

## Iran expects to restart nuke talks with EU

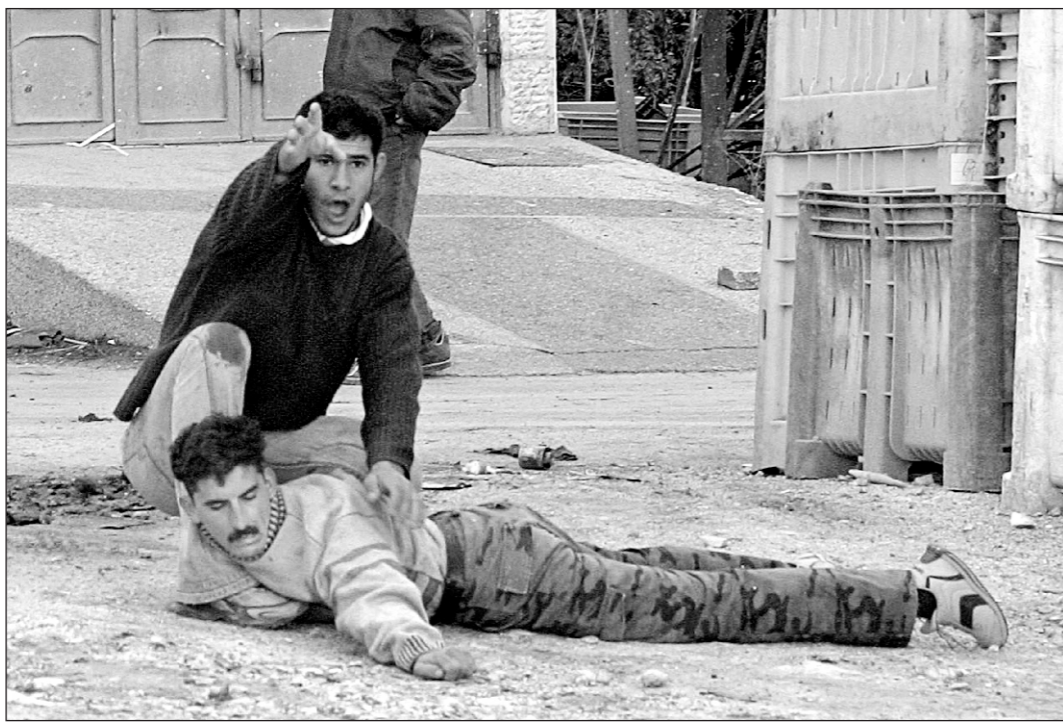
REUTERS, Tehran

Iran expects its nuclear talks with the European Union, which broke down in August, to resume after this week's board meeting of the UN's nuclear watchdog, Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said on Wednesday.

"The atmosphere exists for such negotiations to be held after the Vienna meeting (of the International Atomic Energy Agency)," Mottaki told a news conference. The IAEA board meeting is due to start on Thursday.

Diplomats told Reuters on Tuesday that talks with Iran could resume on December 6. They said discussions would focus on a proposal that Iran transfer to Russia all of its uranium enrichment activities -- a process that can be used to make atomic bombs.

Mottaki said he had spoken by telephone with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw on Tuesday night to discuss resuming the talks which collapsed in August when Iran broke U.N. seals at its Isfahan nuclear facility and began processing uranium ore.



A Palestinian man shouts as he rescues an injured man caught in clashes with Israeli forces yesterday in the northern West Bank city of Jenin. Six young Palestinians were wounded by Israeli fire during a military incursion into the volatile northern city of Jenin, medical sources and witnesses said. The six youngsters were wounded when Israeli soldiers opened fire towards schoolchildren throwing stones in defiance of a curfew imposed after troops rolled into the flashpoint town, the sources said.

PHOTO: AFP

## Israel sets March 28 for election

AP, Jerusalem

Israel on Wednesday set March 28 as the date for early elections, clearing the way for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to try to stay in power at the head of a new centrist party in a major political realignment.

Sharon bolted from his hard-line Likud and formed the new "National Responsibility" party, which picked up momentum Wednesday with an announcement by Haim Ramon, a senior Labor Party politician, that he is joining the group. He was the first Labor legislator to switch to the Sharon camp.

