

Allies lead a wary US into fresh talks with Iran

AFP, New York

Months of tough-talking US diplomacy on Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme faded from view yesterday after Washington formally endorsed a new round of negotiations with Tehran following talks here with its major allies.

Tuesday night's meeting of seven nations closely involved in the Iran standoff had been billed by Washington as the moment when the international community would back up its demand that Tehran suspend its uranium enrichment program with UN sanctions against the Islamic republic.

The sanctions are called for under a unanimous UN Security Council resolution which gave Iran until August 31 to halt the uranium enrichment, which the US and others believe is a cover for development of nuclear weapons.

But France, China and Russia -- Iran's EU talks next week

AFP, Tehran

Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani will hold a new round of talks in Europe next week with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana, Larjani's office said yesterday.

Larjani and Solana "agreed in a telephone conversation to hold talks next week in one of the European capitals," the official IRNA news agency reported, citing the office of Iran's supreme national security council.

The pair had held talks earlier this month to discuss an offer made by the five UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany over Iran's nuclear programme and Tehran's response.

Both sides hailed the last round of talks as constructive and Solana later said he believed there was a new level of engagement from the Iranians.

all veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council -- have balked at following through with sanctions.

The standoff was at the center of discussions Tuesday when US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hosted the dinner meeting of foreign ministers from the other four permanent Security Council members -- Britain, China, France and Russia -- plus Germany and Italy.

And instead of an agreement on how to proceed with punitive measures against Iran, the meeting resulted in Washington backing a plan for a new round of negotiations with the Iranians, a senior US official said.

Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns said the negotiations would be conducted later this week between European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani.

There was "very strong support for Javier Solana's negotiations," including from the US, Burns told reporters after the meeting.

He said if Solana succeeds in convincing the Iranians to verifiably suspend their enrichment program, Rice would personally attend the launch of broader negotiations with Iran on improving relations with the Islamic state.

It would be the first direct negotiations between the two governments in 27 years.

Washington's endorsement of the Solana-Larjani talks was a stark change from recent weeks when US officials repeatedly derided European calls for continued dialogue with Tehran.

The US said that dragging out talks would simply give Iran time to perfect its uranium enrichment work and set it firmly on the path to acquiring nuclear arms.

Burns said Tuesday's policy shift reflected a new seriousness on the part of the Iranian negotiators.



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers sit on top of a tank as they patrol the streets of Bangkok yesterday.

Thailand's new military rulers tighten control

Ban on media, public gatherings

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's new military rulers tightened their grip yesterday after an overnight coup, imposing strict controls on the media and banning public gatherings in what they said was a bid to restore order.

International news channels were off the air for hours as the generals, who overthrew Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra late Tuesday without firing a shot, moved to consolidate their control on a surprised but calm nation.

Coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin defended Thaksin's ouster in a statement on state television, saying he had "caused an unprecedented rift in society" and was guilty of widespread corruption.

Sonthi said a newly-established "Council for Political Reform" had taken action to try to bring back "normalcy" after months of turmoil which saw Thaksin resign and then win re-election in a vote that was later annulled.

"We have seized power," the general said. "The council has no intention to rule, but to return power to the people as soon as possible."

Leaders around the world denounced the coup, which rattled Asian stock markets and overshadowed the opening of the annual United Nations General Assembly in New York, where Thaksin had gone to deliver a speech.

"We want to see a return to democratic rule," Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said. "It's of grave concern for us that the government has been overthrown in this way."

The ruling generals announced they would honour agreements with foreign governments and organisations.

CNN and the BBC, like other

foreign networks, were off the air for around 12 hours. It was not clear if they had been intentionally blocked but Thai newspapers said security forces had seized transmission facilities.

As pockets of troops and tanks took up positions in the capital Bangkok, the generals said they had given the communications ministry the order to block the broadcast of any "disinformation", and had also banned public gatherings.

The seizure of power by Sonthi, the largely Buddhist nation's first-ever Muslim army chief, came amid widespread criticism of Thaksin's handling of a militant Islamic uprising in the south of the country.

More than 1,400 people have been killed in nearly three years of violence in the south and the unrest has continued to intensify despite Thaksin's imposition of martial law in parts of the region.

