

Chirac calls for lifting UN sanctions threat on Iran

AFP, Paris

French President Jacques Chirac yesterday urged more nuclear talks with Iran during which it would not be referred to the UN Security Council — setting the scene for another possible clash with the United States, which is pushing for sanctions.

Chirac argued that more negotiations should take place with Iran, free of the threat of sanctions.

"During that negotiation, I propose that on the one hand the six refrain from referring the issue to the Security Council and that Iran renounce during the negotiation the enrichment of uranium," he told Europe 1 radio.

The six nations holding talks with Tehran are the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany.

It was the first time a European leader has clearly stated that the suspension of uranium enrichment was not a precondition for opening talks on the nuclear dossier.

Chirac indicated that the suspension should come during rather than before negotiations.

"We can find solutions via dialogue," said Chirac, who was later to head to New York for the UN's General Assembly due to start Tuesday.

There, he was to meet US President George W Bush, who has been espousing a harder line against Iran, America's arch-enemy for the past three decades.

Both men were to address the assembly on Tuesday — as was Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Bush last week warned US allies

not to get too caught up in talking with Tehran, which Washington suspects is trying to build a nuclear arsenal under cover of an energy production programme.

"My concern is that, you know, they'll stall; they'll try to wait us out," Bush said. "So part of my objective in New York is to remind people that stalling shouldn't be allowed."

The United States would like to see the Security Council threaten sanctions on Iran, including economic measures and travel bans.

But veto-wielding members China, Russia — and now France — are openly balking.

Chirac, in an interview with CNN, said: "There is a lot more potential to dialogue and I would like us to go the end of that particular road before we decide to go any further in any other direction."

"I very much hope that dialogue will get us out of this crisis and I believe it will."

The French president also touched on the UN Security Council row over the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, which poisoned relations between Paris and Washington and cast Chirac and Bush more as ideological opponents than allies.

He told CNN he was convinced that his objections to the US push for war on Iraq — Iran's neighbour — had been validated.

"I adopted a stance on Iraq and I have to say that the way things panned out, it certainly didn't go against the stance I took. What I said has been borne out and I remain very pessimistic about Iraq and its future."

12 military officers killed in Nigerian plane crash

AFP, Abuja

Twelve military officers, including 10 generals, were killed in an air force plane that crashed into a hill in central Nigeria, presidential spokeswoman Remi Oyo said yesterday.

"President Olusegun Obasanjo has described as a monumental tragedy the crash of a Dornier plane into a hill 18 nautical miles from Obudu in Cross Rivers State," she told reporters here.

"Twelve military officers including the pilot lost their lives. They included eight major-generals and two brigadier-generals," she added.

Oyo said there were only six survivors from the Dornier 228-221 belonging to the air force that crashed into the hills of Korti in central Benue State on Sunday morning.



PHOTO: AFP
A group of Maoist students shout slogans demanding a date for constituency assembly elections in Kathmandu yesterday. The Maoist affiliated student wing of the All Nepal National Independent Students Union-Revolutionary marched to mark their 17th National Conference.

'Musharraf gave explicit commitment on terror'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, On Board Air India One

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said that President Pervez Musharraf had assured him "Pakistan has no hand" in perpetuating recent terror acts in India and had given an "explicit commitment" to work with India "to do all that is in their control to control the scourge".

Talking to journalists accompanying him while returning from Havana, where he met Musharraf, the prime minister said the "new mechanism" between the two countries to deal with terrorism was

a "new beginning" and he was "very pleased" with the outcome of the discussions.

"I hope it works, but if it does not work, then also we have to deal with the consequences," he said.

The two leaders issued a Joint Statement at the end of their talks in Havana — their fourth meeting in two years — which directed their foreign secretaries to resume their composite dialogue and to put in place an India-Pakistan anti-terrorism institutional mechanism to identify and implement counter-terrorism initiatives and investigations.

4 Nato troops killed by blast in crowd of Afghan children

AFP, Kandahar

A suicide bomber blew himself up in a crowd of children clamouring to get pens and books from Canadian troops in Afghanistan yesterday, killing four Nato soldiers and a number of civilians, police and Nato said.