Sharon's aides said Wednesday he would campaign on the US-backed "road map" plan, which calls for Palestinian statehood as part of a peace deal. However, aides Lior Horev and Eyal Arad insisted that Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas must dismantle militant groups before Israel has to

start meeting its obligations, such as freezing West Bank settlement construction and removing outposts.

Palestinian officials said Sharon's approach will lead to deadlock and is a cover for Israel drawing its borders unilaterally, including by building a separation barrier in the West Bank.

"I think this is more lip service and diversionary tactics than a political platform," said Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi.

In the leaderless Likud, meanwhile, the race for the top spot was heating up, with Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz sharply attacking rival Benjamin Netanyahu over his social spending cuts as finance minister under Sharon.

The Likud primary, tentatively set for Dec. 19, is expected to be waged over economic issues. Mofaz, who has a working class background, also disparaged what he said was

Netanyahu's privileged upbringing.

In Palestinian politics, parliament rejected a proposal to change the election law at the last minute, clearing the way for parliament elections to be held as scheduled on Jan. 25.

Legislators voted 20-10 against the proposal, brought by lawmakers from the ruling Fatah movement. The legislators had wanted to have all candidates compete on party lists. Under the current system, half compete on party lists and the others at the district level.

The Islamic militant group Hamas is dominant in Gaza, and Fatah activists there feared they would do poorly in competition at the district level. Approval of the changes would have delayed the vote by several weeks. Abbas is under strong pressure at home and abroad to hold the election on time.

## French spy chief warns of high terrorism risk

AFP, Paris

France is viewed as a target by a number of terrorist organisations, with several groups known to be planning attacks against the country, France's head of domestic intelligence warned on Wednesday.

The terrorism threat in France is "unfortunately a real concern," Pierre de Bousquet de Florian, the director of the DST domestic intelligence agency, told RTL radio, as France's parliament prepared to examine a new anti-terrorism law.

He said this was "because a certain number of organisations have singled us out as an enemy, and also because our own investigations reveal day after day that networks already in place are working to set up terrorist projects hostile to our country."

Part of the current threat could be traced to Iraq, he said, warning that the conflict was acting as a "magnet for would-be holy warriors" from other countries, including France, to create a new generation of Islamic extremists.

## Indian driver's body found in Afghanistan

India expresses shock at killing

AFP, Kandahar, New Delhi

A body found dumped in a desert in southern Afghanistan on Wednesday is believed to be that of an Indian truck driver who the Taliban claim to have kidnapped and killed, police said.

Villagers found the body of Maniappan Raman Kutty, which had almost been decapitated, in Nimroz province's Dilaram district, said local police chief Bahdur Khan.

"The body does not look Afghan. It looks Indian," he said. "We think it is the hostage's body."

Purported Taliban spokesman Qari Mohammed Yousaf told The Associated Press in a satellite phone call the location of the body, which matched the information from the police chief.

Yousaf on Tuesday claimed that the rebels had shot Kutty because the Indian state-owned company he worked for had not agreed to the kidnappers' demands to pull out of Afghanistan.

Yousaf often calls news organisations to claim responsibility for attacks, often with information that proves exaggerated or untrue.

His exact tie to the Taliban leadership is not clear.

Kutty was kidnapped along with three Afghans in Nimroz province on

Saturday. One of the Afghans has since been released, while the fate of the two other Afghans was unknown.

The abduction was the latest in a string of kidnappings in southern Afghanistan. A British engineer working on a road project and two Japanese tourists were kidnapped in August and killed.

The violence comes amid the deadliest year of rebel fighting since the ouster of the Taliban in 2001. About 1,500 people have been killed and many southern and eastern areas are considered too dangerous for foreigners to enter without security.

India Wednesday expressed deep shock at the killing of an Indian construction worker by suspected Taliban rebels in Afghanistan and called for swift justice.

"We strongly condemn this inhuman and barbaric act against an innocent person. The Taliban and its backers bear the responsibility for the consequences of this outrageous act," the Indian foreign ministry said in a statement.

"We earnestly hope that the perpetrators will be brought to justice swiftly," it said.

