

Iran, Russia sign nuclear fuel deal

AFP, Tehran

Iran and Russia yesterday signed a landmark nuclear fuel accord that paves the way for the firing up of the Islamic republic's first atomic power station, a project the United States alleges is a cover for weapons development.

Iranian media said Russia's top atomic energy official Alexander Rumyantsev and his Iranian counterpart Gholamreza Aghazadeh inked the deal during a tour of the Russian-built power plant at Bushehr in southern Iran.

Under the fuel agreement -- which would cap an 800-million-dollar contract to build and bring the plant on line -- Russia will provide the fuel and fire up the reactor on the condition that Iran sends back spent fuel, which potentially could be reprocessed and upgraded to weapons use.

The United States, convinced that Iran is using an atomic energy drive as a front for a secret bomb programme, has been trying to convince Russia to halt its nuclear cooperation with Iran.

The condition that spent fuel be returned was built into the deal as a concession to widespread international concerns over Iran's ambitions. Iran initially rejected the condition, but eventually relented after two years of negotiations.

The dispute over the fate of spent fuel had pushed the plant's opening back to January 2006, and the deal faced a further snag Saturday when

Iran objected to a Russian proposal to further delay firing up the plant's reactor.

According to Russia's ITAR-TASS news agency, the plant is now scheduled to go online at the end of 2006.

"We foresee physical startup at the end of 2006, with the fuel to be delivered around half a year before that," Rumyantsev quoted as saying.

"We signed a confidential protocol setting out the schedule for delivery of fuel to the nuclear power station at Bushehr," he said, saying the quantity of fuel involved was around 100 tonnes.

Bushehr was raised during a summit between US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Bratislava on Thursday. While both publicly agreed that Iran should not develop nuclear weapons, Russia has stuck by the lucrative Bushehr contract.

According to Russian diplomats, the United States has been lobbying against Moscow's involvement in Iran's nuclear programme "on a daily basis" -- and right up until the Bratislava meeting.

But they also point out that the huge contract has "virtually saved Russia's atomic energy industry", and emphasise that there is no way Bushehr -- also under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) scrutiny -- could constitute part of a weapons programme.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Congress Party workers burn crackers as they herald their party's victory outside its headquarters, in New Delhi yesterday. India's Congress Party was tipped to win or become a coalition partner in two state assemblies following elections this month, bolstering its standing as leader of the federal coalition government.

Cong storms back to power in Haryana

Bihar, Jharkhand set for coalition govt

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party yesterday stormed back to power in the northern state of Haryana with a landslide victory.

But Bihar, where charismatic politician Lalu Prasad's ruling Rashtriya Janata Dal suffered major losses, and adjacent Jharkhand states are set for coalition governments with no party securing majority on its own.

Congress, led by 58-year-old Italy-born Sonia Gandhi, bagged 67 of the total of 90 seats in Haryana state legislature dethroning ruling Indian National Lok Dal, headed by outgoing Chief Minister and Jat leader Om Prakash Chautala, which ended up with just 10 seats. The BJP could manage just two seats, as counting of votes were completed this afternoon.

Veteran Haryana Congress leader Bhajan Lal, has staked claim to the post of Chief Minister but he may face tough competition from some other senior or younger leaders in the party's state unit.

Bhajan Lal is the only active and second surviving of the famous Lal's in Haryana politics who along with late Devi Lal and aged Bansil Lal

formed the Jat triumvirate in the state.

While election to legislatures in Haryana was held on February 3 the polling in Bihar, which has a 243-member assembly and Jharkhand with a 81-member assembly, were held in a phases beginning on February 3 and ending on February 23.

The biggest story is however that of the outcome in Bihar where BJP and its ally Janata Dal (United) were poised almost neck and neck with RJD which lost majority of its own this time and is critically dependent on others if it wants to form the government. Lalu has ruled Bihar for the last 15 years at a stretch.

