

It was Isaf's biggest anti-Taliban operation since the alliance took command of the south on July 31. It was focused on Panjwayi, about 35km west of Kandahar city.

"We believe we have cleared the Taliban out of the Panjwayi Pashmul area," Isaf spokesman Major Quentin Innes told AFP.

But a Taliban mid-level commander told AFP by phone that the rebels were still in the area and preparing for fresh attacks on foreign and Afghan targets.

"We're here. We're still in Panjwayi and will resist to the death," Abdul Bari, who claimed to be a Taliban group-commander, said.

Bari said 50 to 60 Taliban fighters were killed during Operation Medusa.

"The bombardment was relent-

less. But we're still here," he said. The troops would now help with reconstruction and humanitarian aid, Major Innes said.

There were however a "significant" number of Taliban-laid mines and improvised explosive devices in the area and troops wanted to remove them before encouraging the thousands of people who had fled the area to return home.

Meanwhile, interior ministry said hundreds of Afghan security forces will launch an offensive in western Afghanistan against Taliban who are said to have fled Nato-led strikes in the south.

The operation due to start Monday will involve nearly 500 Afghan police and troops who will first move into southwestern Nimroz province and then into neighboring Farah, interior ministry spokesman, Zemarai Basha told AFP.

21 lions dying in India after failed experiment

REUTERS, Chandigarh

Twenty-one lions are dying in a zoo in Chandigarh after a cross-breeding experiment to boost the park's attractions went disastrously wrong.

In the 1980s officials at the Chhatbir Zoo in Chandigarh, bred captive Asiatic lions with a pair of African circus animals, resulting in a hybrid species.

Within a few years it became obvious it had not worked.

The offspring found it hard to walk, let alone run, because their hind legs were weak. And by the mid 1990s the big cats -- which live for up to 20 years in captivity -- showed symptoms of failing immune systems.

But it wasn't until 2000 that the breeding programme was ended, and the male lions given vasectomies, by which time the zoo had 70 to 80 such lions.



PHOTO: REUTERS

Lajwanti (front) and Lakshmi rest inside their exhibit enclosure at Chhatbir Zoo in the northern Indian city of Chandigarh on September 6. Twenty-one feeble lions are waiting to die in their cages at a north Indian zoo after a breeding experiment meant to boost the park's attractions with a number of healthy animals went horribly wrong.

Taliban warn against Pak pact violation

REUTERS, Islamabad

An aide to fugitive Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar warned of "problems" in Pakistan's North Waziristan region in case of a violation of a peace pact signed this month, a newspaper reported on Sunday.

Pro-Taliban militants and the Pakistani government reached a peace deal on Sept 5 under which the militants agreed to stop attacks in the country and across the border in Afghanistan in return for a halt in government's operations in the region.

"Violation of the terms of agreement in Waziristan would cause problems and destabilize the area," The News quoted Mullah Dadullah, Taliban's feared field commander as saying.

Critics say Pakistan government has virtually caved in to the militants' demands and the strategy risked creating a safe haven in North Waziristan for Taliban insurgents, who are fighting the government in Afghanistan, and their al-Qaeda allies.

US, Iraqi forces net top al-Qaeda militant

AFP, Baghdad

A top militant of the al-Qaeda in Iraq network has been arrested in the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, the US military announced yesterday.

The militant, whose identity was not disclosed, was arrested on September 13, the military said.

"Intelligence indicates he is an extremely active weapons facilitator associated with vehicle bomb attacks on Iraqi police," a statement from the military said.

It said reports also point to his "involvement in arranging an upcoming meeting of high-level terrorists."

On September 10, security forces had also killed a top aide of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, the group's leader in Iraq.

Abu Jaffar al-Lybi, a Libyan, was killed in an operation in Baghdad's Karrada district.

Lybi was reported to be the head of "al-Qaeda's criminal operations" in Baghdad's Rusafa and Karrada districts and the restive province of Diyala, northeast of Baghdad.

Masri took over as the chief of al-Qaeda's operations in Iraq after the slaying of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in a US air strike on June 7 near Baquba, the capital of Diyala province.