Police said around two dozen children were also hurt by the blast that struck a Canadian patrol in volatile Kandahar province, a day after Nato said it had successfully completed a major anti-Taliban operation nearby.

The extremist Taliban movement said it carried out the suicide attack.

"What I can confirm is four Isaf soldiers were killed," Major Quentin Innis, a spokesman for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), told AFP. Others were

wounded but he could not yet say how many.

"There were a number of Afghan civilians that were also killed," Innis said without giving a figure.

A witness said the suicide bomber had ridden a bicycle into a crowd of laughing children as they gathered around the soldiers at the scene, around 35km west of Kandahar city.

"Kids were running towards the Canadian convoy because they were giving out pens and notebooks to the children," bystander Mohammed Karim told AFP.

"There was a crowd of kids laughing and shouting, 'Give me one, give me one'. At this time a man riding on a bicycle approached the crowd and detonated in the crowd."

US Capitol opens after brief security shutdown

REUTERS, Washington

The US Capitol was shut down briefly yesterday after a man was arrested for racing past security into the building, Capitol police said.

The suspect breached security with his car first and then got out and ran past guards into the building, Sgt Kimberly Schneider said.

He was captured just inside the building. The building was closed for a search but it was opened within an hour, the police said.

The congressional day had barely begun when the man was arrested and it appeared there were no members of Congress in the building at the time.

There have been a string of security alerts involving evacuations of the Capitol and various surrounding office buildings since the September 11 attacks five years ago.

Nepal peace talks likely to resume next week

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Peace talks between Nepal's multi-party government and Maoist rebels aimed at ending a decade-old civil conflict are likely to resume next week, after a three-month lull, a cabinet minister said yesterday.

Hard bargaining and a lack of trust between the two sides have slowed the peace process to end the conflict in the Himalayan nation, which has killed thousands of people and ravaged its infrastructure.

But following an informal meeting on Sunday between Maoist chief Prachanda and Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, senior government officials said the peace

talks which have been put off since June were likely to resume next week.

"We have decided to hold the meeting as soon as possible," tourism minister Pradip Gyanwali, a government negotiator, told Reuters.

Gyanwali said during the meeting the two leaders discussed finalising a temporary constitution and setting up an interim parliament and government, which included the Maoists.

They also discussed plans for early elections for a special assembly to prepare a permanent constitution, he said.

"The Maoists had doubts about

the government's commitment on these political matters, which the prime minister cleared in the meeting with Prachanda," Gyanwali said.

Rebel spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara also said their "suspicion" had been lifted.

Both the government and rebels have been observing a ceasefire after weeks of mass protests forced King Gyanendra to hand power to political parties in April.

They have held three rounds of talks but the dialogue has been delayed with the rebels accusing the government of dragging its feet over issues such as the holding of assembly elections — a key demand of the Maoists.



PHOTO: AFP
World's Strongest man Franz Mullner of Austria upkeeps 30 seconds a helicopter of 600kg on his shoulders during World Records Day at Vienna's Prater on Sunday.

POPE'S ANTI-ISLAM REMARKS Vatican tries to calm row as militants vow war

REUTERS, Vatican City

al-Qaeda militants in Iraq vowed war on "worshippers of the cross" and protesters burned a papal effigy yesterday over Pope Benedict's comments on Islam, while Western churchmen and statesmen tried to calm passions. The statement by an umbrella group led by Iraq's branch of al-Qaeda came after the Pontiff said on Sunday he was deeply sorry Muslims had been offended by his use of a medieval quotation on Islam and holy war.

"We tell the worshipper of the cross (the Pope) that you and the West will be defeated, as is the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya," said a Web statement by the Mujahideen Shura Council.

"We shall break the cross and spill the wine ... God will (help) Muslims to conquer Rome ... (May) God enable us

to slit their throats, and make their money and descendants the bounty of the Mujahideen," said the statement, posted on Sunday on an Internet site often used by al-Qaeda and other militant groups.

In Iraq's southern city of Basra, up to 150 demonstrators chanted slogans and burned a white effigy of the Pope.

"No to aggression!", "We gagged the Pope!", they chanted in front of the governor's office in the Shia city. The protesters also burned German, US, and Israeli flags.