Onus now on coup leaders to restore trust of people

ANN/THE NATION

They proclaimed to be doing it in the name of democracy, to wipe out rampant corruption and to rehabilitate a badly divided nation. Now the coup makers have to prove their intent. And unlike those before them, the Thai armed forces leaders who seem to have overthrown Shinawatra in a bloodless coup, have very little time to do so.

The world is watching and scrutinising. To many democracy lovers, Thaksin's downfall, engineered by top military officers, led by Army Commander-in-Chief Sonthi Boonyaratglin, turned back the clock on Thailand's political development.

The use of military force, instead of a free and fair election, to change government can hardly be condoned in a democratic society like ours, let alone the fact that the coup took place just months before the country was due to hold a general election.

The coupmakers are luckier than those before them in that much of society now believes they have done the wrong thing for the right reason. But the perception that this is something done in good faith will be extremely fragile. Public trust in power in the hands of men with guns can last as long as the smoke that follows when a shot is fired.

The slower the coupmakers are in the pledged transfer of power back to the people, the more Thaksin will look like a "pretext" and not the "reason" for the power seizure. Today, he is seen as a seriously flawed political leader, who had tried to propagate and perpetuate a culture of corruption and deceit that threatened to undermine democracy as we knew it.

Throughout his five and a half years in power, he was exposed as a greedy politician who had pursued self-interest at the expense of public good. Even called a tyrannical leader by some, he was accused of rolling back civil liberties, suppressing dissenting voices, not to mention his flagrant violation of human rights as part of a sinister design to dominate and then monopolise political power so as to indulge in corrupt practices unimpeded.

Ideally, the likes of Thaksin should be rejected at the ballot box or through public pressure in the

form of peaceful protests. The problem is most people did not believe both options available to them would succeed in removing him from power. To many people the military coup against Thaksin may be a necessary evil.

But make no mistake, the seizure of power, albeit one that was achieved without the loss of lives, is nonetheless a form of political violence that is incompatible with the democratic aspirations of the Thai people. Democratic aspirations will live on even as the Constitution has already been abrogated by the coup leaders.

The spirit of democracy that undermined Thaksin's apparent omnipresence will now shift its watchful eyes to the coup leaders.

The Administrative Reform Council has pledged allegiance to democracy under the constitutional monarchy and cited Thaksin's corruption-prone leadership and his disrespect for the monarchy as justification for the coup. But it cannot be emphasised enough that the coup party has now also concentrated all power of government in its own hand unrestrained by public accountability or system of checks and balances.

The coup group wanted the public to take them at their own word that they would do their best to implement needed reform and rid politics of corruption for now. They will be expected to promise to return sovereign power to the people, organise a free and fair election and then ensure a smooth transfer of power to the next democratically elected civilian government.

We expect the coup group to make clear how exactly it will implement its plans to restore democracy in this country, complete with definite timeframes.

A transitional government headed by a respected and politically neutral civilian leader with unblemished personal integrity must be installed and a provisional parliament must be set up to draft a new constitution within specific timeframes leading up to a fresh general election and a return to democracy.

Once a transitional government is installed, all coup leaders must submit to the authority of the new civilian leader and bring back their troops to the barracks.



Gen Sonthi was handpicked by Thaksin himself

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's apparent coup leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, is known as a soft-spoken and pragmatic career military man hand-picked as army chief by the very prime minister he has deposed.

Premier Thaksin Shinawatra named Sonthi just one year ago to head the army, making him the first Muslim to lead the most powerful branch of the military in this predominantly Buddhist country.

The appointment drew praise from observers who hoped the decorated combat veteran would find a way to end an Islamic separatist insurgency in mainly Muslim provinces of southern Thailand.

Aside from their shared religion, Sonthi has little else in common with the ethnic Malay Muslims in the impoverished and volatile region along the southern border with Malaysia.

He was born outside Bangkok in 1946 to a prestigious family descended from a long line of prominent Thai Muslims.

One of his ancestors was Thailand's first national Muslim spiritual leader more than two centuries ago, and his mother was a lady-in-waiting at the royal palace.

As an army chief known to be close to Thailand's revered king, Sonthi has publicly clashed with Thaksin over security policy in the run-up to the military takeover late Tuesday.