New Delhi said the killing would not affect its assistance of the Afghanistan government in its reconstruction efforts.

## Ahmadinejad's third oil minister nominee rejected

AFP, Tehran

Iran's parliament dealt a fresh blow to hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad Wednesday by rejecting his third nominee for the crucial post of oil minister.

The nominee, Seyed Mohsen Tassaloti, had been the target of rumours over his personal life and fortune.

In August MPs in the conservative-controlled parliament refused to give their backing to Ahmadinejad's first choice on the grounds he was unqualified. The president was dealt another embarrassing blow earlier this month when deputies forced him to withdraw his second nominee. For his lack of experience in the oil sector -- which accounts for 80 percent of Iran's export revenues.

## Nobel winner Pinter to skip banquet

AFP, Stockholm

Harold Pinter, who won this year's Nobel prize for literature, will not attend next month's gala ceremony and banquet to pick up his award for health reasons, the Nobel foundation said on Wednesday.

The writer will travel to Stockholm a few days before the ceremony to hold the traditional laureate's lecture on December 7, which is already sold out, but will not stay on for the festivities, it said.

## Chinese flee city after taps turned off

REUTERS, Beijing

Residents of one of China's biggest and coldest cities, where water has been shut off for fear of chemical contamination, are jamming the airport and railway stations to get out, a witness said on Wednesday.

Taps were turned off in Harbin, capital of northeastern Heilongjiang province and famous for its January snow and ice show, at midnight on Tuesday after there had already been panic buying of bottled water and food.

"Everyone wants to leave Harbin and it is very difficult to buy tickets, just like during the Lunar New Year," a factory manager told Reuters.

"All containers are being used to store water, including the bathtub. It will be okay for four days, but not

longer than that."

The water supply was shut down after a blast at a chemical plant on November 13 in neighboring Jilin province only a few hundred yards from the Songhua River, which supplies water to Harbin, a metropolitan area of nine million people. Five people were killed.

The Beijing Times newspaper said the pollutants in the partly frozen river included benzene, an industrial solvent and component of petrol, and that they had reached the city.

"Pollution is definite," said a regional water official, who declined to give his name. "It has entered the Songhua River and has affected the banks and lower reaches."

But state television said no pollutants had reached Harbin by 11 a.m.

(0300 GMT).

Fifteen hospitals were on standby to take in contamination victims, Xinhua news agency said.

A government notice saying supplies would resume in four days have been removed, raising doubts about how long the crisis would last.

"The new notice does not necessarily mean an extension," a Harbin government spokesman told Reuters. "But we will make a decision after four days according to the water quality at that time."

"There is sufficient water. Residents have all stored a lot and we have been rushing in water from other places. We also have safe underground water."

## 1993 MUMBAI BOMBINGS Salem sent to judicial custody

REUTERS, Mumbai

One of India's most wanted men appeared in court in Mumbai on Wednesday, accused of involvement in bombings more than 12 years ago that killed 260 people in the country's financial center.

Police accuse Abu Salem, 36, of being a key associate of criminal syndicate leader Dawood Ibrahim, whom they say planned and funded the bombings in Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay.

Arriving in court dressed in jeans and a black t-shirt, Salem looked calm, surrounded by tight security. A lawyer for Salem, a Muslim, has said he worries that

Hindu gangsters in Mumbai might kill him.

Judge PD Kode ordered Salem to be sent to judicial custody and to be decided later on Wednesday which jail he will be held in, given fears over his safety.

Dozens of policemen, many armed with automatic weapons, guarded the anti-terrorist court in the heart of Mumbai, created to try cases relating to the blasts.

He was extradited from Portugal a few weeks ago along with one-time Bollywood actress Monica Bedi. He had been held there since being arrested with Bedi in 2002 for using fake documents and resisting arrest.

## Saddam trial to be broadcast by US channel

AFP, New York

The US television channel Court TV said on Tuesday it plans to broadcast the trial of Saddam Hussein on its internet site when court proceedings resume next week.

The trial will be shown on Court TV Extra, the network's online service, with a 20-minute delay. Other news organizations have also considered providing a stream of the trial.

Footage from the Baghdad courtroom will be available daily from 0900 GMT for about five hours, the company said in a statement. The Court TV Extra service costs subscribers 5.95 dollars a month.

