

US, Europe plan tougher action against Iran

Gulf Arab leaders talk tough against Tehran, Damascus

REUTERS, Washington/Abu Dhabi

Faced with an increasingly hard line from Iran, the United States and Europe have stepped up planning for tougher diplomatic action should Tehran follow through on threats to resume critical nuclear activities, according to US officials and European diplomats.

The US and its European allies are seeking agreement among themselves on precisely when Iran's nuclear programme will have progressed to the point that the matter should be taken to the UN Security Council and what kinds of sanctions might be pursued there, the officials said.

Tehran insists it only aims to

produce civilian nuclear energy. Allies say the programme is to produce weapons.

Russia, which is building Iran's nuclear power plant at Bushehr in southern Iran, remains a serious impediment. The United States fears that weapons-grade plutonium could be extracted from the Bushehr reactor once it goes online.

The United States and major European nations -- Britain, France and Germany -- have long threatened to bring the issue to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

But negotiations appear at an impasse and new Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has alarmed the world with aggressive

calls for Israel to be "wiped off the map."

Under the nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which Iran signed, member states are guaranteed the right to develop a full nuclear fuel cycle but are banned from making weapons.

The Bush administration is under growing pressure from Congress and pro-Israel groups to soften its stance toward Tehran. They want the nuclear issue referred to the UN Security Council, where sanctions could be imposed.

US Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph, who oversees non-proliferation issues, was in Europe this week for meetings that included discussions on Iran.

US and European experts are to meet Iran next week to see if negotiations can resume, but the outlook is pessimistic.

Meanwhile, US-allied Gulf Arab leaders, alarmed at neighbouring Iran's nuclear ambitions, will examine proposals for a nuclear-free zone in the world's top oil-producing region when they meet for a summit yesterday.

Syria's standoff with the United Nations over the killing of former Lebanese premier Rafik al-Hariri will also top the agenda of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which groups Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar.

EDUCATION PLANS Deputy deals a serious blow to Blair

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was dealt a blow by his normally loyal deputy yesterday over his flagship education plans, which could fuel the dissent in his governing Labour Party.

Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott went public with deep reservations about one of Blair's key reform proposals in an interview with the Sunday Telegraph newspaper.

The blow was all the more significant as party heavyweight Prescott has been a staunch Blair loyalist. His comments could strengthen rebels planning a damaging defeat for Blair when the proposals come to a vote in February.

"I'm not totally convinced major reform is necessary," Prescott said of the plans to create elite city academies and allow successful schools more freedom to run themselves.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian relative Meena (C) mourns the death of her husband outside the mortuary at the G.H.Hospital in Chennai yesterday. At least 45 people, mostly women, were killed and more than 50 injured in a stampede for food coupons at a flood relief camp in the southern Indian city of Chennai, police said.

String of attacks kill 19 people in Iraq

Cheney pays surprise visit

AP, AFP, Baghdad

President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari.

Gunmen killed two relatives of a senior Kurdish official and 17 others died in a string of attacks overnight and yesterday, piercing three days of relative calm that followed the country's first election for a full-term parliament.

US Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the main architects of the invasion to oust Saddam Hussein, paid a surprise visit yesterday to Iraq, three days after the parliamentary election there, his office said.

Cheney's visit, his first to Iraq since the fall of Saddam's regime, included a meeting with Iraqi

of the two main Kurdish parties, were shot late Saturday as they walked near their house, police said. They were identified as Dhiab Hamad al-Hamdani and his son the uncle and nephew of party official Khod Hassan al-Hamdani. The PUK is led by President Jalal Talabani.

In Baghdad on Sunday, a roadside bomb killed three police officers and wounded two. A similar attack on Saturday night killed one policeman and wounded two in the northern town of Tuz, 68 miles south of Kirkuk, police said.

Israel renews calls for polls bar on Hamas

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday renewed its campaign for Hamas to be barred from running in next month's Palestinian parliamentary polls after the radical Islamist group's strong showing in last week's local elections.

Ron Prosor, director general of the foreign ministry, urged the European Union to follow the example of the US House of Representatives which passed a resolution on Friday that Hamas should not be permitted to participate in Palestinian polls until it recognises the Jewish state's right to exist.

"We hope that the countries of the European Union will follow the example set by the House of Representatives with regards to Hamas, and have made contacts to this effect," Prosor told public radio.

"Whoever advocates the destruction of the state of Israel should not be allowed to participate in the political process."

Having boycotted the last and to date only parliamentary elections a decade ago, Hamas is fielding candidates at the polls in the West Bank and Gaza Strip on January 25.

Israeli calls for Hamas to be barred from the process had been muted since it became apparent that the United States, which includes Hamas on its list of terrorist organisations, was holding off from making such a demand to the moderate Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

However the resolution in Congress and the strong showing of Hamas in local elections last week, when it won control of three of the main West Bank cities, has added new impetus to the campaign.

