

US demands action from Syria on Lebanon

Damascus warned of further sanctions

AFP, Beirut

A senior US official called yesterday for action from Syria to prove it was changing its attitude regarding Lebanon, Iraq and its alleged support of terrorism, warning of further sanctions if no change was forthcoming.

"There are many issues that raise concern about Syria's attitude towards Lebanon, Iraq and terrorism," US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield was quoted as telling Lebanon's leading Arabic language An-Nahar newspaper.

"We want to see Syria take concrete measures because words are not enough."

The tough comments follow stringent criticism by Washington last week that Lebanon's new prime minister-designate was an inappropriate choice owing to his strong links with Syria.

The United States had in May imposed economic sanctions on Syria for its alleged support of terrorism, purported efforts to obtain

mass destruction weapons and failing to crack down on infiltration of insurgents into Iraq.

Damascus has rejected the charges.

"The American president has available a number of measures he could take and which would have an effect on the United States' economic, financial and commercial relations with Syria," Satterfield warned.

"The United States is extremely worried by the current situation in Lebanon because of Syrian interference," he added.

The UN Security Council in September passed Resolution 1559, sponsored by the United States and France, demanding that Damascus pull its estimated 15,000 troops out of Lebanon and end what it saw as meddling in the affairs of its neighbour.

The 15-member UN Security Council issued a further statement Tuesday calling again on Damascus to comply with the resolution, a call rejected outright by Syria and Lebanon as "interference".

"Lebanon and its political leaders must make their decisions in freedom, far from external interference or threats," Satterfield said, adding that a recent US Congress proposal to freeze the assets of Lebanese officials who support Syria's domination of its small neighbour "reflects the profound concern of Congress and the American government".

Lebanon's prime minister Rafiq Hariri resigned on Wednesday, with his pro-Damascus arch-foe Omar Karamah almost immediately called upon to form a new government, a move sharply criticised by Washington.

Satterfield also warned that the Security Council did not have to wait for UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to present his six-monthly report on the implementation of Resolution 1559 to take action.

Meanwhile, Washington's ambassador to Beirut said Saturday that the US would lift customs exemptions on Lebanese goods if the country failed to improve its record on copyright violations.

US on 'march' to refer Iran to UNSC: Powell

AFP, Tokyo

The United States has seen no sign Iran will comply with international demands on its suspect nuclear program and will push next month for the matter to be sent to the UN Security Council unless Tehran reverses its course, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday.

Powell said Washington believed it could get support from the International Atomic Energy Agency to refer Iran to the Security Council in the event it fails to comply with its IAEA obligations and commitments to European nations.

The IAEA's governing board last met in September and called on Iran by its November 25 meeting to halt uranium enrichment activities that could be used to produce nuclear weapons and disprove fully US accusations that it is secretly developing such arms.

"I think everybody left the September meeting believing that if there was not a significant response, and a very clear significant response that met all of the IAEA requirements and was totally consistent with the agreement they had with the EU, that there should be a referral in November," Powell said.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Iraqi youth look at a burning Bradley fighting vehicle attacked along the highway leading to the airport in Baghdad yesterday. Six US soldiers were injured when a roadside bomb exploded in the path of their vehicle in western Baghdad early yesterday.

US tightens security measures on visitors, foreign student pilots

AFP, Washington

The United States Friday tightened security measures on foreign visitors and non-US citizens taking flying lessons.

The Department of Homeland Security said foreign visitors seeking admission under the Visa Waiver Programme would need machine-readable passports beginning Tuesday.

Those not complying will get one free pass and a letter explaining the new rules, with the one-time exemption noted in the visitor's permanent computer record, said the DHS.

A machine-readable passport carries an unalterable barcode containing a wealth of encrypted information about the bearer, which an immigration officer can read by scanning the document much like a supermarket checkout clerk scans food prices.

The new US passport requirement had been scheduled to take effect a year ago but was extended to give VWP participating countries time to issue machine-readable passports and inform their citizens

of the new rules.

Also, the Transportation Security Agency has begun requiring non-US citizens seeking training at US flight schools to submit to fingerprinting and provide security data for training on any type or size of aircraft.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Transportation Security Act mandated the Justice Department to do threat assessments on non-US citizens seeking training on aircraft weighing 12,500 pounds or more, including commercial aircraft.

This month, new legislation transferred that responsibility to the Transportation Security Administration and gave enforcers new teeth.

"September 11 taught us that terrorists exploited the use of US flight schools," said retired Admiral David Stone, Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security for TSA. "Fortifying security by knowing who trains at these schools is an integral part of our mission to secure the homeland."



