

Iraq, Iran fuming over Mubarak 'civil war' comments

AFP, Cairo

Iraq and its powerful neighbour Iran were fuming yesterday over comments by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a major broker in Middle East politics, about Iraqi civil war and Shias' allegiance to Tehran. In an interview first aired Saturday by the Dubai-based Al-Arabiya news channel, Mubarak warned that Iraq was in the midst of a civil war that threatened the Middle East.

He also expressed alarm about Shia Iran's influence in Arab countries.

"There are Shias in all these countries (of the region), significant percentages, and Shias are mostly always loyal to Iran and not the countries where they live," he said.

"Naturally, Iran has an influence over Shias who make up 65 percent of Iraq's population," added the 77-year-old Mubarak, who has ruled Sunni-dominated Egypt for a quarter of a century.

Ibrahim Jaafari, Iraq's incumbent premier and a devout Shia, unequivocally condemned Mubarak's remarks.

"The comments have upset Iraqi people who come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds and have astonished and discontenented the Iraqi government," he told reporters Sunday.

As Jaafari spoke, he was flanked by President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, and Adnan al-Pachachi, a Sunni and the parliament's acting speaker. Jaafari's government has come under repeated accusations of collusion with Tehran from Sunni Arab factions in Iraq.

Egypt had been one of the main driving forces behind an attempt at uniting Iraqi ranks by sponsoring a national reconciliation conference, still due to take place in the near future.

Expressing his anguish at Mubarak's statements, Talabani said these "accusations against our Shia brothers are baseless and we have asked our foreign minister to talk to Egypt about this."

Iran, with its 90 percent Shia Muslim population, many of whom make frequent pilgrimages to the shrines of revered Shia imams in Iraq, did not take kindly to Mubarak's comments.

"It is evident that the Islamic republic of Iran is only interested in seeking security and stability in Iraq and the region," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters in Tehran.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli security men prevent Palestinian people from entering their homes after they were evicted by radical Jewish settlers yesterday in the Atur neighbourhood in the Mount of Olives, east of Jerusalem. Similar transfers of property are occurring throughout east Jerusalem, occupied and then annexed by Israel in 1967.

Hamas wing vows to avenge Israeli raids

Tel Aviv tries to sell 'unilateral plan' to US

AFP, Gaza City/ Washington

The armed wing of the governing Palestinian movement Hamas, under huge international pressure to renounce violence, vowed yesterday to avenge a weekend of Israeli strikes which has left 15 people dead.

The latest victim was a 29-year-old taxi driver, Yasser Abu Jarad, killed by a tank shell by a national security post in the Beit Hanun region of the northern Gaza Strip as he dropped off members of a military unit.

A total of 21 other people were also wounded in shelling in the north, including 10 when a house in Jabaliya was hit, which came as part of efforts by the Israeli army to put a halt to the firing of rockets into southern Israel.

A series of air strikes on the Gaza Strip Friday night and Saturday left 14 people dead, making it much the deadliest bout of violence since Hamas's upset victory in a January election and subsequent formation of its first government last month.

The Islamist movement has carried out the bulk of the suicide attacks against Israel since the

Palestinian uprising erupted in September 2000.

Although it has held off any such attacks for more than a year, Hamas has so far resisted international pressure to commit itself to non-violence and recognise Israel's right to exist.

The United States and European Union announced over the weekend that they were either cutting or suspending direct aid payments to the already cash-strapped Palestinian Authority now that it is led by Hamas in the absence of a change in its hardline platform.

However the prospects of a Hamas u-turn looked particularly dim Sunday after its armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, vowed to avenge the Israeli attacks.

"The Zionist enemy will pay a high price and will drink from the same cup from which our people drink day and night," it said in a statement.

Hamas's interior minister Said Siam urged all the armed factions to exercise caution, telling them to steer clear of training camps after one such base was bombed. "It is clear that the camps are targets of the occupation forces," said Siam.

The statement by the Hamas armed wing also backed its political masters' refusal to buckle to pressure from the West on the financial front.

"We confirm our whole-hearted support for the elected Palestinian government which has been under pressure and has had obstacles placed in its way," it said.

Meanwhile, interim Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said yesterday he believed "the time is right" for a unilateral settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as he began selling to Americans his plan that would leave parts of the West Bank under permanent Israeli control.

The comment came as the United States and Europe stepped up pressure on the Hamas-led Palestinian government, urging it to renounce violence, recognise the Jewish state as well as previous Israeli-Palestinian accords as the basis for future diplomatic efforts.

