

## US drones scanning Iran for nukes

US intelligence reviewing assessments of nuclear threat

AFP, REUTERS, Washington

The United States has been flying drones over Iran since April 2004, seeking evidence of nuclear weapons programmes and probing for weaknesses in Iran's air defences. The Washington Post reported yesterday.

The small, pilotless planes have penetrated Iranian airspace from US military facilities in Iraq, prompting an official complaint from the Iranian government via Swiss channels, the report said. Iran and the United States lack diplomatic relations. US intelligence has begun reviewing its assessments of the Islamic Republic regarding its nuclear capabilities.

Iranian civilians began reporting seeing colored flashes and racing lights in the sky in December, sparking speculation of UFOs.

But Iranian air force commanders, many of them trained in the United States, identified the drones, and Iran's National Security Council decided not to engage them, the report said, citing a senior Iranian official.

US officials familiar with the program told the daily the drones use radar, video, still photography and air filters to scan for evidence of nuclear activity not accessible to satellites.

"The aerial espionage is standard in military preparations for an eventual air attack and is also employed as a tool for intimidation," the Post said.

The drones were deployed along Iran's northern and western borders in April, December and January, the report said. In response Iran's military stepped up defences around its nuclear facilities in south-

ern Isfahan and Bushehr.

But Iran did not take the bait and turn on its radar, which would have revealed vital information about the country's air defence systems, according to the Post.

The US intelligence community, responding to Bush administration concerns about a nuclear-armed Iran, has begun reviewing its assessments of the Islamic Republic, from weapons capabilities to the stability of Tehran's government, US officials said on Saturday.

The broad review includes a new National Intelligence Estimate, or NIE, intended to provide US policy-makers with a comprehensive profile of Iran's economic, political and military strengths, officials said.

## Iran tells US not to 'play with fire'

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran warned the United States yesterday not to attack its nuclear facilities and said talks with European nations might produce a deal to defuse the dispute.

"They know our capabilities. We have clearly told the Europeans to tell Americans not to play with fire," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told a weekly news briefing.

He said Iran was determined to continue its nuclear energy program despite pressure from Washington, which accuses Tehran of pursuing atomic weapons and has refused to rule out any option, including force, to stop it acquiring them.

## UN oil-for-food project chief blocked audit

AP, New York

The UN oil-for-food programme chief under scrutiny for alleged corruption and mismanagement blocked a proposed audit of his office around the same time he's accused of soliciting lucrative oil deals from Iraq, according to investigators.

A UN auditing team, which was severely understaffed, said running the \$64 billion oil-for-food programme was "a high risk activity" and a priority for review. But Benon Sevan denied the internal auditors' request to hire a consultant to examine his office in May 2001 an act to investigators of the programme are now calling into question.

## Abbas secures truce

Hamas, Islamic Jihad to halt their fire, Israel okays release of 500 Palestinian prisoners

AP, AFP, Gaza City

The Palestinian militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad said Saturday they were adhering to a de facto truce with Israel, but stopped short of committing to the official ceasefire that Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon agreed on at their summit.

Israel approved the release of some 500 Palestinians from its jails yesterday after Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas secured a pledge from radical Islamists to refrain from attacks.

The widely-anticipated decision was unanimously approved at a committee meeting chaired by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon who held a landmark summit with Abbas in Egypt last week.

In fast-paced moves to cement the truce, Israel said it will transfer control of the West Bank town of Jericho to Palestinians this coming week. As part of the cease-fire, Israel has pledged to return five West Bank towns the others are Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Bethlehem and Ramallah to Palestinian control within three weeks.

Leaders of Hamas and Islamic Jihad met Saturday with Abbas, who is trying to keep the fragile ceasefire intact and end more than four years of fighting.

The two groups had already agreed to halt attacks before the cease-fire agreement at Tuesday's summit in Egypt.

A Hamas leader, Mahmud Zahar, told The Associated Press the group will wait to see whether Israel stops its military activities and targeted killings of Palestinian militants before deciding whether to sign on to



Hamas leader Mahmud Zahar holds a press conference following his meeting with Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in Gaza City Saturday. Abbas held key talks with leaders of the Islamic militant group Hamas in a bid to persuade them to sign up to a permanent ceasefire with Israel.

the official ceasefire.

Zahar, after meeting Abbas, said Hamas was "committed to what is called 'quietness' until it determines whether Israel meets its truce obligations, including disclosing the criteria for releasing Palestinian prisoners.

