

Iran threatens to end cooperation with IAEA

AFP, Tehran

Iran will halt its cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog if European states fail to counter US pressure on the Islamic republic over its atomic programme, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi threatened yesterday.

The minister also said Iran intended to end its suspension of uranium enrichment -- a key step in producing both nuclear weapons and atomic energy -- once relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were "normalised".

"Unfortunately, the agency allows itself to be influenced by the Americans," Kharazi told reporters here after a cabinet meeting.

"We are engaged in cooperation (with the IAEA), and for this to continue the cooperation has to be bilateral. If one side does not respect its obligations, the cooperation will end," he added.

The foreign minister asserted that he expected European states -- which have brokered Iran's continued cooperation with the IAEA -- to counter mounting US pressure over the Islamic republic's suspect bid to generate atomic energy.

"We advise the Europeans to respect their obligations and to resist American pressure, otherwise there is no reason for cooperation to continue," he warned.

The minister also suggested that the Islamic republic was becoming increasingly impatient to resume

its controversial work of making its own enriched uranium instead of importing it.

"In order to build confidence we decided to voluntarily suspend, for a limited time, our enrichment activities. When relations with the IAEA are normalised, we will resume enrichment," Kharazi said.

He spoke after the United States and western European countries reached tentative agreement on a draft resolution criticising Iran for failing to declare sensitive parts of its nuclear program but putting off seeking any sanctions until at least June.

The resolution is to be submitted to the IAEA's 35-nation board of governors, which is meeting this week at its headquarters in Vienna.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami speaks to the press following a cabinet meeting in Tehran yesterday. Iran will halt its cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog if European states fail to counter US pressure on the Islamic republic, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi threatened yesterday. The minister also said Iran intended to end its suspension of uranium enrichment -- a key step in both the manufacture of nuclear weapons and producing atomic energy -- once relations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) were "normalised".

Israeli, Palestinian PMs finally set for meeting

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his Palestinian counterpart Ahmed Qorei moved closer to their long-awaited first meeting amid a flurry of diplomatic activity yesterday aimed at restarting the Middle East peace process.

"Mr Sharon and Mr Qorei are planning to meet next week but the date of their summit has not yet been finalised," a source close to Sharon told AFP.

It would be the first such encounter since Qorei took over in October from his predecessor Mahmud Abbas.

According to Israeli reports, the meeting has been pencilled in for Tuesday with the agenda being finalised at a meeting of the two prime ministers' bureau chiefs on Sunday.

A Palestinian official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said a final preparatory meeting was scheduled for Sunday "and if this meeting is successful, the summit between Abu Alaa (Qorei) and the Israeli prime minister will take place next week."

The Israelis broke off top level contacts with the Palestinians in August last year after a massive suicide bomb in Jerusalem.

The bilateral roadmap peace plan has subsequently run into a dead end, leading Sharon to pledge to implement his own unilateral measures which will include the evacuation of most Gaza settlements.

Sharon is trying to secure US backing for his project and win over neighbouring Egypt and Jordan.

Death toll rises in Madagascar storm

AFP, Antananarivo

At least 23 people were killed when cyclone Gafilo ripped through north Madagascar at the weekend, rescue services said Wednesday, while regional officials said they still had no news of a ferry with 113 passengers on board that went missing during the storm.

"The toll issued this morning at 8:00 (0500 GMT) is 23 dead, five missing, 16 injured and 3,722 homeless," Farah Rasoarimamonjy, an official at the Indian Ocean island's national rescue council, told AFP.

He spoke as the storm was reported to be once again crossing the island, hitting the south early on Wednesday.

Officials in the Comoros Islands, located northwest of Madagascar, meanwhile said they still had no news of the ferry, the Samson.

The ferry left the Comoros port of Moutsamoudou for Madagascar at the weekend, but has not been heard from since it had been unable to put into its destination port on Sunday night.

Pakistan, India agree to start another bus service

AP, Islamabad

Officials from Pakistan and India yesterday agreed to restart a cross-border bus service on a route that had been suspended since the 1960s, officials said.

