

## Iran rules out easing of ties with US

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami on Wednesday ruled out talks with Washington or any easing of ties, accusing Washington of adopting a "bellicose" stand toward Tehran, Iranian television reported.

"When a power ... uses a bellicose and threatening tone toward us, the possibility of talks cannot be considered, nor even the slightest easing in relations," Khatami said in a meeting with MPs.

"We want peace," he said, adding however that softening Iran's stand "would mean not taking into account the interests of the regime."

"All those who speak of discussions with the United States must submit to the policies of the regime

and not do anything that goes against the national interest and honour," he added.

Parliamentary sources told AFP on Wednesday that US Secretary of State Colin Powell asked Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on April 15 to help facilitate a US-Iranian political dialogue despite their differences.

Assad passed the message on to Khatami, who rejected it, the sources said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi would not comment on the report, but said it was "nothing new".

"In view of America's behavior, all negotiation between the two governments is out of the question," he said.



PHOTO: AFP  
British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (L) gestures during a press conference as his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh (R) looks on, following talks at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Wednesday. Jaswant Singh again signalled India's growing impatience with Pakistan, saying President Pervaiz Musharraf had given plenty of time to crack down on terrorism.

## Bomb attacks on buses in Gujarat: 12 hurt

AFP, Ahmedabad

Three bombs planted in separate buses rocked the commercial capital of the riot-hit western Indian state of Gujarat Wednesday injuring 12 people, a police spokesman said.

The bombs were placed under seats in the buses and exploded almost simultaneously, police said.

Another two bombs were found by police at bus stations and defused, he added.

The blasts occurred at peak hour, when the buses were crowded with commuters. Police suspect crude homemade bombs of low intensity were used.

Forensic experts from Gujarat's police force were sent to the sites of the blasts to investigate.

Payal Takkar, 26, a commuter in one bus, said the explosion took place around 10:00 am (0430 GMT), just as the vehicle was about leave the bus station.

"I was sitting in the seat behind the driver when there was a loud explosion," said Takkar, who works for a local courier company.

"The bus was immediately filled with dense smoke and fumes and everyone tried to run out of the bus in panic," she said.

The back portion of another bus was wrecked in the blasts while some rear seats of a third bus also suffered damage, witnesses said.

Alerted by the explosions, the police launched a search of all buses and bus stations in Ahmedabad and recovered another two bombs hidden in lunch containers, the spokesman said.

The two bus stations were immediately evacuated and bomb disposal squads sent in to defuse the devices, he said.

Gujarat has been ravaged by a series of sectarian clashes in which more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, have been killed since February.

## Indo-Pak teams begin talks over Indus water treaty

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan on Wednesday began a meeting here over the Indus water-sharing treaty despite the heightened tensions between the two nuclear rivals, an official said.

He said the meeting was a routine one and dismissed reports that the crucial water treaty would be

scrapped.

The two sides are expected to exchange data relating to flood forecasts and other administrative issues in accordance with the 1960 treaty.

The Indian delegation is headed by Indus Commissioner A.C. Gupta, while the Pakistani team is led by his counterpart M. Mamnoon, the official said.

## Blair names new transport secretary

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair named Alastair Darling as Britain's new transport secretary Wednesday, in a cabinet reshuffle sparked by the sudden resignation of previous holder Stephen Byers.

The moves also saw Paul Boateng, a junior Treasury minister, elevated to a new post that makes him Britain's first black cabinet minister.

Darling, currently the minister for work and pensions, is being replaced by Andrew Smith, whose own post as chief secretary to the Treasury will be taken by Boateng.

This reshuffle follows the resignation Tuesday of Byers following months of controversy during which he was accused of misleading parliament and fumbling the supervision of Britain's ailing privatised railway network.

Darling, 48, is regarded as a close ally of finance minister Gordon Brown, who himself is seen as notably more cautious than Blair on British membership of the European single currency.