PHOTO: AFP

Greenpeace environmental activists stand in the Alster river with a banner reading "Do it like Putin, Say yes to Kyoto" and a replica of the Statue of Liberty in front of the US consulate in Hamburg Friday asking the US government to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Russia's parliament ratified the Kyoto Protocol Friday in a historic vote that virtually guaranteed the UN global warming pact would finally enter into force.

Body formed to probe Taj tilting

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The government of northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has formed a seven-member committee of experts to probe reports that one of the four minarets of the 17th-century monument of love the Taj Mahal is tilting due to drying up of Yamuna river flowing past the heritage site in Agra.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav said the committee members would work with Archaeological Survey of India and submit its report in a week.

According to conservationist Navin Piplani, the foundation of the Taj Mahal, built by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan 350 years ago, is made of ebony wood and it has been nourished by the moisture from the plenty of water in Yamuna.

But this moisturing is weakening due to dryness of the river and cracks may have developed in the foundation, he said.

Piplani believes that the minarets of the Taj have always been slightly inclined to save the monument from quakes.

US-backed Iraqi govt losing support: Survey

UN declines to train Iraqis for Saddam trial

REUTERS, Washington

Support among Iraqis for the US-appointed government in Baghdad has plunged since it was installed this summer, a US survey released on Friday said.

The survey brought unwelcome news for the Bush administration as it fights to build stability before elections in January. It also indicated that Iraqis are most strongly influenced by their religious, rather than secular, leaders.

The survey, carried out at the end of September, showed popular support for interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi dropped more than 20 percentage points since July. Washington formally handed sovereignty to Iraq at the end of June.

Just over 45 percent of those surveyed said Allawi had been effective since taking office in June,

down from over 66 percent in July, and support for his government plummeted from 62 percent to 43 percent over the same period.

The survey was carried out by the International Republican Institute, a government-funded body that promotes democracy around the world and which is helping oversee efforts to build political parties in Iraq.

It found religious leaders carry more political weight than tribal leaders, the government or political parties with potential Iraqi voters.

The Washington Post, reporting figures not publicly released by the institute, said the survey also found that the most popular politician in Iraq was Abdel Aziz Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

Fifty-one percent said they want him in the national assembly, which will pick a new government.

Allawi was second, with 47 percent of Iraqis supporting him for a seat in the new parliament if elections were held now, and rebel Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was a close third, with 46 percent, the newspaper said. An institute spokesman would not confirm the Post figures.

Meanwhile, the United Nations has rejected a request from Iraqi leaders to train some 30 judges and prosecutors who would be trying former President Saddam Hussein, in part because Baghdad has the death penalty, a UN spokesman said Friday.

The request was made to Carla del Ponte, chief prosecutor at the UN war crimes tribunal on the former Yugoslavia in the Hague, but UN Secretary General Annan turned it down, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

US rejects world calls to join Russia in ratifying Kyoto pact

N Korea threatens to double N-deterrent

Powell rejects Pyongyang's demands

AFP, Washington

The United States, flying in the face of snowballing world opinion, said Friday it would not follow Russia's lead and ratify the Kyoto protocol on global warming.

"We have no intention of signing or ratifying it. We have not changed our views," a defiant deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said after the European Union and environmentalists across the globe hailed Moscow's decision and urged Washington to follow suit.

Heading the chorus of delight after the Russian cabinet approved the Kyoto pact and sent it to lawmakers for ratification was the EU, which has been battling to save the accord thrown into disarray by the US walkout.

"This is a huge success for the international fight against climate change," declared European Commission President Romano Prodi. "Today Russian President

Vladimir Putin has sent a strong signal of his commitment and sense of responsibility."

"We are happy that the Russian Duma has decided to ratify. We hope that the United States will now re-consider its position."

But the State Department left no room for hope.

"We note the actions taken today," said Ereli, "but I'd refer you to the Russians for opinion or comment on their rationale for ratifying it. Our position against it remains the same."

EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom said Russia's action "sends a very forceful signal to the rest of the world... It is also very much a victory for the European Union."

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, a Green party member, said, "For the first time there can be global responsibility for the world's climate and the management of its resources."

REUTERS, AFP, Seoul/Tokyo

North Korea threatened yesterday to double the size of its nuclear deterrent if the United States did not drop what Pyongyang sees as a confrontational policy aimed at unseating the communist leadership there.

On Friday, North Korea set three conditions to be met before it would consider returning to six-party talks on its nuclear programs, including Washington ditching its "hostile policy."

The main newspaper in North Korea, the communist daily Rodong Sinmun, took this a stage further on Saturday in a commentary published by the official KCNA news agency.