The RJD was pitted against a strong anti-incumbency factor and much of the benefit has gone to Paswan's party and BJP-JD (U). However, Lalul's party is set to emerge as the single largest party.

The biggest gainer in the state is Federal Steel Minister Ram Vilas Paswan whose Lok Janashakti Party (LJP) emerged as the principal king-maker whose support is crucial to a coalition government formation after it won a sizable number of seats.

RJD, LJP and Congress are

constituents of India's ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) but they fought with each other in Bihar. It is nothing unusual in Indian politics that coalition partners at the national level fight for political turn in states. It remains what stand is taken by Paswan, who fought on a die-hard anti-RJD and anti-Lalu plank and even today refused to either give or take support from either RJD or BJP, in future government-formation in Bihar.

Smaller parties, including the Left, regional groups and independents, are the third largest entity in the tally of seats after BJP-JD(U) and RJD and will have a crucial say which party or group of parties come to power in Bihar, given the kind of fractured electoral mandate.

In Jharkhand, ruling BJP has failed to get majority on its own but is poised to finish slightly ahead of Congress and pre-poll ally and tribal regional party Jharkhand Mukti Morcha.

But the support of RJD, having won some seats, and smaller parties and independents hold the key to government formation in tribal-dominated Jharkhand, a state which was carved out of Bihar.



Saddam's half-brother detained

AFP, Baghdad

A half-brother of ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, a former intelligence chief who figures on the US list of Iraq's most wanted, has been arrested, officials said yesterday.

Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan was Saddam's advisor and intelligence chief, a key post in the old regime. No details were immediately available on the arrest but the government said it would make it a statement later Sunday.

Two other half-brothers of Saddam, Barzan and Watban, are already being held at a US army-run jail near Baghdad and are set to be tried in the coming months.

Al-Hassan was one of about a dozen of the most wanted officials who have so far escaped arrest or death at the hands of American-led security forces.

MAOISTS CALL OFF BLOCKADE

Nepali troops continue to escort vehicles

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese troops and police yesterday maintained armed escorts for trucks carrying supplies to the capital despite a decision by Maoist rebels to call off a nationwide transport blockade.

The rebels Saturday halted the 14-day blockade staged to protest at King Gyanendra's seizure of power at the start of the month.

The Maoists cancelled the protest after it slowed traffic to a trickle, sent food prices soaring and caused hardship for families in one of the world's poorest countries.

But the Maoist supremo Prachanda, or the "Fierce One", warned of a countrywide general strike next month unless the king reverses his power grab.

In the southwest of the country, police said the guerrillas shot

dead a senior traffic policeman and his police bodyguard.

Deputy Superintendent Bikram Chand and his bodyguard Havildar Dilliraj Panthi were gunned down at Chand's home at Butwal, said Deputy Superintendent Maya Kumar Saha.

Butwal is 300km southwest of Kathmandu. Saha said the attackers managed to escape.

Security personnel were seen at a key checkpoint escorting vehicles in and out of Kathmandu Sunday.

"More than 400 vehicles left the Kathmandu valley escorted by security personnel Sunday morning," a police officer said at the Nagdhunga checkpoint, 14km south of the capital. "Around 25 have come in."

"Escorting will continue as we cannot totally trust the rebels who

said they have called off their blockade call," the police officer said.

An army official at the Gajuri checkpoint, 54km west of the capital also said armed convoys were continuing.

"The escorting of vehicles by security personnel will continue until further notice comes from our office," he said. "None of the vehicles has been allowed to operate without escorts."

The Maoist blockade was enforced mainly through fear of rebel reprisals rather than through a show of force. But police said a bus driver was killed and nine passengers hurt on Monday last week when rebels opened fire on a convoy in western Nepal.

"There are no obstacles on the roads and the situation is gradually returning to normalcy," the army official said.

KL launches crackdown on migrants tomorrow

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is set to crack the whip on hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants tomorrow, with a force of about half-a-million officials to be deployed to hunt them down.