National TV puts Maoist death toll at 152

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali troops killed 152 Maoist rebels in a counter-attack after their military camp in the west of the Himalayan kingdom was raided overnight, state-run Nepal television said on Wednesday.

National TV said "155 terrorists were killed in the attack on the army camp in Rukum," about 600 km (375 miles) west of the capital, Kathmandu.

It said thousands of Maoists had attacked the army camp and showed footage of dozens of bodies of guerrillas lying in open fields.

The Maoists are battling to install a communist republic in the impoverished country, sandwiched between India and China.

## Last WTC steel beam removed from Ground Zero

REUTERS, New York

With bagpipes skirling, the last steel girder still standing at "ground zero" was cut down on Tuesday night, bringing a symbolic end to more than eight months of grueling recovery work at New York's World Trade Center site.

The 36-foot (10-metre), 58-tonne girder -- column 1001 B of the southeast corner of the south World Trade Center tower -- was taken down as four workers bathed in floodlights and welding torches applied the last cuts, sparking a crowd of 1,000 workers and uniformed officers to chant "USA, USA, USA."

It was an emotional end to a herculean task -- the grisly search for human remains and the clearing away of mangled debris and ash seven stories high and eight stories underground left when the 110-storey twin towers collapsed after being hit on Sept. 11 by hijacked airliners.

Workers cleared some 1.8 million tonnes of rubble and steel from the site in more than 108,000 truckloads, according to Deputy Commissioner Frank McCarton of the Office of Emergency Management, which oversaw the recovery efforts.

More than 19,000 body parts

were also recovered.

The beam, a makeshift shrine to the more than 2,800 people killed in the attacks, bore the numbers of dead from each of the city's uniformed services, had personal messages scribbled on it and pictures glued to the surface.

Representatives of all the groups of workers involved in the recovery including engineers, carpenters, iron workers, plumbers and construction workers were on hand.

"The workers who dedicated themselves to this effort are on the verge of completing an enormous job," said Mayor Michael Bloomberg. "In many ways this is their night to reflect and remember."

Iron worker Joseph Alba brought a special perspective to the ceremony. He was a member of the first crew that erected steel on the site of the World Trade Center in 1967 and on Tuesday was a member of the last work crew.

"We are just workers," said the 60-year-old Alba, wearing a stained denim shirt and denim pants to his last shift at ground zero.

"I'm glad it's over," said Alba, who said he was working at the nearby South Ferry terminal on Sept. 11 when the planes hit.



PHOTO: AFP  
A couple (R) pause and look at the last steel beam that was standing from one of the World Trade Centre towers, just before it was lifted from the ground on Tuesday in New York. Workers painted the numbers of several New York Fire Department and Police units on the beam, which will be ceremoniously driven away on May 30 during a service marking the end of the recovery efforts and the start of reconstruction of the site.

## Suu Kyi plans to publish opposition newspaper

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has unveiled plans by her National League for Democracy (NLD) to launch a newspaper in the military-ruled state, reports said Wednesday.

"Regarding the dissemination of information, we will apply for the right (to publish a party newspaper)," the Nobel peace laureate said in an interview published in the Nation daily.

"We have a plan (to do so).

We'll see whether this will be allowed," she said in the interview which originally ran in Irrawaddy Magazine, published by Myanmar exiles in Thailand.

"We have already accepted that there must be freedom of expression and (dissemination of) information through media) to bring about a democracy," Aung San Suu Kyi was quoted as saying on Irrawaddy's website.

All media in Myanmar are tightly controlled by the junta.

## EU hopes progress on all points at Russia-EU meet

AFP, Moscow

European Commission President Romano Prodi said Wednesday he hoped the ninth Russia-EU summit opening in Moscow would lead to significant progress in bilateral relations between the two sides.

The EU president said he and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar would "discuss all the strategic issues in cooperation between Russia and the Union" and hoped for "progress on all points" in their talks later with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Our relations began 11 years

ago. Over the course of these 11 years, Russia has changed radically for the better," he noted, speaking at the inauguration of the new European Commission premises in Moscow, accompanied by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Khristenko.

