

'Bush won't hesitate to attack Iran if other options fail'

Rice cool to talks with Tehran, Damascus

REUTERS, Jerusalem

President Bush will not hesitate to use military force against Iran if other options fail, Israel's outgoing ambassador to the United States said in an interview published yesterday.

"I know President Bush well... From his standpoint, a nuclear Iran, ayatollahs with a bomb, is unacceptable," Danny Ayalon told Israel's Ma'ariv newspaper.

"I have been privileged to know him well, he will not hesitate to go all the way if there is no choice." Concern over Iran's atomic ambitions figured prominently in talks in Washington this week between Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

The US and allies including Israel have accused Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons under the guise of a civilian energy program. Iran denies the accusation.

Ayalon, who has spent the past 4-1/2 years in Washington, said Bush would continue to pursue diplomatic efforts for now, and failing that would choose to try to isolate Iran via sanctions.

But if that tactic also failed to stem Iran's nuclear plans, Ayalon said Bush would likely use air power combined with limited ground forces to attack Iran.

"Anyone who knows President Bush knows that he is very determined. He is convinced of the moral supremacy of democracies over dictatorships... If the sanctions succeed, all the better. Otherwise, he will act by all means possible, including military action," he said.

In public, Bush has said he backs a diplomatic solution with Iran but has refused to rule out a military strike.

The Islamic republic has said it is willing to talk to the US, but that Washington must first "change its

attitude." Asked if the United States would be capable of taking military action against Iran, given that it is already engaged in a debilitating conflict in Iraq, Ayalon said:

"This is not an operation on the same scale. There is no intention of employing large ground forces. That is not the model. This is more a case of employing air power combined with limited ground forces."

Earlier US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Tuesday said neither Iran nor Syria appeared interested in helping stabilise Iraq or the Middle East as she played down the idea of direct talks.

"There is no lack of opportunity to talk to the Iranians. I think the question is: is there anything about Iranian behaviour that suggests that they are prepared to contribute to stability in Iraq and I have to say that at this point, I don't see it," Rice told reporters as she flew to Hanoi for the Asia

Pacific Economic Cooperation regional summit.

Her plane stopped at Ramstein Air Base in Germany for a routine refuelling.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and former US secretary of state James Baker, who is co-chairing an independent panel studying US policy in Iraq, have suggested talks with both nations as a way to curb the violence in neighbouring Iraq.

The United States has accused Iran and Syria of helping to fuel the Iraqi insurgency. Both have denied doing this.

Rice did not rule out talks with Iran about Iraq, noting there is a channel between the US and Iranian ambassadors to Iraq "that, at some point, it could make sense to activate." But she made clear she saw little profit in such discussions.

Pakistan votes to roll back law on rape

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's lower house of parliament voted yesterday to put the crime of rape under the civil penal code, curtailing the scope of Islamic laws that rights groups have long criticized as unfair to women.

The Women's Protection Bill was seen both as a barometer of President Pervez Musharraf's commitment to his vision of "enlightened moderation" and a major battle in a long struggle between progressive forces and religious conservatives to set the Muslim nation's course.

"It is a historic bill because it will give rights to women and help end excesses against them," Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told the assembly after the vote.

The bill must be approved by the upper house of parliament before it becomes law.

In an apparent concession to conservatives, an amendment was introduced shortly before the vote setting down punishment of up to five years in prison for extra-marital sex, though sex outside marriage had always been an offence under laws on adultery.



Pakistani NGO activists stage a protest outside the parliament building during a national assembly debate on rape laws in Islamabad yesterday.

Small tsunamis hit Japan after quake

AP, Tokyo

Japan issued a tsunami warning yesterday and told Pacific coast residents to flee to higher ground after a powerful earthquake hit off sparsely populated islands to the north.

The coastal areas were hit by a series of small waves that did not swell higher than 16 inches and rapidly diminished in size.

Japan's meteorological agency initially predicted that a 6 1/2-foot tsunami would hit the Pacific coast of its northernmost island of Hokkaido and main island of Honshu after 9:10 pm (7:10 am EST).