No timeframe has been set for restarting the bus service between Kohhrapar in Pakistan's southern Sindh province and Munabao in Rajasthan, which was suspended during 1965 war.

"Definitely, our effort would be to start the bus as soon as possible," said the official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity at the conclusion of two days of talks between the two sides in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad.

He gave no other details.

A joint statement about the outcome of the talks was expected to be issued by Pakistan's Foreign Ministry later on Wednesday. The announcement came shortly after India's cricket team arrived in Pakistan's eastern city of Lahore for a much-anticipated six-week tour that will be its first of Pakistan in 14 years.

US accused over death of Palestinian detainee

REUTERS, Gaza

Followers of Mohammed Abbas, Palestinian mastermind of the Achille Lauro cruise ship hijacking in 1985, said Wednesday his death in US custody in Iraq amounted to "assassination."

Abbas, also known as "Abu Abbas," was captured by American forces in Iraq nearly a year ago and Washington vowed to bring him to justice. The US military in Baghdad confirmed his death in detention, one official attributing it to a heart attack.

"We hold the Americans responsible for his death, for his assassination," said Omar Sheble, number two to 56-year-old Abbas in the Palestinian Liberation Front (PLF).

"They put him to die slowly in a prison cell, deprived of his freedom. His detention was illegal and his conditions in jail were bad,"

Sheble told Reuters in the Gaza Strip.

He said wakes would be held for Abbas in the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Iraq, but it was not clear where he would be buried. "We have to consult with his wife in Lebanon and also with (Palestinian President Yasser)...Arafat."

Sheble said Abbas's wife was banned by Israel from entering Palestinian territories.

Abbas planned the hijacking of the Italian cruise liner Achille Lauro in October 1985 during which a wheel-chair-bound American Jew, 69-year-old Leon Klinghoffer, was killed and thrown into the sea.

Abbas, who was not aboard the ship during an operation that embarrassed Arafat's mainstream Palestine Liberation Organization (news - web sites), had spent most of the past 17 years in Iraq, eluding capture by the United States or

Italy.

Italy freed Abbas after US warplanes forced his jet to land in Sicily following the hijack, although it later sentenced him -- when he had already left -- to life in jail.

Efforts by the United States to bring Abbas before a court founded on legal and diplomatic problems such as the possible expiry of the U.S. statute of limitations.

Abbas renounced violence when the Palestinians signed accords with Israel in 1993 and last returned to Palestinian-run territories for a brief visit four years ago.

The US military did not reveal where Abbas had been held since his capture on April 14, 2003. He died Tuesday.

"Initial reports indicate that he died of natural causes. Efforts by medical personnel to revive him were unsuccessful. An autopsy will be performed," a statement said.

Kerry steps closer to nomination

REUTERS, Washington

John Kerry moved closer to formally clinching the US Democratic presidential nomination on Tuesday with easy victories in four Southern states, including the crucial November battleground of Florida.

The Massachusetts senator, looking to challenge President Bush in a region that has not been friendly to Democrats in recent elections, swept to easy wins in Florida, Mississippi, Texas and Louisiana.

Kerry effectively locked up the right to face Bush last week when he drove his last major rival from the race and the victories put him on the verge of making it official by capturing a majority of the delegates to July's nominating convention.

"This nation is demanding more than ever before leadership that takes us in a new direction," Kerry told supporters in Chicago, Illinois, which holds the primary next week that could put him over the top.

"George Bush will not take us in

that direction," he said. "I will."

Kerry rolled up more than 75 percent of the votes in Florida and Mississippi over rivals who have dropped out of the race but remained on the ballots and over two remaining minor challengers, civil rights activist Al Sharpton and Ohio Rep. Dennis Kucinich.

Kerry, already locked in an escalating general election struggle with Bush, slammed the president's economic and foreign policies and ridiculed Bush's claim to "steady leadership," describing him as a "stubborn" leader.

"After four years of the same old failed policies, what we've seen is stubborn leadership," Kerry said.