The large-scale operation, codenamed "Ops Tegas", to round up, whip and deport illegal immigrants, mainly Indonesians, marks the end of an amnesty which has twice been extended at Jakarta's request.

"The government is tegas (firm). There will be no defertment," Home Affairs Minister Azmi Khalid said at the weekend.

"When they are caught this time, not only will we haul them to court but they will also be barred from entering Malaysia in future."

He warned Malaysian employers, who sometimes prefer illegal workers because they can pay them less than locals, also faced arrest and punishment under tough laws introduced in 2002.

The crackdown will be Malaysia's largest blitz to flush out illegal immigrants in three years. A similar nationwide sweep was carried out in 2002 following the end

of a four-month amnesty program.

Before the recent amnesty began on October 29 last year, Malaysia estimated there were more than a million illegal workers in the country, mostly from Indonesia but also from the Philippines, Myanmar, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka.

Nearly 400,000, mostly Indonesians, left without facing any penalty during the first three months of the amnesty, but others have remained, clinging to jobs in the construction, plantation and service industries in the face of unemployment at home. The planned crackdown, which will involve about 500,000 officials and civilian security force volunteers, has been widely criticised by human rights groups, which say it is open to abuse.

Indonesia and the Philippines have urged Malaysia to ensure there were no human rights abuses when it carries out the crackdown.

Amnesty International earlier this month urged Malaysia to halt the planned deportation of illegals amid fears some could face execution or torture in their home countries.

