

# Syria urges UN to help rid ME of nukes

REUTERS, United Nations

Syria pushed for a ban on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in the Middle East Monday, using its final days on the UN Security Council to shine a spotlight on Israel's suspected nuclear arms.

Syrian Ambassador Faysal Mekdad, whose two-year term on the 15-nation council expires at midnight on Wednesday, asked the UN body to take up a resolution -- drafted by Damascus in April -- that is intended to rid the volatile Middle East region of all nuclear, biological and chemical arms.

But in a closed-door meeting, diplomats said, a number of the council's member nations -- including the United States, Britain and Pakistan -- expressed concerns with the Syrian text and Mekdad

said he would not push for a quick vote.

The Syrian draft was "wrong in substance, wrong in timing," Deputy US Ambassador James Cunningham said.

"We don't expect the resolution to make much progress," British Ambassador Emrys Jones Parry told reporters.

The draft calls for "freeing the Middle East region of all weapons of mass destruction" and asks Secretary General Kofi Annan to verify whether the measure, once passed, is implemented.

Syria asked for Monday's meeting after the council last week issued a statement welcoming Libya's announcement that it was voluntarily abandoning its programs for developing weapons of mass

destruction.

But Arab envoys said the draft was aimed at embarrassing Israel, widely believed to be the only country in the Middle East to have nuclear weapons though it has never officially acknowledged possessing them.

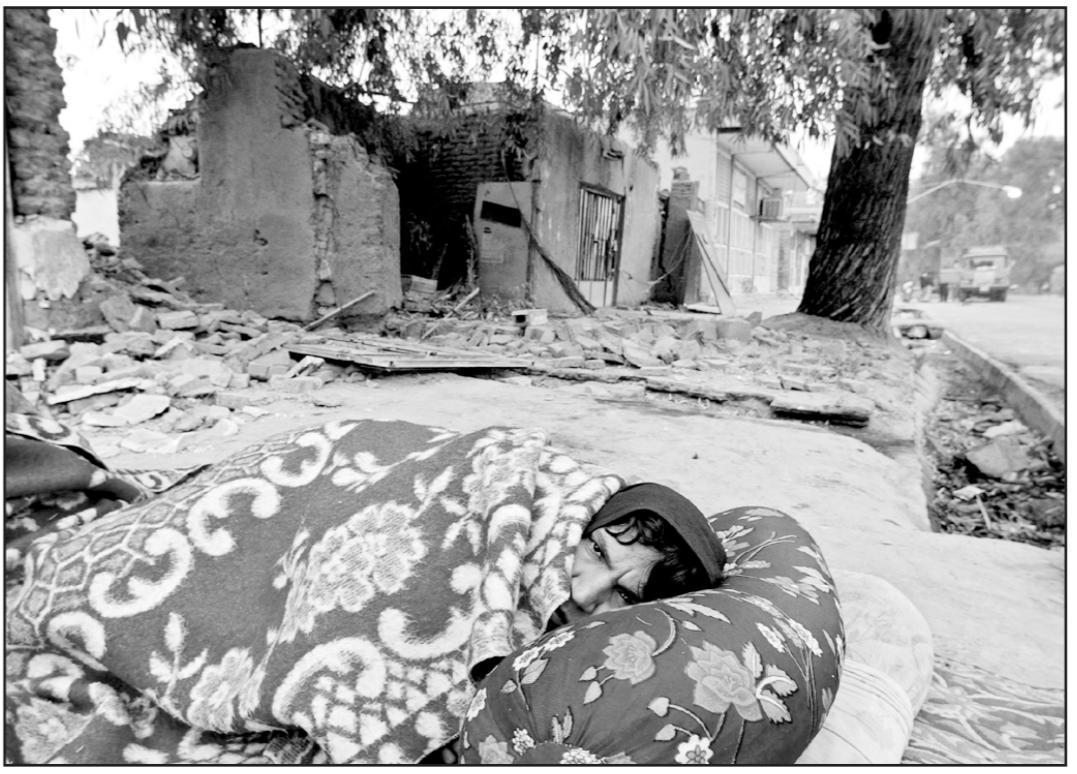
The draft resolution "is applicable to everybody, but in fact Israel is the real address in this regard, whether we like it or not, because Israel has all these kinds of weapons" and has not ratified most nonproliferation treaties, Mekdad said.

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But Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, said the move could backfire on Syria as well as Iran, two nations believed by US intelligence to have chemical weapons stockpiles.

"The Syrians must realise that by offering a resolution on weapons of mass destruction, and not just nuclear weapons, they are potentially attracting attention to their own activities, which are suspected to include chemical weapons programs, as well as other states in the region including Iran," Kimball told Reuters in a telephone interview.

A CIA report to Congress earlier this year concluded that Damascus likely already held a stockpile of the nerve agent Sarin and appeared to be trying to develop "more toxic and persistent nerve agents," while Tehran likely already had supplies of "blister, blood, choking, and probably nerve agents and the bombs and artillery shells to deliver them." Both countries have denied the weapons charges.



An Iranian woman sleeps on the pavement outside her destroyed house yesterday in the devastated city of Bam. The death toll from the massive earthquake that flattened the southeastern Iranian city is expected to rise even further, a UN spokesman said as a local official predicted it could top 50,000.

PHOTO: AFP

## '60 terrorist groups at work around world'

AP, Washington

Roughly 60 terrorist groups, many of which are expanding their access to home-made weapons of mass destruction, are operating worldwide, the National Defence Council Foundation reported.