Earlier in the day Bush, without mentioning Kerry by name, decried "economic isolationists" who would weaken the US economy.

"There are economic isolationists in our country who believe we should separate ourselves from the rest of the world by raising up barriers and closing off markets. They're wrong," Bush said in a clear jab at Kerry.

Tamil Tigers deny gearing for war

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday denied allegations by the leader of a breakaway faction that they were preparing to relaunch a civil war.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said regional commander V. Muralitharan who led a breakaway last week was trying to discredit the main rebel group after he was dismissed by supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran.

"He (Karuna) is trying to justify himself," LTTE spokesman Daya Master told AFP when contacted by telephone. "There is no truth in his allegation that Prabhakaran was preparing for war."

"Our leadership is committed to solving the problem in a peaceful way."

In an interview with AFP late Tuesday, Karuna said he broke away because he believed Prabhakaran was gearing up for war despite Norwegian-backed attempts to peacefully end a conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Two US civilians shot dead in Iraq

AFP, Hilla

Two US civilians and their Iraqi interpreter have been shot dead in central Iraq, while an errant US mortar round killed one Iraqi civilian, military officials said yesterday.

Attackers disguised as Iraqi police shot the three civilians after holding them up at a false checkpoint near Hilla, 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Baghdad, Polish military official Zdzislaw Gnatowski told AFP in Warsaw.

It is believed the US nationals were affiliated with the US-led Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq.

Five suspects have been arrested over the killings, he said.

"The attackers, disguised as Iraqi policemen had set up a false checkpoint... They stopped the car in which the two US civilian workers and their Iraqi interpreter were travelling at 8:00 pm (1700 GMT)," he said.

"They shot them on the spot," he said. "In their car, the soldiers discovered three bodies... They also found arms."

"The soldiers arrested five men and have handed them over to the American police," Gnatowski said.

Poland heads a multinational force of 9,000 troops patrolling southern and central Iraq, with their headquarters in Hilla.

In northern Iraq, an off-target US mortar round killed one Iraqi civilian and wounded another when it struck a building in the village of Ejba, the US military said Wednesday.

"A mortar round from 3rd

Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division accidentally struck a building in the southeast side of Ejba, killing one citizen and injuring another Monday," Taskforce Olympia, charged with the northern provinces of Nineveh, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah, said in a statement.

"The coalition unit was conducting a mission against hostile forces in the area when one round fell short of its intended target. Soldiers were immediately dispatched to the scene."

The soldiers transported the casualties to a medical hospital for treatment and the incident is under investigation, the military said.

In nearby Mosul, a police chief narrowly avoided an attempt on his life.

"Three unknown persons in a car opened fire on chief Abdel Azal Haffudi in the city centre. In the ensuing exchange of fire, one assailant was killed and two others injured," police Colonel Mohammad Abdallah Obeidi told AFP.

In other developments, a bomb exploded early Tuesday some 50 kilometres (30 miles) northwest of Baghdad, near the Baquba office of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), one of the main Shiite parties.

"Around 6:00 am (0300 GMT), a bomb placed by the Badr Organisation office exploded left four people wounded, including the four year-old son of one of the security guards," said Faraj Hatem, a SCIRI official.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian opposition leader and Congress party president Sonia Gandhi greets supporters during a rally at Vadiampet village in Anantpur district in the Andhra Pradesh state yesterday. Gandhi embarked on a three day-long roadshow in this southern Indian state to begin the election campaign for the upcoming four-phased general elections starting 20 April in the world's largest democracy to elect its 14th Parliament.



PHOTO: AFP

Tibetan monks stage a sit down protest after a march to commemorate 45th Tibetan National Uprising day, in New Delhi yesterday. The Tibetan Youth Congress organised the 535 kms march which started 11 February 2004, from the seat of the Tibetan government in Exile in Dharamshala to New Delhi, to highlight the growing violation of the fundamental human rights and freedom of the Tibetan people under the repressive regime of China. The forty-fifth anniversary of the Tibetan uprising in 1959, which led to the Dalai Lama fleeing to India, will fall on 10 March.