

UN agrees with top cleric on need for polls in Iraq: Envoy

REUTERS, Najaf

A United Nations envoy said after talks with Iraq's top Shiite cleric yesterday the world body backs his calls for elections but did not go into the timing of such polls.

Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani "is insistent on holding the elections and we are with him on this 100 percent because elections are the best means to enable any people to set up a state that serves their interest," Lakhdar Brahimi told reporters after holding two hours of talks with the cleric who holds the key to Iraq's political future.

A UN team led by Brahimi is touring Iraq to assess the feasibility of holding early direct elections that Sistani has been pushing for in opposition to a US plan to hand over power on June 30.

"We are in agreement with the

Sayyid (descendant of the Prophet Mohammad) that these elections should be prepared well and should take place in the best possible conditions so that it would bring the results which the Sayyid wants and the people of Iraq and the UN," Brahimi said.

The United States favors a gradual approach with caucuses that will eventually lead to direct elections in 2005.

Thousands of Sistani's followers have protested in the streets calling for direct elections over the past few months.

Earlier the UN envoy visited the Shiite cleric who holds the key to Iraq's political future yesterday, after two days of violence that killed 100 Iraqis.

The most revered man in Iraq for the country's Shiites, who make up around 60 percent of the popu-

lation, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has called for direct elections before US occupiers hand back sovereignty to Iraqis by the middle of this year.

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi heads a UN team that is in the country to discuss the possibility of holding elections ahead of the June 30 deadline.

Brahimi, an Algerian, met the reclusive cleric in the holy city of Najaf the day after a suicide bomb in Baghdad killed 47 people at an army recruitment center. A similar attack on Tuesday killed 53 people lining up for jobs at a police station.

Brahimi was accompanied by an Arab aide and Iraqi UN guards into Sistani's well-guarded complex. The 73-year-old leader has not ventured out of his house or met a Westerner for years, aides say.

Sistani, whose top religious rank

grants him powerful influence in the Shiite community, called mass demonstrations earlier this year to press for elections to replace a US plan to choose a government through regional caucuses. US plans are for elections only next year.

Brahimi is due to leave Iraq by Friday at the latest, a senior US-led administration official has said. The rest of the UN team has started touring provinces. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is expected to give his opinion on the elections on February 21.

In the latest bout of violence, the US Army's 1st Armored Division said a bomb exploded Wednesday evening as troops were passing by in their vehicles, killing two soldiers.



PHOTO: AFP
Anti-Aristide protestors march past the main police station of Gonaives Wednesday, which was torched and looted by armed rebels February 6. Armed rebels began an uprising that began February 5 in Gonaives, a city of some 200,000 located some 70 miles north of this nation's capital of Port-au-Prince.

Aristide calls for talks, refuses to step down

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide on Wednesday urged the opposition to negotiate and stop fighting, but again rejected calls for his resignation.

Aristide, who called a press conference inside the presidential palace, said he wanted the opposition "to stop terrorist actions because dialogue is essential."

"There have been 32 coups in Haiti in 200 years of independence, but now we must go from one democratic election to another democratic election," he said.

"Elections are indispensable in all democratic countries," he said. "Violence will not save Haiti."

Haiti's political opposition has distanced itself from the armed uprising that has torn the country apart in less than one week.

US pressures EU over China arms ban

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday piled more pressure on the European Union over a French-led drive to end the EU embargo on arms sales to China, saying such a move was unwise as tension flared between Beijing and Taiwan.

Powell said he had raised the issue at lunch last week with French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, after French President Jacques Chirac gave an undertaking to work to end the embargo in talks last month with China's President Hu Jintao.

"With the Taiwan referendum

coming up, (at a) very sensitive time, why start changing this policy?" Powell asked at a hearing of the International Relations Committee of the House of Representatives.

Taiwan will hold a referendum alongside a general election next month in which voters will be asked whether the island should beef up defenses against China's military threat, and whether Taipei should start negotiations with China for peaceful co-existence.

China, which regards Taiwan as a breakaway province, has angrily denounced the referendum, branding it a step towards

independence.

Powell said he had lobbied against lifting the arms embargo on Wednesday in a telephone conversation with Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen, and had also raised the issue with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

He said he told them "this is something that we really need to give long and hard thought to and not do."

"We will be pressing our European Union colleagues not to abandon this policy."

Kerry victories force Clark out of race

AFP, Washington

Former NATO commander Wesley Clark dropped out of the presidential race Wednesday in the wake of frontrunner Senator John Kerry's two latest victories and amid mounting questions about President George W. Bush's military service.

Clark scored disappointing third-place finishes in Tennessee and Virginia on Tuesday, trailing Kerry and Senator John Edwards.

The retired general returned to his hometown of Little Rock, Arkansas, to formally drop out of the race, and took a farewell swipe at Bush's "fatally flawed" foreign policy, slamming the US-led invasion as "a war we didn't have to fight."

Bush also faced growing questions about his Vietnam war-era military service, one day after the White House released payroll and service documents on Bush from the murky period in 1972-73.

Nasa 'excited' about layered rock on Mars

AFP, Washington

Nasa geologists seeking signs that life once existed on Mars are "excited" about layered rocks photographed by the Mars rover Opportunity, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said Wednesday.

"Scientists are excited to see new details of layered rocks in Opportunity Ledge," Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, said in a statement.

"In previous panoramic camera images, geologists saw that some rocks in the outcrop had thin layers, and images sent to Earth (Monday) now show that the thin layers are not always parallel to each other like lines on notebook paper.