But a wave that hit the port of Nemuro on Hokkaido at 9:29 pm was measured at 16 inches, and live footage from the area showed calm seas. A few minutes later, a second, 8-inch wave hit the nearby port city of Kushiro, the agency said, and the waves got progressively smaller.

The quake struck at 6:15 am EST with a preliminary magnitude of 8.1 about 245 miles east of the island known in Japan as Etorofu, which is about 110 miles northeast of Hokkaido, according to the Japanese meteorological agency.

Etorofu is one of four islands claimed by both Japan and Russia. The disputed islands are known in

Russia as the Southern Kurils and in Japan as the Northern Territories. Etorofu is known in Russia as Iturup. Russia's RIA-Novosti news agency reported that a tsunami warning was issued for the Kurils and Sakhalin, a large island that lies between the Kuril chain and Russia's eastern coast.

Southern Kurils residents were being evacuated from shoreline areas because of the tsunami threat, RIA-Novosti reported, citing emergency officials in the country's Far East. The Interfax agency reported that residents along the entire Kuril chain of more than 12 islands were being evacuated to safer areas.

The islands have rich natural resources but their population has plummeted to just 9,900, according to official statistics.

The ITAR-Tass agency reported that Russia's Pacific Fleet ships took refuge at their bases but were ready to help with rescue operations if necessary.

A tsunami warning was in effect on the coastal areas of Alaska, and the Alaska Tsunami Warning Centre advised people in low-lying coastal areas to be alert to instructions from local officials. It said people on beaches in the warning area should move to higher ground.

Democrats to press military to quit Iraq

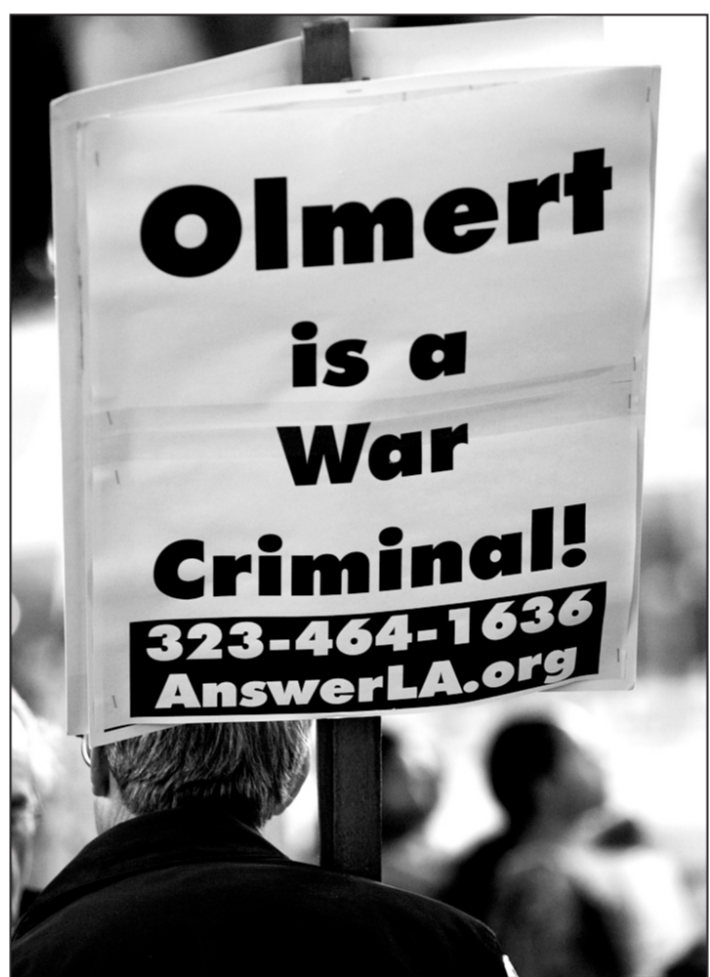
AP, Washington

Emboldened by election gains and the resignation of Defence Secretary Donald H Rumsfeld, Democrats want to press a top Army general and other advisers to President Bush on beginning to pull troops out of Iraq.

