



## Fidel Castro walks, talks on state television

AFP, Havana

Convalescing Cuban President Fidel Castro appeared on state television Saturday speaking to Cubans as he browsed the day's newspapers, his first public appearance in 40 days.

"Now, when our enemies have prematurely declared me moribund or dead, I'm happy to send to our compatriots and friends around the world this short film footage," said Castro, 80.

The Cuban leader walked unassisted in the five-minute video.

Castro, in power since 1959, temporarily handed over the presidency to his brother Raul, 75, on July 31 as he recuperated from gastrointestinal surgery.

# Defiant Iran scents world split on nuclear issue

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday remained defiant over its nuclear programme despite the threat of sanctions, saying it was detecting splits between world powers on whether to punish Tehran for intensifying atomic work.

With world powers locked in talks in New York over a draft resolution that would impose sanctions over Iran's failure to halt uranium enrichment, Tehran has defiantly expanded work on the process at a key nuclear plant.

But Iran's foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini did not appear concerned that sanctions were imminent, saying there was a split between the stances of China and Russia on one hand and Europe and the US on the other.

"Splits between the parties are very visible, that is to say between the United States and the Europeans on one side and Russia

and China on the other," foreign ministry spokesman told reporters.

"These two countries have completely different positions to the Europeans. Russia does not want sanctions and does not want to close the path of negotiations, and the Chinese have a similar position," he added.

The United Nations Security Council's five veto-wielding members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the US -- as well as Germany have been discussing a draft resolution on sanctions put forward by European countries.

But in a sign of the difficulty in reaching an agreement, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov rejected the proposed sanctions, arguing that they did not advance objectives agreed on by the six world powers.

The Chinese stance has yet to become clear, although Beijing -- like Moscow -- is an economic ally of Iran and traditionally reluctant to use sanctions as diplomatic leverage.

Hosseini meanwhile played down Iran's move to start enriching uranium from a second cascade of 164 centrifuges at its nuclear plant at Natanz in the centre of the country, a decision greeted with suspicion by the West.

"The second cascade is part of the research activities of the country which are in line with the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," he said.

"There is nothing new. It is the continuation of legal activities under the control of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and there is no deviation," Hosseini added.

Iran vehemently rejects US allegations that its nuclear programme is aimed at making nuclear weapons, saying the drive is solely aimed at providing energy for civilians.

Enriched uranium lies at the centre of the dispute over Iran's nuclear programme, as it can be used both to make nuclear fuel and, in highly refined form, the core of a

nuclear bomb.

Iran would need thousands more such centrifuges to enrich uranium on an industrial scale and its current uranium enrichment work is on a research level only.

Officials have said that uranium was successfully enriched from the second cascade of centrifuges to a level of 3-5 percent and has now been put into storage.

To make a nuclear bomb, the uranium needs to be enriched to around 90 percent, far above the level needed for nuclear fuel.

The text drafted by Britain, France and Germany in consultations with Washington calls on UN member states to slap ballistic missile-related and nuclear sanctions on Iran.

It provides for a freeze of assets related to Iran's nuclear and missile programmes and travel bans on scientists involved.



PHOTO: AFP  
Anti-war demonstrators hold signs during a rally in downtown Miami, Florida Saturday. Anti-war coalitions called for a nationwide protest against US invasion in Iraq.

## Thousands march in US against Iraq war

AFP, Los Angeles

Thousands of protesters marched against the Iraq war and the government of President George W. Bush on Saturday in Los Angeles and San Francisco, just days ahead of crucial congressional elections.

In Los Angeles, some 2,000 demonstrators rallied in Hollywood chanting anti-war slogans such as "Give peace a chance" and "The war is over if you want it," in references to hit protest songs by the late Beatle John Lennon.

More standard chants included "US out of Iraq" and "Endless war means endless profits."

Speakers at the event included anti-war activists Cindy Sheehan, whose son was killed in Iraq, and Ron Kovic, a Vietnam war veteran whose story was immortalized on the screen by actor Tom Cruise in the movie "Born on the Fourth of July."