A speech by Pope Benedict last Tuesday was seen as portraying Islam as a religion tainted by violence, causing dismay among Muslim states where some religious leaders called it the start of a new Christian crusade against Islam.

US war prisons keep 14,000 detainees beyond reach of law

AP, Baghdad

In the few short years since the first shackled Afghan shuffled off to Guantanamo, the US military has created a global network of overseas prisons, its islands of high security keeping 14,000 detainees beyond the reach of established law.

Disclosures of torture and long-term arbitrary detentions have won rebuke from leading voices including the UN secretary-general and the US Supreme Court. But the bitterest words come from inside the system, the size of several major US penitentiaries.

Tigers hack 11 Muslims to death in E Lanka

REUTERS, Colombo

Suspected Tamil Tiger rebels hacked 11 Muslim labourers to death in eastern Sri Lanka at the weekend, the army said on Monday, the latest in a string of mass killings and abuses.

The deaths near the town of Panama in the tsunami-battered eastern district of Ampara — which has so far escaped the worst fighting since a 2002 ceasefire — come just days after the government and rebels agreed to meet for talks to halt violence that has killed hundreds of people since late July.

"They had gone to renovate a sluice gate and went missing. They have been found dead, hacked and chopped," a military spokesman said. "Some of the bodies have been chopped into pieces."

He said the labourers were believed to have been killed on

Sunday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who control jungle areas in Ampara district, had no immediate comment. Nordic truce monitors were on the way to the scene.

The killings also came as the navy exchanged fire on Sunday with the rebels' feared naval wing, the Sea Tigers, and said it, along with the air force, sank a large vessel carrying rebel weapons and ammunition.

The navy did not say how it knew there were weapons on board the vessel.

Peace broker Norway announced last week that the government and the Tigers had agreed to meet for talks for the first time since the rebels pulled out of negotiations in April, and is aiming to arrange a meeting in Oslo next month.

However both sides have imposed conditions few expect either to honour. Petty squabbling has sunk previous talks, and some analysts fear renewed fighting could escalate.

"It's certainly not clear what talks are going to lead to," said Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu of the Centre for Policy Alternatives. "They both at the end of the day would prefer to be in positions of strength as far as the ground situation is concerned before they engage in serious negotiations."

The Tigers insist the army must end offensive operations and give back captured territory on the southern lip of the strategic northeastern harbour of Trincomalee.

The government wants a written guarantee from the Tigers that they will halt attacks, and have also urged them to lay down arms.

First female space tourist blasts off

AP, Baikonur

An Iranian-American telecommunications entrepreneur took off Monday on a Russian rocket bound for the international space station, achieving her dream of becoming the world's first paying female space tourist.

Anousheh Ansari was accompanied by a US-Russian crew on the Soyuz TMA-9 capsule, which entered orbit about 10 minutes after liftoff from the Russian cosmodrome in Kazakhstan.

Ansari reportedly paid \$20 million to become the fourth private astronaut to take a trip on a Russian spacecraft and visit the station.

"I'm just so happy to be here," she said ebulliently as she entered the rocket Monday, watched by about a dozen relatives.

As smoke billowed below the rocket, her relatives gasped and her mother clasped her hands in front of her chest.

Ansari's husband, Hamid Ansari, watched the liftoff stoically, but her sister's face was streaked with tears and her aunt jumped up and down, shrieking and pumping her arms in the air.

At Russian Mission Control, NASA flight director Robert Dempsey said Ansari's presence was a plus to the mission. As for the propriety of sending tourists into space, he said: "My personal feeling is I wish it could be me."

The Soyuz TMA-9 capsule took off less than a day after the US space shuttle Atlantis pulled away



PHOTO: AFP
The world's first woman space tourist Anousheh Ansari smiles just before boarding the spaceship at the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan yesterday.

from the orbiting station and began its journey Earthward.

On board with Ansari were Russian cosmonaut Mikhail Tyurin and US astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria, who were to join German astronaut Thomas Reiter on the station just over 48 hours after liftoff.

Ansari, 40, was due to return to Earth on Sept. 29, along with cosmonaut Pavel Vinogradov and astronaut Jeffrey Williams, who have been on the station since April.

On Sunday, Ansari defended the role of "space flight participants" and said she viewed herself as an ambassador for attracting private investment to space flight.