The foundation, made up of former military special operations forces members, found that terrorists are getting better at sustaining themselves through the drug trade and other illegal activities, giving them the economic base for terrorist activities.

The foundation usually puts out an annual count of world conflicts this time of year, but the prevalence of terrorist activities made the true tally of conflicts impossible to calculate, F Andy Messing Jr, executive director of

the Alexandria, Virginia, think tank, said on Monday.

The proliferation of nuclear weapons and the ease with which terrorist groups can make weapons of mass destruction are big concerns, the panel said.

The expansion of US intelligence has helped considerably in pinpointing these groups, but the foundation was uncertain about whether intelligence groups have caught up to the rise of terrorism.

The United States must reconfigure its forces to meet the threat of terrorism, using greater special operations capabilities over conventional military resources, said Advani.

He was speaking after talks with Bal Thackeray, chief of the far-right Shiv Sena which is one of around 20 parties in the federal coalition, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

## Advani wants early polls

AFP, Mumbai

Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani said yesterday he wanted national elections before the October 2004 deadline as he was confident his Hindu nationalist party would be re-elected.

Advani said the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was upbeat after December 1 regional polls, in which it swept the main opposition Congress out of power in three states, and amid indications of strong economic growth.

"Looking at the economic feel-good factor and the impact of recent assembly elections, we feel that elections should be held early," Advani told reporters in Bombay.

He was speaking after talks with Bal Thackeray, chief of the far-right Shiv Sena which is one of around 20 parties in the federal coalition, known as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

## Aid workers shift focus to wounded in Iran

AP, Bam

Aid workers sifting through the ruins of Iran's devastating earthquake said yesterday their operation had shifted from searching for survivors to treating the injured and homeless and burying the corpses still being pulled from the rubble.

The death toll from Friday's 6.6-magnitude quake that shook the ancient city of Bam rose to 28,000, according to Ted Peran, coordinator of UN relief operations. At least 10,000 people were believed injured.

"We have gone out of the rescue phase and entered the humanitarian relief phase of the operation," Peran said. "There's always hope of pulling more survivors out ... but the window of opportunity is closing rapidly."

Some international rescuers headed home, saying they were frustrated at their inability to save lives.

There were fears the number of dead could rise as high as 40,000 after Bam on Monday passed the critical mark of 72 hours after the quake, the longest period people are expected to survive in rubble.

Occasionally, people survive longer if they are trapped in a pocket with air to breathe, though Bam's traditional architecture sharply limited that possibility. The city's mud-brick houses, constructed without supporting metal or wooden beams, crumbled into small chunks and powder-like dust.

"We did not find anyone alive," said Steve Owens of the charity British International Search. His team spent 14 hours traveling less than 125 miles on a jammed road to

Bam and reached the devastated city too late to help.

"We were a day late getting to the site," Owens said, waiting Tuesday at the airport in the provincial capital of Kerman for a flight back to England. "When things like this happen, there should be ways to get teams in quicker. It's frustrating."

Russia's Emergency Situations' Ministry said that its 150 rescuers would return to Moscow on Tuesday and that a plane carrying humanitarian aid would be sent to Iran on Wednesday.

At the peak of rescue efforts, 1,700 international relief workers from 30 countries had converged in Bam, Peran said. By Tuesday, the number of rescuers dropped to about 1,500 after seven teams returned home.

## US open to talks with Iran: Powell

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is open to restoring a dialogue with Iran after "encouraging" moves by the Islamic republic in recent months, Secretary of State Colin Powell said in an interview published on yesterday.

"There are things happening and therefore we should keep the possibility of dialogue at an appropriate point in the future," Powell said in an interview with The Washington Post.

This month, in a European-brokered deal, Iran agreed to snap UN inspections of its nuclear facilities, which the United States says are a front for building an atom bomb. Tehran also welcomed international humanitarian aid for victims of Friday's devastating earthquake.

The first US military aircraft to land in Iran in more than 20 years arrived over the weekend carrying disaster response experts and tons of emergency supplies for survivors of the Bam earthquake, US officials said on Monday.

## Referendum plan strains Taiwan-US relations

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan-US relations have fallen to their lowest level after being stranded by Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's controversial plan to hold a sovereignty referendum, officials and analysts said.

Chen's announcement earlier this month of plans to hold the referendum provoked a stinging rebuke from US President George W. Bush and anger from China, which considers the island part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary.

"We oppose any unilateral decision by either China or Taiwan to change the status quo," Bush said after talks with visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

"And the comments and actions made by the leader of Taiwan indicate that he may be willing to make decisions unilaterally to change the status quo, which we oppose," Bush added.

## Vatican envoy to Burundi shot dead in 'rebel' ambush

AFP, Bujumbura

The Vatican's ambassador to Burundi died Monday after he was shot in an ambush the army blamed on rebels refusing to sign up to a peace deal to end a civil war.

Archbishop Michael Courtney, an Irishman, was hit in the head, shoulder and leg Monday when his car was attacked south of the capital, the military said.

The 58-year-old papal nuncio died in a Bujumbura hospital less than three hours later, an official there said. "We were trying everything we could to save him. We were trying to extract the bullets and he died while we were operating," he said.

Chief of army staff General German Niyoyankana pinned the blame for the attack on rebels from the National Liberation Forces (FLN), the only remaining active rebel group in a decade-long conflict that has claimed around 300,000 lives -- a war in which Courtney played an active mediating role.

"We are sure the FLN is responsible for this monstrosity," Niyoyankana said.

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