Prosor said that EU countries should cut back on aid to the Palestinian Authority if Hamas, which has been behind the majority of anti-Israeli attacks over the past five years, were to join the democratic process.

Pakistani dam proposal meets fierce opposition

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is trying to rally support for the construction of a controversial dam he says is vital for long-term prosperity but even some of his staunchest allies are vehemently opposed.

Water has long been a sensitive and divisive issue in drought-prone Pakistan and Musharraf is facing opposition from downstream of the proposed dam on the Indus River, where people fear it will rob them of their fair share of water.

The dispute over the Kalabagh dam has produced rare cracks in Musharraf's ruling coalition but the president is determined to muster support to begin construction.

"Dams are very crucial for the economic development of the country. We are trying to build national understanding on this," Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed told Reuters over the weekend.

Lankan peace hopes dim amid fresh row

AFP, Colombo

Hopes for a revival of Sri Lanka's peace process dimmed after Tamil Tiger rebels rejected a government offer to hold ice-breaking talks at an Asian venue hosted by Japan, diplomats said yesterday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Saturday rejected a government offer to end an impasse over a venue for talks on a fragile ceasefire in place since 2002 by agreeing to an Asian location.

Colombo had earlier insisted that any talks with the Tigers must be held on the island, but last week told Japan's peace envoy Yasushi Akashi that it was amenable to an Asian venue. The suggestion prompted Akashi to offer Japan as a venue.

But the LTTE rejected the offer saying it wanted to continue with a Norwegian-sponsored talks format that the new government of President Mahinda Rajapakse had pledged to review.

"There is no change in our position with regard to the venue for talks and

we stand by the Norwegian facilitator's original suggestion that the talks on effective implementation of the ceasefire take place in Oslo," the LTTE's political leader S.P. Thamil Selvan said on the group's official website.

There was no formal government reaction to the LTTE's rejection of an Asian venue and insistence on Oslo for the proposed talks.

Asian diplomats said the latest stance of the Tigers was a setback to hopes of the current peace broker Norway as well as Sri Lanka's key backers that talks to shore up the ceasefire could begin early next month.

Diplomats said the Tiger statement was also a snub to Akashi who last week publicly offered to host the talks in Japan after Colombo told him that it was climbing down from its earlier stance and agreed to negotiations in Asia.

The rejection comes ahead of a meeting by a quartet known as the "co-chairs" that have pledged financial support for peace building in Sri Lanka -- Japan, the European

Union, the US and Norway.

They are due to meet in Brussels Monday to review Sri Lanka's faltering peace talks, which broke down in 2003 on LTTE demands for autonomy in the northeast which is largely controlled by the rebels.

"The co-chairs were keen that the talks begin as soon as possible particularly in view of the deteriorating security situation in the northeast," a Western diplomat involved in the peace effort, who declined to be named, said.

At least 35 people, including 18 government soldiers and two policemen, have been killed in the northeast of the island nation this month alone in bloodshed linked to a separatist ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

The Western diplomat said there was growing concern that mediation efforts on the ceasefire were stalled completely as several governments have said continued violence has heightened the possibility of a return to war.

Bush defends secret spying in the US

AP, Washington

news media had endangered Americans.

Bush's willingness to publicly acknowledge a highly classified spying programme was a stunning development for a president known to dislike disclosure of even the most mundane inner workings of his White House. Just a day earlier he had refused to talk about it.

Bush said congressional leaders had been briefed on the operation more than a dozen times. That included Democrats as well as Republicans in the House and Senate, a GOP lawmaker said.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said she had been told on several occasions that Bush had authorized unspecified activities by the National Security Agency, the nation's largest spy agency.

She said she had expressed strong concerns at the time, and that Bush's statement Saturday "raises serious questions as to what the activities were and whether the activities were lawful."

Often appearing angry in an eight-minute address, the president made clear he has no intention of halting his authorizations of the monitoring activities and said public disclosure of the programme by

news media had endangered Americans.

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Since October 2001, the super-secret National Security Agency has eavesdropped on the international phone calls and e-mails of people inside the United States without court-approved warrants. Bush said steps like these would help fight terrorists like those who were involved in the Sept. 11 plot.

"The activities I have authorised make it more likely that killers like those 9/11 hijackers will be identified and located in time," Bush said. "And the activities conducted under this authorisation have helped detect and prevent possible terrorist attacks in the United States and abroad."

News of the programme came at a particularly damaging and delicate time.



PHOTO: AFP
Anti-racism protesters display the Australian national flag during the Community Harmony rally through the streets of Sydney yesterday. Thousands of demonstrators from Sydney's numerous ethnic communities marched to show their solidarity after race riots erupted on Sydney's beaches on December 11.