## Marxists out of new Sri Lanka cabinet

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new president on Wednesday appointed a 25-member cabinet which excluded government allies from the Marxist and Buddhist monks' parties.

President Mahinda Rajapakse retained the defence portfolio as required by the constitution and also kept the finance ministry, as most of his predecessors have done.

No cabinet posts were given to the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, or to the all-monks JHU, or National Heritage Party. They were key allies of Rajapakse in last Thursday's presidential election which he narrowly won.

The JVP quit the previous government in June after falling out with then-president Chandrika Kumaratunga over proposals to share tsunami aid with Tamil Tiger rebels. It supported Rajapakse's candidature.

Political sources said squabbling for top jobs in cabinet delayed the swearing in of the new government, originally scheduled for Monday to

coincide with the induction of Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickrematunge.

The appointment of Wickrematunge raised concern among some analysts about the prospects for a ceasefire in place since 2002 with separatist Tamil rebels.

The ethnic war has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

There was no official explanation of why the JVP and the JHU were kept out of cabinet, but a senior minister who declined to be named said there were differences with the JVP on the appointments.

The all-monks party had previously said they may not take up cabinet posts but would support Rajapakse in parliament.

Kumaratunga's brother Anura Bandaranaike, who was earlier tipped to be the prime minister, was appointed tourism minister. His deputy will be Sri Lanka's world cup-winning cricket skipper Arjuna Ranatunga.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lanka's newly elected Mass Media Minister Anura Priyadarshana Yapa (L) is sworn in by President Mahinda Rajapakse at a ceremony in Colombo, yesterday.

## Jazeera urges probe into Bush bomb plot report

AFP, Doha

The Arab satellite channel Al-Jazeera has urged the White House and Downing Street to challenge a British newspaper report that US President George W Bush had planned to bomb the Qatar-based station.

"We sincerely urge both the White House and Downing Street to challenge the Daily Mirror report," the Qatar-based network said in a statement on Tuesday.

The British tabloid, citing a Downing Street memo marked "Top Secret", reported on Tuesday that British Prime Minister Tony Blair had talked Bush out of launching a military strike on the station.

"Before making any conclusions, Al-Jazeera needs to be absolutely sure regarding the authenticity of the memo and would hope for a confirmation from Downing Street as soon as possible," it said.

If the report is correct then this would be both shocking and worrisome not only to Al-Jazeera but to media organisations across the world.

"It would cast serious doubts in regard to the US administration's version of previous incidents involving Al-Jazeera's journalists and offices," the news channel said.

The television station's coverage of the war in Iraq has drawn criticism from Washington since the invasion.

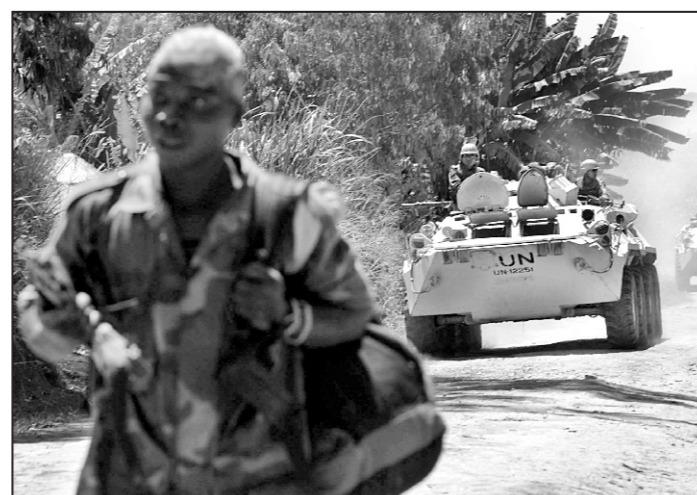


PHOTO: AFP

A Congolese soldier walks alongside United Nations vehicles of the Bangladeshi Battalion on 19 November 2005, near Aviba, 75km south of Bunia, Ituri. Fifty-seven rebels have been killed in Democratic Republic of Congo's northeastern Ituri region during a three-day offensive by government troops backed by UN peacekeepers, the army said on Tuesday.