He had advocated talks with militants as a way out of the violence that has killed more than 1,400 people since January 2004, but was rebuffed by the government, which publicly quashed any hopes for negotiations.

But until Tuesday, he had steered a neutral course through the months of political turmoil that has hobbled Thailand since anti-government protests broke out in February.

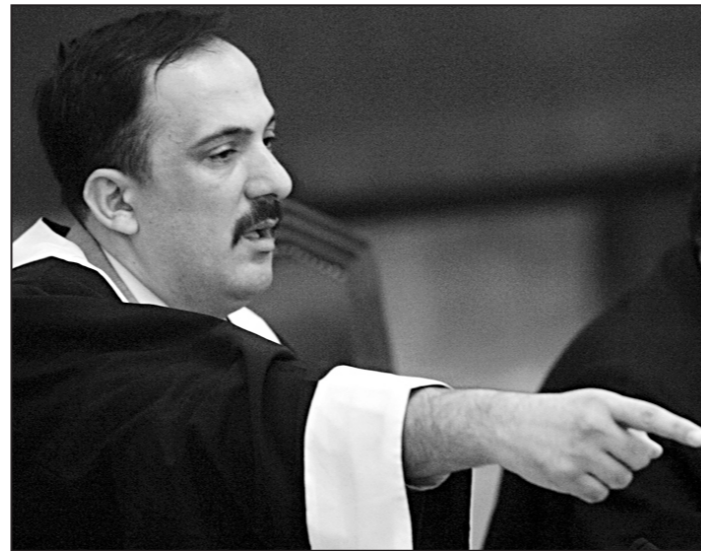


PHOTO: AFP

New chief judge Mohammed al-Oreibi al-Khalifah gestures as he orders Saddam Hussein to leave the court in Baghdad yesterday.

Saddam expelled from court by chief judge

AFP, Baghdad

The new chief judge in the genocide trial of Saddam Hussein immediately stamped his mark on proceedings yesterday by expelling the former Iraqi leader from court during a stormy hearing which also saw the defence team walk out.

Mohammed al-Oreibi al-Khalifah, a Shiite who was deputy presiding judge, took over as chief judge after the government's sacking of his predecessor Abdullah al-Ameri who had said Saddam was "not a dictator".

As Khalifah tried to start the session, the defence lawyers announced they would boycott the trial in protest at the change of judge, which also drew strong criticism from international human rights watchdogs.

Khalifah then brought in court-appointed lawyers, only to have Saddam stand to register his own dissatisfaction with the change.

When the ousted president refused the judge's instructions to sit down, Khalifah ordered him removed.

"We want to say that the government is interfering in the trial. We cannot continue with our work fairly," lawyer Wudud Fawzi said, reading a statement on behalf of the defence team.

"We want no interference with the trial from the government and we will not return until this condition is met."

Saddam and six of his colleagues face charges including genocide, for spearheading a military campaign against the Kurds in 1987-1988 dubbed the Anfal (spoils) that prosecutors say killed 182,000 people.

They face the death penalty if

found guilty. Before being escorted out, Saddam told his fellow defendants: "You should leave too."

And he told Khalifah: "Your father worked as a deputy in the security services up until the (2003) occupation," in an apparent attempt to reveal the judge's family links with his regime.

In his statement, Fawzi also charged that the first chief judge in Saddam's previous trial over the killing of Shiite civilians had to step down under government pressure.

Judge Rizkar Mohammed Amin cited "personal reasons" when he stepped down on January 23 from overseeing the trial in which Saddam and seven others were accused of killing 148 Shiites from the town of Dujail after an attempt on the then president's life there in 1982.

Sources close to Amin revealed that he had come under pressure from government officials who felt he was too lenient with the defendants, particularly Saddam and his half-brother and former secret police chief Barzan Ibrahim al-Tikriti.

Another high-profile defendant, Ali Hassan al-Majid, also known as Chemical Ali, asked to leave the court but the judge ordered him to stay, to which Ali retorted that he would keep quiet "even if I am hanged."

Ameri, also a Shiite, was removed on Tuesday by the Iraqi cabinet following accusations he was too soft on Saddam and the other defendants.

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh said "the decision to transfer the judge was taken to preserve the neutrality of the court."