"Up to this moment, we are committed to the previous agreement with Mr. Abbas, and we are going to see how the Israelis' act,

Zahar told the AP.

Hamas was behind dozens of suicide bombings and attacks that killed hundreds of Israelis. On Thursday, it upset the Sharon-Abbas truce by training dozens of rockets and mortars on Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip.

Though Israel gave no timetable for the return of the deported Palestinians, one of the exiles, Ghanem Sweilem, told reporters in

Gaza City on Saturday that they expect to go home within a week or two.

"Today, we received good news that an agreement was reached with the Israeli side to allow us to return to our cities ... each to his home, each to his city, within a short period of time," said Sweilem, who was exiled from his home in the Balata refugee camp near Nablus more than two years ago.

PHOTO: AFP



Members of the Filipino army, load the bodies of three soldiers who were killed in clashes with separatists, in the southern Philippines' Jolo island yesterday. The Philippines sent hundreds more troops to the southern island to crush a week-old rebellion by Moro separatists as the latest clashes left the three soldiers dead and 13 wounded.

PHOTO: AFP

## NATWAR STARTS ISLAMABAD VISIT TOMORROW

## Indo-Pak leaders set for talks to restore faith in peace process

REUTERS, Islamabad

India's Foreign Minister Natwar Singh arrives in Islamabad tomorrow for talks with Pakistani leaders aimed at restoring faith in a peace process that South Asia's nuclear rivals began a year ago.

No one expects a major breakthrough on the core issue of Kashmir, the Himalayan region at the center of two of the three wars fought between the neighbours following their partition when they became independent from Britain in 1947.

"I don't think anything is going to happen on the Kashmir front," said Riffat Hussein, a defense analyst at Quaid-e-Azam University, who rued the lack of progress over the past year on a range of issues, not just Kashmir.

The peace process certainly needs a boost as relations between Islamabad and New Delhi have cooled following a series of irritants in recent months.

"This visit is a positive movement in a slow and steady process -- there are bound to be some hiccups. I'm optimistic but with a small O," said

Jasjit Singh, an independent analyst of strategic affairs based in New Delhi.

Those hiccups included a violation of the cease-fire along the Line of Control dividing Kashmir last month, and the breakdown of talks over a dam being built by India that Pakistan claims will reduce the flow of water on its side of the border.

Pakistan was also irked by the cancellation of a South Asia summit in Bangladesh due to New Delhi's concerns about security in Dhaka and a political crisis in Nepal.

Islamabad had hoped the meeting would have given another chance for Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to give Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh a nudge on the peace process.

Niaz Naik, a former Pakistani foreign secretary who has been involved in recent diplomatic exchanges, said he hoped Foreign Minister Singh can lift some of the gloom.

But the best that analysts hope for from Singh's three-day visit is some tangible step forward. And no one is quite sure what that step could be.

## Blair feels 'passion' to win

AFP, Gateshead

British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared Sunday he has the "passion and hunger" to fight an expected May election and win a third straight term in power for his Labour Party.

In a major speech to Labour's spring conference, however, Blair warned that the main opposition Conservatives could yet snatch victory "by the back door" if Labour supporters fail to turn out and vote in big numbers.

"My political insight is the same... I have the same passion and hunger as when I first walked through the door of 10 Downing Street" after the 1997 election, Blair said.

But he warned: "The Tories may be a mess, their policy incoherent... But they have a strategy. Not power by the front door, but by the back. Spread disillusion and cynicism... Don't underestimate it."

"What it means to us is this: we take nothing for granted. Not one vote. Not one seat. We go out and earn every vote, every seat as we work towards earning a majority."

Blair went on to stress: "I said no complacency in 1997. I said no complacency in 2001. I say it again now: no complacency."

Labour, the Conservatives and the smaller but up-and-coming Liberal Democrats are shifting into full campaign mode as Blair is expected to call a general election for May 5.

## Nepal boosts patrols to end Maoist blockade

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal ordered more troops and helicopters to patrol highways and break an indefinite Maoist blockade across the nation, a government minister said yesterday, in the first test of nerves since King Gyanendra took power.

Traffic remained thin across the landlocked nation on the second day of the transport shutdown called by the Maoists to force Gyanendra to withdraw his decision to sack the government, impose a state of emergency and suspend civil liberties.