Several hundred people also marched in San Francisco, a bastion of liberal anti-war sentiment, local news media reported.



PHOTO: AFP  
Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa (R) gestures during a meeting with European Union Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana (L) in Cairo yesterday. Solana arrived in Cairo for talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on the final leg of a Middle East tour aimed at reviving stalled peace talks.

## Hope of ME prisoner swap deal grows

AFP, Cairo

Palestinian officials voiced hope yesterday that a prisoner exchange agreement between Israel and Palestinian militants could be sealed soon amid a flurry of high-level contacts in Cairo.

Several key Palestinian players have held recent consultations in Egypt, which has acted as the main mediator since the crisis sparked by the June 25 capture in the Gaza Strip of Israeli corporal Gilad Shalit, but disagreements still exist over what or who is preventing the deal from moving forward.

"We are close to a deal but it is tied to an Israeli response," Osama Hamdan, a senior official from the governing Palestinian movement Hamas, told AFP by telephone from Lebanon.

"There is a big Egyptian effort aimed at reaching a deal, with some conditions," he said. "There have

been positive signs from the Israelis but no definite response."

"If they agree to our conditions, we will have a deal. If not, we are back to square one," he said.

Hamas has demanded the release of some 1,000 Palestinians held in Israel in exchange for Shalit, whose capture sparked a prolonged Israeli offensive in Gaza where more than 250 Palestinians have since been killed.

But a senior Palestinian official said that the finalisation of the swap was in fact pending a response from Hamas.

According to the official who wished to remain anonymous, the deal as it stands would see 500 Palestinian prisoners released once Shalit was handed to the Egyptians, followed by the release of another 500 once he was in Israel.

## Troops kill 17 in Iraq

Bush promises more military aid

REUTERS, Baghdad

US and Iraqi forces said they killed about 17 guerrillas in a battle north of Baghdad early yesterday, after President George W. Bush promised Iraq's prime minister more military aid in a bid to soothe recent friction.

"There are no strains in the relationship," White House spokesman Tony Snow said after Bush and Nuri al-Maliki spoke for nearly an hour on Saturday after a week of public skirmishes involving US and Iraqi leaders that have raised questions over Bush's exit strategy ahead of congressional elections on November 7.

"The president is very happy ... with the way the prime minister is working," Snow said.

Maliki's aides say he is furious at American pressure on him, and he and fellow Shia Islamist leaders are concerned at what they see as a rapprochement between Washington and the long rebellious

Sunni minority dominant under Saddam Hussein.

In a reminder of the sectarian violence, Interior Ministry sources said Baghdad police found 25 bodies, most tortured by death squads, in the past day. It was typical of the bloodshed that Bush has said is trying US patience.

He has vowed to stand by the Iraqi government -- but only as long as it makes "tough decisions," including clamping down on party militias loyal to rival political leaders. Some analysts see White House criticism of Iraqi leaders as preparing the ground for a US troop withdrawal plan, once voting is over.

"We are committed to the partnership our two countries and two governments have formed," Bush and Maliki said in a joint statement after their talks. Bush said last week, however, he would not leave his troops in the crossfire of a civil war.

## US is world's biggest threat to peace, Swedes believe: Poll

AFP, Stockholm

The United States is a greater threat to world peace than North Korea, according to Swedes surveyed in a poll aired Sunday.

Some 29 percent of those surveyed said the US posed the biggest danger to peace, compared to 28 percent who considered North Korea the top menace, according to the Temo poll broadcast Sunday by Swedish television station Axess.

Among Swedes aged 16-29, a striking 40 percent believed the US presented the greatest risk.

Iran placed third with 18 percent, followed by Israel (six percent), China (four percent) and Russia (three percent).

Some 1,000 people were surveyed.