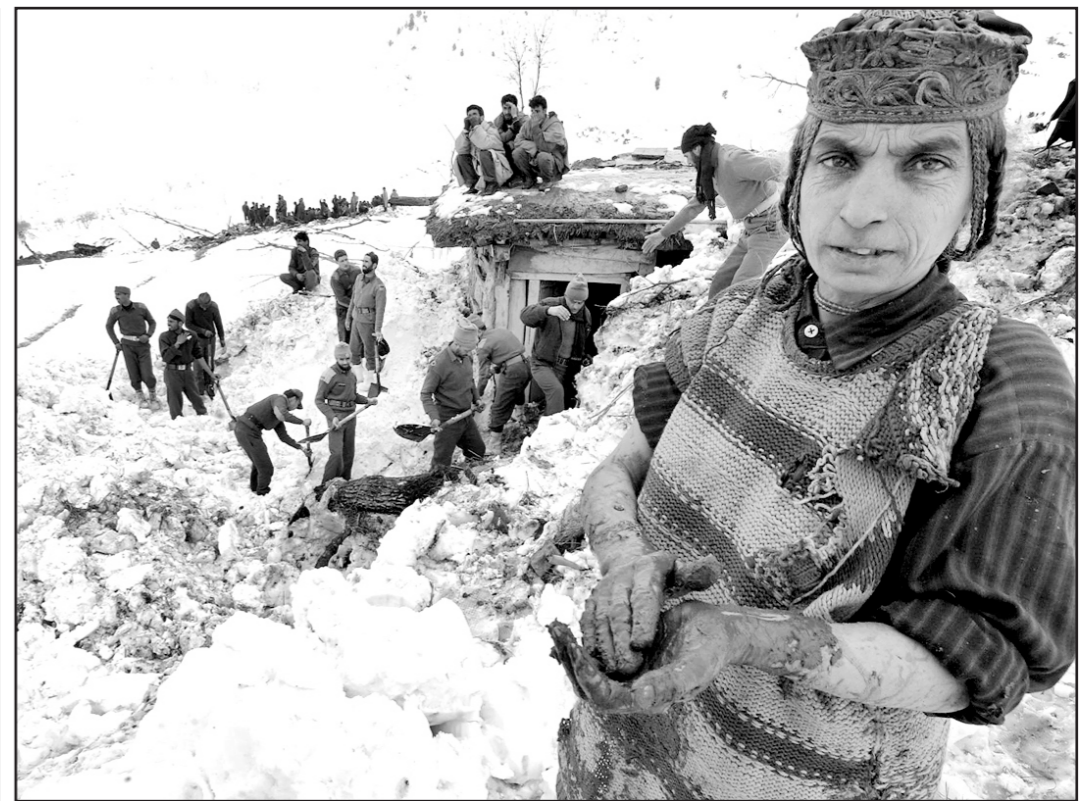


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiri woman Jana Bibi (R) poses as police rescuers in the background attempt to dig out the body of her missing husband from within their damaged house in Walingo Nar, some 90km south of Srinagar Saturday. The Indian army, which has called the avalanches an "unprecedented crisis", has urged people living in the mountains to leave their homes as expected warmer weather could cause more avalanches.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraq policeman holds back demonstrators in the center of Basra yesterday. Some 500 citizens took to the streets to protest against the banning of right-hand drive vehicles, which were imported into the country following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by US troops. Iraq drives on the left-hand side of the road.

'Aides of Pak scientist offered Iran nuke kit'

REUTERS, Washington

Investigators have found evidence of a meeting 18 years ago between Iranian officials and associates of the scientist dubbed the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme that resulted in a written offer to supply Tehran with the makings of a nuclear weapons programme, The Washington Post reported in its yesterday edition.

Citing unnamed foreign diplomats and US officials, The Post said the secret 1987 meeting in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, between Iranian officials and Abdul Qadeer Khan's associates started both Iran's nuclear efforts and Khan's black market.

Iran, according to the newspaper, bought centrifuge designs and a starter kit for uranium enrichment.

While Iran recently told the International Atomic Energy Agency it turned down the chance to buy the

more sensitive equipment required for building the core of a bomb, there is evidence the country used Khan's offer as a guide to acquire some of the pricier items elsewhere, the newspaper said.

It quoted an unnamed Western diplomat as saying the offer was the "strongest indication to date that Iran had a nuclear weapons programme, but it doesn't prove it completely."

The newspaper said much of the equipment Iran obtained could be used for peaceful purposes and is scattered throughout Iran's energy programme.

The United States has accused Iran of secretly pursuing an atomic weapons program under the cover of its nuclear energy program. Tehran, however, insists its nuclear activities are focused on producing energy.

The report surfaced as the IAEA prepares to meet next week.

Queen thinks Charles puts personal life before duty

AFP, London

Queen Elizabeth II has distanced herself from the wedding of Prince Charles because she believes her son is putting "personal gratification before duty," a newspaper reported yesterday.

Royal courtiers, quoted by The Sunday Telegraph, also said privately that the queen is "lukewarm" about the marriage and worried it could tarnish the monarchy itself.

It was announced last Tuesday that the queen and her husband Prince Philip would miss her son's April 8 civil marriage ceremony with Camilla Parker Bowles at Windsor town hall in deference to their wishes for a "low-key" event.

The courtiers told the newspaper that Prince Charles' private office had been outmaneuvered by Buckingham Palace, the queen's official residence in London.

Interpol mobilises against bioterror

AFP, Paris

International police chiefs gather this week at the Interpol headquarters in Lyon to grapple with the threat of bioterrorism.

More than 400 delegates from at least 120 countries "will discuss the risk of bio-terror attacks, case studies, prevention of attacks, preparation and training of law enforcement personnel, and the related legal and political framework," Interpol said in a statement.

Interpol's role is to raise awareness and link the world's police and medical services in light of a lack of information and a tendency to underestimate the threat, said Interpol Secretary General Ronald Noble.

"After 9/11 and the investigations on al-Qaeda, we know now that the terrorists have investigated the possibility using nuclear materials to

make weapons, how to use bio-agents and also the chemicals," Noble told AFP.

"Now we have to let our imagination run wild and prepare for anything," he added.

"From the anthrax attacks (in the United States in 2001) we know that a small amount of a bio-agent can have an extraordinary global impact, beyond the target area. That's why Interpol believes it has a central role to play."