Information and Communications Minister Tanka Dhakal said soldiers had stepped up patrols and set up pickets along the highways to bolster the confidence of people, shaken by nine years of a conflict that has killed more than 11,000 people.

"People are feeling a little more secure and more are coming out," he said, adding the government had offered to pay immediate compensation if any vehicle was attacked while defying the guerrilla ban. So far, there were no reports of violence.

"We have put more troops, there are helicopters providing air patrol along the highways," Dhakal said.

The Maoists, who are fighting to topple the constitutional monarchy, successfully enforced a blockade of hill-ringed Kathmandu last August merely on the basis of threats, and

without any physical show of force.

Gyanendra, who blamed the previous government for failing to contain the Maoist revolt, has ordered a crackdown on the Maoists in their remote mountain hide-outs and thick jungles and force them to resume talks, cut off since August 2003.

The king's decision this month to take absolute power has prompted protests from many countries.

The guerrillas, who want to install a communist republic in Nepal, one of the world's 10 poorest nations, said on Saturday the king's power grab had ended all possibility for early peace talks.

Instead, they have urged the country's warring political parties to unite with them to fight the monarchy.

Life in high security Kathmandu appeared unaffected, and there was no sign of panic buying in city markets despite the rebel blockade.

On Saturday, the first day of the strike, only 137 vehicles entered the capital through the main checkpoint of Nagdhunga, compared with 1,659 vehicles the previous day, the daily Himalayan Times said, quoting the army.

Residents reached by phone in the towns of Biratnagar and Janakpur in the east told Reuters there was little traffic in the towns and on the highways.

## Pakistan steps up rescue operation

Disaster toll mounts

REUTERS, AFP, Quetta

Pakistan stepped up search and rescue operations yesterday for tens of thousands affected by flash floods after the heaviest rains in the country in two decades, in which more than 350 people have been killed.

Army and navy helicopters scoured the area affected by a dam burst near the coastal town of Pasni where at least 87 people were killed and up to 2,000 went missing.

More than 20,000 people have been affected by subsequent flooding in Pasni, about 500 miles south of Quetta, the capital of southwestern Baluchistan province.

Baluchistan provincial government spokesman Raziq Bugti said thousands of soldiers were ferrying people to safety across the Pasni district where two more small dams burst late on Saturday, flooding

about 20 villages. "More than 200 people have been killed in Baluchistan alone," he said.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said on state television the government has rushed blankets, tents and other relief goods to villages near Pasni while President Pervez Musharraf, who personally toured the area, announced financial compensation.

The unusually heavy rain and snow has hammered other parts of Pakistan as well.

In mountainous Kohistan district in northern Pakistan, four houses were crushed by an avalanche killing at least 16 people while as many were believed to be still missing, Rao Amin Hashim, deputy inspector general of police in the region, told Reuters.

## Grenade attack on Tamil Tiger office

AFP, Colombo

A grenade was tossed into a Tamil Tiger office in northern Sri Lanka, killing a person, while six others were hurt in clashes at protests against the murder of a rebel leader, the guerrillas said Sunday.

The grenade was tossed into a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) office in the northern town of Mannar on Saturday evening, a report on the rebel's website Tamilnet.com said.

A civilian was killed and two people, including a LTTE political worker, were injured.

Six people were meanwhile wounded in Jaffna, further north, when security forces and protesters clashed at a demonstration to condemn the killing Monday of a senior rebel leader and his colleagues by attackers in military uniforms.

## Brain-damaged woman talks after 20 years

AP, Hutchinson

For 20 years, Sarah Scantlin has been mostly oblivious to the world around her the victim of a drunken driver who struck her down as she walked to her car. Today, after a remarkable recovery, she can talk again.

Scantlin's father knows she will never fully recover, but her newfound ability to speak and her returning memories have given him his daughter back. For years, she could only blink her eyes one blink for "no," two blinks for "yes" to respond to questions that no one knew for sure she understood.

"I am astonished how primal communication is. It is a key element of humanity," Jim Scantlin said, blinking back tears.

Sarah Scantlin was an 18-year-old college freshman on Sept. 22, 1984, when she was hit by a drunk driver as she walked to her car after celebrating with friends at a teen club. That week, she had been hired at an upscale clothing store and won a spot on the drill team at Hutchinson Community College.

After two decades of silence, she began talking last month. Doctors are not sure why. On Saturday, Scantlin's parents hosted an open house at her nursing home to introduce her to friends, family members and reporters.