The European Union envoy to Moscow, Richard Wright, noted that with a 118-strong staff, the EU representation to Russia was the largest in the world and indicated the importance the European Union accorded to its relations with Russia.

## Libya offers \$ 2.7 b to families of Lockerbie blast victims

AFP, Washington

The government of Libya has offered to pay 2.7 billion dollars in compensation to the families of the victims of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, a senior US official said.

"As I understand it, it's an offer Libya has made to the families through their lawyers and it's up to the families to decide whether they want to accept it or not," the official told AFP Tuesday on condition of anonymity.

The families of each of the 270

victims of the bombing -- the 259 passengers and crew on board the

plane and 11 people on the ground in the Scottish town in December 1988 -- would receive 10 million dollars, according to the official's account of the Libyan offer.

Under the offer, the money is to be paid in installments, spread out over time based on the lifting of certain sanctions imposed against Libya, the official said.

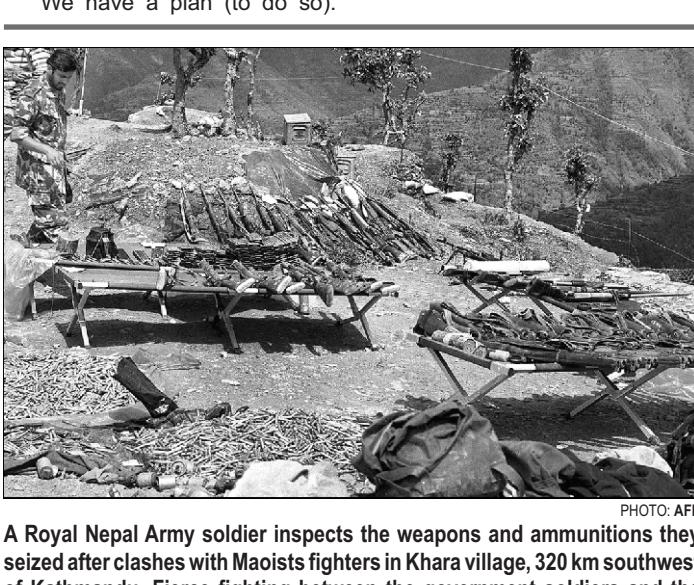
Leading US dailies on Wednesday said 40 percent of the money would be paid when the United Nations lifts its sanctions on Libya; another 40 percent when US sanctions are lifted.

The final 20 percent would be paid when the US State

Department removes Libya from its list of nations that sponsor international terrorism.

The offer does not include an admission of responsibility of the 1988 bombing by Libya, the dailies said, but the United States, Britain and Libya are negotiating a statement to that effect and are scheduled to meet again in June in London.

The senior US official said Washington would not likely take a position on the offer -- which has been negotiated without the government's participation -- but said Washington would not be bound by a private agreement.



A Royal Nepal Army soldier inspects the weapons and ammunitions they seized after clashes with Maoists fighters in Khara village, 320 km southwest of Kathmandu. Fierce fighting between the government soldiers and the Maoists left more than 100 Maoists, five army soldiers and ten civilians killed, army official said.

plane and 11 people on the ground in the Scottish town in December 1988 -- would receive 10 million dollars, according to the official's account of the Libyan offer.

Under the offer, the money is to be paid in installments, spread out over time based on the lifting of certain sanctions imposed against Libya, the official said.

Leading US dailies on Wednesday said 40 percent of the money would be paid when the United Nations lifts its sanctions on Libya; another 40 percent when US sanctions are lifted.

The final 20 percent would be paid when the US State

Department removes Libya from its list of nations that sponsor international terrorism.

The offer does not include an admission of responsibility of the 1988 bombing by Libya, the dailies said, but the United States, Britain and Libya are negotiating a statement to that effect and are scheduled to meet again in June in London.

The senior US official said Washington would not likely take a position on the offer -- which has been negotiated without the government's participation -- but said Washington would not be bound by a private agreement.