## Russia, France overtake US as top arms sellers

AFP, Washington

The United States ceded to Russia and France last year its role of the top arms supplier to the developing world as it failed to take full advantage of emerging markets and opportunities created by booming oil prices, according to a new congressional study.

The annual report by the Congressional Research Service showed the US share in the total value of all arms transfer agreements concluded in 2005 dropped to 20.5 percent from 35.4 percent the year before.

In monetary terms, the value of these deals concluded by the United States fell from 9.4 billion dollars in 2004 to about 6.2 billion in 2005.

By contrast, Russia made last year seven billion dollars worth of such deals in Asia, Africa and Latin America, a notable increase from 5.4 billion dollars in 2004, which propelled Russia to the position of the top arms supplier to

the developing world, the report said.

France rose to second place, inking last year 6.3 billion dollars worth of delivery of military hardware, up from just one billion dollars in agreements in 2004.

France's success, the study said, was attributable to a 3.5-billion-dollar agreement with India for the sale of six Scorpene diesel attack submarines.

US congressional experts also predicted that an aggressive sales pitch by Paris could eventually collide with key interests of the United States and its allies as France usually pursued its national interests rather than Nato alliance considerations.

"So the potential exists for policy differences between the United States and major West European supplying states over conventional weapons transfers to specific countries," warned Richard Grimmett, the main author of the report.

## Race casts shadow over tight US polls

AFP, Nashville

One of the tightest races in the US legislative elections has devolved into racially-charged mudslinging aimed at a man who hopes to become the first African-American elected to the senate from a Southern state.

In a Republican party television ad, Democratic candidate Harold Ford is the object of a bare-shouldered blonde's flirtations who talks of meeting him at "a Playboy party" and later winks, saying "Harold, call me!" in a stage whisper.

The blonde, according to some critics, is a not-so-subtle attempt to prompt a negative reaction toward Ford among voters hostile toward sexual relationships between black men and white women.

"It is unbelievable," said John Geer, a Vanderbilt University political science professor who has authored a book on political advertising. "I've seen thousands and thousands of ads and never before one that brings up interracial sex."

The ad, sponsored by the Republican National Committee, was pulled last week after it sparked a national backlash, but was just one of several that have more subtle

race-related messages in the Tennessee campaign.

One was a radio commercial aired by Ford's opponent, Bob Corker, that plays the sound of beating tom-toms -- which critics have called "jungle drums" -- while the narrator portrays Ford, who currently serves in the House of Representatives, as a product of Washington.

The music shifts to a symphony orchestra when the narrator hails Corker's Tennessee roots as a businessman and former Chattanooga mayor in an ad titled "DC versus Tennessee."

The campaign between Ford and Corker is one of a handful of contests in the November 7 midterm elections that will decide whether Republicans continue to control the Senate. That and the prospect of an African-American being elected from a state that was part of the Confederacy during the Civil War have added heat to the contest.

The only time that a black has served in the senate from a Southern state was in the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, when senators were chosen by state legislatures, not by popular election.



PHOTO: AFP  
Pro-democracy activists release birds for the freedom of political prisoners at the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon yesterday. More than 100 pro-democracy activists gathered at the prayer vigil calling for peace in a rare show of dissent in military-ruled Myanmar ahead of a visit by a United Nations envoy.

## Israeli president urged to stand down

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel's attorney-general recommended on Sunday that President Moshe Katsav stand down until an investigation of rape allegations against him runs its course, the Justice Ministry said.

Menachem Mazuz issued the advisory in response to a High Court petition filed by a private lawyer demanding that Katsav resign in light of a police statement that there was evidence he had raped and sexually molested several female employees.

Katsav, 60, has denied wrongdoing. Though his formal functions are largely that of a figurehead, the case has underscored widespread unhappiness in Israel with the national leadership following the inconclusive recent war in Lebanon.

The Justice Ministry quoted Mazuz as telling the High Court that the severity of the allegations against the president should prompt him to "consider suspending himself from duty by asking parliament to declare him temporarily incapacitated."