Firemen fight a fire at the Windsor building in downtown Madrid yesterday. Squadrons of firefighters were battling a blaze, which swept through several floors of a landmark office block in central Madrid and caused several sections to collapse, prompting fears the whole edifice would come tumbling down.

PHOTO: AFP

## Insurgents hold Iraq economy hostage

Government holds out hope

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi insurgents have a gun to the head of the country's war-torn economy, according to ministers and experts who are anxiously waiting to embark on major reforms.

Daily attacks have put the brake on plans for privatization, cuts to subsidized food and fuel, opening up the oil industry to foreign investment and other measures to modernise the socialist-style economy left by Saddam Hussein.

"All these are ideas but we are still at the beginning. Frankly speaking we are the hostages of security, this curtails everything," said Mehdi al-Hafez, planning minister in the interim government.

"Without stability in the country we cannot do anything meaningful," the minister told AFP.

Factories have closed and many farms have been abandoned. Thousands of Iraqi soldiers and private guards patrol the main oil pipeline from the northern Kirkuk region, but regular supply cuts and smuggling have cost billions of dollars over the past 18 months.

The old US-nominated governing council instituted one of the most liberal investment laws in the world in 2003, guaranteeing the free transfer of profits abroad. But insurgents have

scared off most businessmen.

The government and US officials have expressed confidence, however, that the rebel threat will ease in the months after the country's historic January 30 election.

A new government should be named in the coming weeks and the need to reform and open up the economy is one of the few issues where all rival parties -- Shia, Sunni and Kurdish -- agree.

"The differences are not on the economic side," said Hafez, who has been involved in negotiations on the makeup of the next government even though final election results have not been announced yet.

A Western diplomat in Baghdad said all parties were aware they had to "start showing results" to the Iraqi population.

The new government is likely to be dominated by the United Iraqi Alliance, a coalition of Shia religious with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani as its figurehead.

"Their philosophy is not socialist," said Kamal Field, who runs the Iraqi Institute for Economic Reform, the country's only independent think-tank.

private sector."

The new government will inherit the same three key problems as the interim administration: an unemployment rate of between 30 and 50 percent, restoring power and water and economic reforms such as cutting subsidies, which now take up half the government budget.

There are ambitious plans ready once the guns can be silenced, according to Field.

He said a privatisation experiment was planned with a shopping centre at the ministry of trade in Baghdad.

The government is also considering setting up special zones for foreign and Iraqi firms with guaranteed high security, power and telephones, according to Field. "The Americans are pushing for it," he said.

Iraq's massive subsidies for essential goods are a particularly sensitive problem.

The estimated 27 million population is guaranteed set amounts of basic foodstuffs each month. Fuel is kept at the artificially low price of 20 dinars (about 1.5 US cents) a litre -- but on the black market it fetches 1,000 dinars (70 cents). Huge amounts of petrol and food are smuggled abroad.

## Annan urges world to adapt fast to new security threats

AFP, Munich, Germany

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called yesterday on Europe and the United States to devise new ways of adapting collective security solutions for a world transformed by new threats.

"Our global security environment has been transformed and our global collective security system, including the United Nations, must be transformed too," Annan said on the final day of a gathering of defence ministers and experts in the German city of Munich.

Annan said support for a blueprint for a wide-ranging review of the UN he will present next month would recommend tougher rules to prevent nuclear proliferation and a better approach to fight terrorism.

His call for Europe and the United States "to think ahead, and to help plant the seeds of long-term global collective security" summed up the underlying theme of the annual conference.

Annan warned of a "cascade" of nuclear proliferation unless the stronger checks suggested by a panel of experts were introduced and said the world must adapt to threats that can appear "literally from a clear blue sky".

dominated by the relationship between the United States and Europe, which is still being strained by Iraq, and particularly that between the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) and the European Union's developing security capability.

US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told the conference on Saturday that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) remained important but fighting global terrorism had to involve more countries than the 26 Alliance members.

"By now it must be clear that one nation cannot defeat the extremists alone," Rumsfeld said.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder caused controversy with his suggestion to set up an independent panel of experts to try to revitalise Nato.

His Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer, on Sunday dismissed suggestions that Schroeder was effectively sounding the death knell for the Alliance.

"He does not want to undermine Nato but strengthen it," Fischer said. "The transatlantic link is the backbone of the new world order of the 21st century."

The annual conference was