Gen John Abizaid, the top US commander in the Middle East, and David Satterfield, the State Department's senior adviser on Iraq, were scheduled to testify before the House and Senate Armed Services committees on Wednesday, followed by CIA Director Gen. Michael Hayden and Defence Intelligence Agency Director Lt Gen Michael Maples.

"I would hope and expect that we're going to be given some indication at that hearing that they see the need to change direction," said Sen Carl Levin, who will take control of the Senate Armed Services Committee next year.

"My displeasure with the president, he doesn't understand the urgency of this," incoming Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid told The Washington Post. "It's all victory for him, but I don't know what that means anymore in Iraq. I do know what we are doing now doesn't work."



Protesters demonstrate outside the Los Angeles Convention Centre where Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was attending the United Jewish Communities General Assembly Tuesday in Los Angeles, California. The protesters were critical of Israel's 34-day incursion into Lebanon during fighting against Hezbollah militias last summer.

Most hostages in Iraqi mass kidnap freed

20 Iraqis killed, 4 GIs killed in rebel attacks

REUTERS, AFP, Baghdad

Most of the dozens of hostages seized at a Higher Education Ministry building on Tuesday have been freed while more than 20 Iraqis and four US soldiers were killed in rebel attacks, the government said yesterday.

An official at the Prime Minister's media office said around 40 hostages had been in the hands of the kidnapers by Tuesday evening and "most of them have been released." He did not give exact numbers or say how they were freed.

Insurgents killed three US marines and a soldier in the restive western Iraqi province of Al-Anbar, the military said Wednesday.

The four were killed due to "enemy action" Tuesday, the military said.

The marines were assigned to Regimental Combat team 7 while the soldier was with the 1st Brigade, 1st Armoured Division.

Insurgents killed at least 22 people across Iraq on Wednesday, including 15 in two car bombings in the capital, security officials said.

Twelve people were killed in a car bomb blast at a Baghdad petrol station, which wounded dozens of

others. The blast occurred at 9:30 am (0630 GMT) at the petrol station which is close to one of the entrances to the interior ministry in central Baghdad.

Another car bomber blew himself up in southern Baghdad's Al-Dura district, killing three and wounding another 12.

In Baghdad's western Yarmuk neighbourhood, gunmen killed the manager of a petrol station and a official working for the city council.

In the northern city of Mosul, gunmen killed a female Iraqi journalist working for a local daily and her driver, police said.

Colonel Abdel Karim al-Juburi said gunmen in another car killed Fadia Mohammed Abid and her driver in Tahrir neighbourhood of east Mosul. "The two were killed while on the way to the office," he said.

There were different reports on exactly how many men were seized from the Higher Education Ministry building in central Baghdad in a brazen daylight raid by gunmen in police uniforms. Around 20 were released within hours on Tuesday.

A spokesman for the Higher Education Ministry reiterated on

Wednesday his minister's estimate on Tuesday that at least 100 had been taken, including male employees and visitors.

"They beat us and insulted us and after that they freed us," the spokesman quoted the assistant manager of the building, Yaha Alwan, as saying after he was released on Tuesday afternoon.

Amid new suspicions of police complicity in the latest and biggest mass kidnapping, the interior minister hauled in police chiefs to explain how dozens of gunmen swept into the Higher Education Ministry annex, rounded up those inside, and drove them off in broad daylight toward a Shia militia stronghold.

Al Furat, a TV station controlled by a major Shia political group, said early on Wednesday that 25 hostages were still missing.

Some of those released earlier in the day said they were driven to Sadr City, a Shia militia stronghold in eastern Baghdad, Higher Education Minister Abd Dhiab said.



A displaced family is seen seeking refuge on a dry spot in Dadaab, Kenya on November 12. Nearly 13,000 people have been displaced by devastating floods in Kenya.

India's nuke record, Iran links questioned ahead of Senate vote

AFP, Washington

A non-partisan US Congressional study has underlined lawmakers' unease over India's non-proliferation record and its links with nuclear renegade Iran, on the eve of a Senate vote on a landmark US atomic deal with New Delhi.

The report by the Congressional Research Service raised the issue of whether India had adequate teeth to implement export control regulations in efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.