"Instead," said the lab, "if you look closely at this image from an angle, you will notice that the lines converge and diverge at low angles. These unparallel lines give unparalleled clues that some moving current, such as volcanic flow, wind, or water, formed these rocks."

Nasa has always said that any sign of past water on Mars would be a good indication that life once existed on the red planet.

Afghan refugee family fly to US after 2-year wait since Sept 11

AFP, Islamabad

An Afghan refugee family was due to start a new life in the United States yesterday after being stranded in Pakistan for more than two-and-a-half years because of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Sadiq Mir, 48, his wife, Najia, and six children had been due to board an aeroplane on the day of the attacks, but the delay stretched into months and then years as their case was looked at again by the US authorities.

Nine other Afghan refugee families granted visas to enter US were also held back after the attacks.

"I was told that the flight would be leaving in two days, but it took two-and-a-half years," Mir told AFP before he finally left the country with his family.

"I am extremely pleased and hopeful of a better future for my children in the United States."

Mir, who lived in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, until 1988, took refuge in the northwest Pakistani city of Peshawar following threats to his family because he had converted to Christianity.

Bush proposes steps for limiting N-tech transfer

IAEA chief backs call for tighter nuke control

AP, Washington

President Bush proposed new steps Wednesday to halt illicit weapons trafficking, warning that black-market dealings by the architect of Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme had exposed holes in global enforcement efforts.

"Every civilized nation has a stake in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction," Bush said. He promised that the steps he outlined would prevent such weapons from being used, and he painted a grim portrait of the consequences of doing otherwise.

Bush also gave a boost to his intelligence agencies, under fire over miscalculations in Iraq, citing their work in exposing the underground Pakistani network that supplied nuclear weapons technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, the Pakistani nuclear scientist who was the father of the country's nuclear weapons program, last week admitted being the mastermind of the scheme.

Khan was pardoned by Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

"Breaking this network is one major success in a broad-based effort to stop the spread of terrible weapons," Bush said.

Yet Bush skated past the fact that the intelligence successes came after Iran, North Korea and Libya already had obtained the weapons technology from Khan's network.

The president hailed Libya's

agreement to abandon illicit weapons efforts; Iran and North Korea have not said they plan to follow suit.

Bush for the first time publicly accused Khan's network of supplying North Korea with the centrifuge technology that is needed to make highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. The administration previously had said it believed Khan's network was supplying weapons technology to North Korea, Libya and Iran but had not specified what.

The administration and North Korea are in a dispute over whether the Koreans are trying to develop nuclear weapons using highly enriched uranium, a key dispute as the two nations head into talks later this month with four other countries, including China.

The president offered doomsday predictions on what would happen if terrorists come to possess weapons of mass destruction. Some of his language was reminiscent of the warnings a year ago, when he said Iraq had such banned weapons.

"The greatest threat before humanity today is the possibility of secret and sudden attack with chemical or biological or radiological or nuclear weapons," Bush said.

He offered a seven-point plan to combat the spread of such weapons.

Expanding a US-led international effort to halt commerce in weapons moving by land, sea or air. Bush called for bolstering enforcement capabilities of the Proliferation Security Initiative against

networks such as Khan's.

Tightening laws and international controls on weapons proliferation. Bush renewed his call for the UN Security Council to pass a resolution requiring all states to criminalise proliferation.

Increasing government spending worldwide on programmes aimed at securing vulnerable nuclear arsenals in Russia and other former Soviet-bloc nations. He made no mention of any additional US funding.

AFP adds: UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei called Thursday for tighter controls on the export of nuclear technology and equipment, backing a new call by US President George W. Bush's call for a crack-down on atomic smuggling worldwide.

"I have the same concern and sense of urgency expressed by President Bush to shore up the non-proliferation regime and global security system," International Atomic Energy Agency chief ElBaradei said in a statement released at the IAEA's headquarters in Vienna.

He said the IAEA, the UN's organization to monitor compliance with international non-proliferation safeguards, needs "additional authority."

ElBaradei said there should be "a much more stringent export control system and accelerated efforts towards nuclear disarmament."

IAEA finds new type of nuke centrifuge in Iran

AFP, London

United Nations inspectors have found a new type of centrifuge design in Iran which Tehran has failed to declare, despite its promise of cooperation to dispel fears about its nuclear programme, a British newspaper reported yesterday.

Unnamed Western officials told the Financial Times that the International Atomic Energy Agency's findings on Iran would be included in a progress report prepared by Mohamed ElBaradei, the agency's head, ahead of an IAEA board meeting in March.

A western diplomat told the Financial Times that the omissions detracted from Iran's credibility but did not add to Iran's known capabilities.

Centrifuges can be used to enrich uranium, a key ingredient in a nuclear bomb.

Under international pressure, notably from the United States, Iran pledged last November to suspend uranium enrichment as a confidence-building measure to show the IAEA it was not secretly trying to develop nuclear weapons.

And in December Tehran ended months of wrangling by signing a key UN treaty protocol allowing surprise inspections of its nuclear facilities.

But Iran has interpreted the pledge over suspending uranium enrichment in a narrow sense, stopping such activities at its Natanz nuclear fuel-making plant, but continuing to assemble centrifuges in case it decides to resume making highly-enriched uranium, which can be used both as fuel for reactors or to make a bomb, according to diplomats.



PHOTO: AFP
Shiite pilgrims, carrying bottles and jugs, gather February 9 inside a modest yellow-brick house in the Iraqi town of Kufa, 190km south of Baghdad, to have what they consider "blessed water" from the site of Imam Ali's well.