"If the US persistently pursues its confrontational hostile policy toward the DPRK from the viewpoint of escapism, it will only compel the DPRK to double its deterrent force," the newspaper said. DPRK is short for the North's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

North Korea has never said how

many nuclear weapons it has and usually refers ambiguously to its "deterrent force." US officials say the North could have between two and eight weapons.

The commentary said the root cause of the US policy was that Washington wanted to retain military influence in the region, even though the United States -- unlike its regional partners -- is a long way from Northeast Asia.

"This is a main source of trouble and a stumbling block in the way of settling the present situation," it said.

AFP adds: The United States will not accept North Korean demands as "conditions" for the resumption of stalled talks on resolving the Korean nuclear deadlock but Pyongyang is free to raise them if it returns to the table, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said yesterday.

Powell, in Tokyo on the first leg of a three-nation Asian tour that will also take him to China and South Korea, said North Korea would not win rewards for simply agreeing to attend a next round of the so-called "six-party talks."



PHOTO: AFP

Sunni Muslim religious students stand outside their school protesting yesterday the arrest of Sheikh Abdulsatar Abdul Jabar, a cleric, by US and Iraqi forces in Baghdad.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) greets people as the Chief Minister of India's southern state of Tamil Nadu J. Jayalalithaa (L) looks on, upon his arrival at the Chennai airport yesterday. Singh later launched the commercial phase of India's fast breeding reactor programme, at the Indira Gandhi Centre for Atomic Research (IGCAR) in Kalpakkam, some 80 km south of Chennai. The visit is the first to Tamil Nadu by Singh as India's Prime Minister.

Bush admin officials' visits to swing states irk Democrats

AFP, Washington

Top members of President George W. Bush's administration are frequent visitors to key swing states ahead of the November 2 US election bringing accusations from Democrats that the taxpayer is subsidising the Bush campaign.

National security adviser Condoleezza Rice will go to Florida on Monday to speak to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Rice has given speeches in several key states to defend the administration's war on terror, US media said.

Treasury Secretary John Snow has also been across Florida this week, officially talking about the US economy.

Florida is the biggest of the 10 battleground states that Bush and Democratic rival John Kerry are fighting over as they step up the battle for votes.

US ELECTION 2004

Bush, Kerry in campaign frenzy with 9 days to go

AFP, Pueblo

The US presidential rivals stepped up the already frenzied pace of their campaign marathon yesterday, just 9 days before the US election.

Democrat John Kerry was to campaign in the western states of Colorado and New Mexico Saturday, then cross two time zones for more appearances in the crucial state of Florida the following day.

President George W. Bush also faced a jammed schedule: four election rallies in Florida Saturday, then a 1,000-mile (1610-kilometer) trip west to spend the night at his ranch in Texas before stumping in New Mexico Sunday.

The rival candidates are locked in a desperate battle to win support in the 10 battleground states

expected to decide the November 2 election. Key among those is Florida, which has 27 of the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency and a too-close-to-call race.

Kerry was focusing on bread and butter issues as he galloped through a series of special pitches to specific groups of voters -- women on Friday, Hispanics on Saturday, blacks on Sunday.

He accused Bush of trying to make the election about "just one issue", national security, then said he would welcome the narrowed debate.

"Let's talk about what happened when you let Osama bin Laden escape in Afghanistan, let's talk about what happened when we had

the world's number one terrorist cornered in the mountains of Toru Bora," he told a rally at the University of Nevada in Reno late Friday.

He said Bush outsourced the job of capturing bin Laden out to Afghan warlords "who just one week earlier were fighting us."

"I would have used our military and we would have gone after and captured or killed Osama bin Laden," Kerry said.

Bush set the wolves on Kerry in a new television advertisement Friday that Kerry's running mate John Edwards called "despicable."

A female narrator accuses Kerry of being dangerously weak on national security, while a pack of wolves -- standing in for terrorists -- prowl menacingly onscreen.

High turnout in early voting across US

AFP, Washington

More than a million Americans have already voted in the presidential election across the United States, and turnout for early voting is higher than usual, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

Voters are casting tens of thousands of ballots a day in the 30 states that allow early voting or absentee voting without an excuse, the daily said.

More than 1.3 million people had voted in eight swing states -- states where the race was considered too close to call -- by late Friday, it said.

Election officials said they were seeing record early-vote turnout.

Officials in eight countries in Florida, scene of the ballot recount fiasco in the 2000 US election, said greater numbers of Democrats were voting early than Republicans.

In Las Vegas, Nevada, 86,000 people have already cast ballots -- an increase of 30 percent over early voting numbers at this time four years ago -- and 20,000 absentee ballots have been mailed in.