With an annual operating budget of 37 million euros, mostly from the 182 member states, Interpol called on the private sector to finance the March 1-2 conference and the recent creation of a special anti-bioterrorism unit.

The organisation received a near one-million-dollar subsidy from the New York-based Sloan Foundation founded by Alfred P. Sloan, former head of General Motors.

KILLING, CRIMES IN IRAQ

50 British troops face prosecution

AFP, London

Almost 50 more British troops are facing prosecution for murder, manslaughter, assault and other crimes in Iraq, a newspaper reported yesterday, after three soldiers were jailed for abusing Iraqis.

The allegations contained in secret military documents obtained by The Sunday Telegraph include two cases in which soldiers caused Iraqi civilians to drown.

The allegations also include an incident that could lead to the first

member of the elite Special Air Service (SAS) being charged with the murder of an Iraqi civilian.

The leaked ministry of defence documents show that almost three times as many soldiers face charges than had been admitted by the ministry.

The disclosure follows the announcement on Friday by the head of the army, General Sir Mike Jackson, of a wide-ranging inquiry into allegations of abuse by British soldiers serving in Iraq.

He was speaking after the sentencing of three soldiers at a court

martial in Germany for the abuse of Iraqi detainees.

Details of the investigation involving the SAS soldier are contained in documents marked "Restricted - Investigations Not For Disclosure. Ministerial Update of Service Police Investigations."

The Iraqi civilian was named as Mr GGH Roomi who was shot dead by Special Forces in Basra on January 1 last year and the inquiry was passed to Special Investigations Branch for completion.

Grenade attack on Pak radio station, no casualties

AFP, Quetta

Suspected insurgents lobbed a hand grenade into the grounds of a state-run radio station in the restive southwest Pakistani city of Quetta, police said yesterday.

"A grenade thrown onto the lawn of Radio Pakistan exploded late Saturday night and broke the windows of a room located at a corner, but no one was injured," Quetta police chief Pervez Rafiq Bhatti told AFP.

Bhatti blamed insurgents linked to Marri tribesmen for the attack.

Lebanon opposition locks horns with govt

AFP, Beirut

A top US envoy seeking a Syrian troop pullout from Lebanon held more talks yesterday as the opposition locked horns with the pro-Damascus regime on the eve of a showdown in parliament.

Washington's number two Middle East pointman, David Satterfield, was holding talks with opposition figures who have accused the pro-Syrian regime and Damascus of the February 14 killing of ex-premier Rafiq Hariri.

Satterfield, deputy assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern

affairs, met Sunday with Maronite Christian Cardinal Nasrallah Sfeir, a most vocal opponent to Syria's political domination and military presence in Lebanon.

Satterfield is also due to meet with Foreign Minister Mahmud Hammud on Monday, the day the opposition plans to put a censure motion against the government before parliament.

The opposition and Lebanon's business community have announced a general strike and a demonstration on Monday to coincide with the parliamentary session. But pro-government groups

have called for a counter-demonstration and demanded that officials boycott Satterfield, calling him the "the Bremer of Lebanon" in reference to former Iraq civil administrator Paul Bremer.

Army forces have sealed off parliament square since Saturday when thousands chanted "Syria out" in a human chain protest between Hariri's nearby tomb and the site of the seafont bombing that killed the five-time prime minister.

Lebanese newspapers expressed concern over the security measures and the calls for counter-demonstrations by pro-regime groups.

India likely to hike defence budget

AFP, New Delhi

India is expected to sharply hike its defence spending in today's budget, despite peace talks with rival Pakistan, as it goes on a shopping spree for new military hardware to update its ageing arsenal, analysts say.

India, one of the world's biggest arms buyers with one million-plus troops, is looking to buy 126 new jet fighters to replace an accident-prone fleet of Russian-built MiGs, six new submarines from France, an anti-missile system from the United States and rocket launchers from Russia.