In 2004, the United States imposed sanctions on two Indian scientists for nuclear related transfers to Iran, which is facing sanctions for refusing to comply with UN demands it freeze its uranium enrichment work.

The Congressional report by Sharon Squassoni, a national

defence specialist, noted that President George W. Bush's administration had not formally responded to claims that India had a "flawed" nonproliferation record in the nuclear area.

It also cited allegations that New Delhi had a "poorly implemented" national export control system and an "illicit" procurement system for its own nuclear weapons programme, as well as a procurement system that "may unwittingly transfer sensitive information" about uranium enrichment.

"India's nonproliferation record continues to be scrutinized, as India continues to take steps to strengthen its own export controls," the report said ahead of an expected Senate vote this week on the US-India civilian nuclear deal clinched by Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in March.

Rebels attack Manipur CM's Imphal home

AFP, Guwahati

Separatist guerrillas carried out a grenade attack on the home of the chief minister of India's restive northeastern state of Manipur, police said yesterday.

Rebels of the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak (PREPAK) tossed the grenade at Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh's residence in the state capital Imphal late Tuesday, a senior police official told AFP.

"The grenade exploded inside the campus of the chief minister's residence, but luckily no one was injured," he said.

Singh was in New Delhi at the time of the attack.

PREPAK, an outlawed rebel group fighting for an independent homeland for the majority Meitei community in the state of 2.4 million people, claimed responsibility for the attack.

Israel vows to expand Gaza offensive

Woman killed by rocket

AFP, Jerusalem

An Israeli woman was killed by Palestinian rocket fire from Gaza Wednesday, sparking warnings by the Jewish state it will expand its lethal four-month offensive in the coastal strip.

The woman, 57, died of wounds sustained when a rocket fell around 8:00 am (0500 GMT) in a street in the town of Sderot, five km north of Gaza, police and medics said.

A 24-year-old man was seriously wounded in the strike, one of six rockets to fall in Sderot in the morning hours, one of them not far from the house of Defence Minister Amir Peretz who lives in the town.

The man was a member of a private security firm that guards Peretz's home, police said. In a statement, the defence minister vowed that the Jewish state would strike against those behind the rocket fire.

"These organisations will pay a heavy

price," he said. "We will move against those who are involved in the firing of rockets, starting from their leaders and down to the last of their terrorists."

Wednesday's death marked the first time since July 2005 that Palestinian rocket fire killed someone inside the Jewish state, according to the army, and came a week after an Israeli artillery strike killed 19 Palestinians, mostly women and children, in Gaza's northern town of Beit Hanun.

In Gaza City, the armed wings of the Palestinian ruling Hamas movement and the ultra-radical Islamic Jihad group both said they had fired salvoes into Israel to avenge the Beit Hanun deaths, which sparked worldwide condemnation.

"This holy warrior operation comes... in response to the massacre of Beit Hanun and the continuing Zionist crimes against our Palestinian people," said a statement from Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's armed wing.

Nepali rebels step up recruitment before peace deal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist insurgents have embarked on a recruitment drive ahead of signing a peace deal this week, residents and media reports said yesterday, with hundreds of young men and boys forced to join the rebel army.

Under the deal supposed to end a 10-year insurgency, the Maoists say they will place their 35,000-strong rebel force in specially established camps and keep their weapons under lock and key, with Nepal's army also promising to stay in its barracks.

But as the clock ticks towards the signing, more than 400 people have been forced to join the Maoists in the Surkhet and Dailekh districts of western Nepal in the past three

days, according to The Kathmandu Post daily.

Villagers from Kohalpur near the western town of Nepalgunj told Reuters that dozens of young men, including schoolboys as young as 15, were taken from their village by the Maoists.

"They were taken by the Maoists who promised to recruit them in their army," Om Prakash Oli, chief of a school management committee in Kohalpur village, 320 km west of Kathmandu, said by telephone.

"Parents are worried about their children."

The Maoists denied they were responsible but the government said it was a violation of a code of conduct signed in May, shortly after peace talks began and a ceasefire was agreed.