The allies on Friday froze millions of dollars in direct financial aid to the Palestinian Authority because Hamas refused to change its hard-line approach to Israel.

US assault kills 8 Iraqi insurgents

AFP, Baghdad

US forces killed eight suspected insurgents in a raid west of Baghdad yesterday, while seven Iraqis, including a soldier, were killed in shootings and bombings.

US forces stormed an insurgent bomb-making facility early Sunday morning near Hamaniyah, 22km west of Baghdad, the military said in a statement.

Five suspected rebels were killed in an ensuing firefight, while three more suspected insurgents were killed when the US ground commander called in "air support" to target their machine-gun fire, the statement read.

Numerous weapons, ammunition, and falsified documents were found in the targeted safehouse, it added.

In other violence, a civilian was killed and six others wounded when a minibus packed with explosives blew up near Mustansriyah University in eastern Baghdad, police said.

One Iraqi bystander was killed Sunday and three wounded, including two policemen, when a roadside bomb exploded as a police patrol passed by in eastern Baghdad, an interior ministry official said.

A civilian was killed in a similar roadside blast against a police patrol in western Baghdad, which also left two policemen wounded.

IRAN SAYS US military strike talk 'psychological warfare'

AFP, Tehran

Iran branded as "psychological warfare" yesterday media reports that the US military was planning air strikes to force Tehran to abandon its controversial nuclear program.

"We regard that (planning for air strikes) as psychological warfare stemming from America's anger and helplessness," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

Two US publications reported over the weekend that the White House is studying options for military strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities, with one even suggesting the use of an atomic weapon had been proposed.

The administration of US President George W. Bush, which accuses Tehran of seeking to manufacture a nuclear bomb, has repeatedly said it is keeping all options open even though it supports efforts for a diplomatic solution.

However British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, whose country was the key US ally in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, dismissed any idea of military action against Tehran.

He told BBC television that the international community was right to view the Islamic republic's nuclear program with "high suspicion" but "there is no smoking gun, there is no 'casus belli' (justification for war)".

"We can't be certain about Iran's intentions and that is therefore not a basis for which anybody would gain

authority to go to military action," he said.

Citing unnamed US officials and independent analysts, the Washington Post said no attack appears likely in the short term, but officials are preparing for it as a possible option and using the threat to convince Iranians of the seriousness of their intentions.

Pentagon and CIA planners have been exploring possible targets, such as Iran's underground uranium enrichment facility at Natanz and its uranium conversion plant at Isfahan, both located in central Iran, the report said.

In its April 17 edition, the New Yorker magazine said the US government is planning a massive bombing campaign against Iran, including the use of bunker-buster nuclear bombs to destroy suspected facilities like Natanz.

"The Americans are not seeking a solution for the Iranian nuclear file and are seeking to make crisis. They do not want us to reach an agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Europeans," Asefi said.

The spokesman warned that Iran "will not give up its nuclear rights," adding that "activities of research on uranium enrichment are continuing normally" in Natanz.

Interpol issues tough notice on Dawood

REUTERS, New Delhi

Interpol has issued a special notice against India's most wanted criminal sought for the 1993 serial bomb blasts in Mumbai that killed more than 260 people, the international police agency's Web site showed.

The notice sent to all 184 member countries places the Indian crime boss, Dawood Ibrahim, on the same list as al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden and seeks freezing of his assets, ban on travel and an arms embargo.

The notice on www.interpol.int also gave two of his possible addresses in Pakistan, which seemingly backs India's long-standing charge that Ibrahim is hiding in the Pakistani port city of Karachi.

Islamabad denies he is in Pakistan.

US Misra, Interpol's vice-president for Asia and former chief of India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), said the notice issued last week would create pressure on Pakistan.

"All member countries, including Pakistan, will have to give priority in tracing him as per the UN Security Council guidelines," Misra was quoted as saying in The Times of India.

"It's a kind of notice issued against terrorists associated with the al-Qaeda organisation."

CBI officials could not be contacted for comment.

The tough new notice gives details of Ibrahim's 11 passports issued in India, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen, 17 aliases and also the countries from which he is known to operate.

26 women killed in Pak stampede

AFP, Karachi

At least 26 women and children were killed and 19 injured in a stampede at a religious gathering in the southern Pakistani city of Karachi yesterday, police and hospitals said.

City police chief Niaz Siddiqui said some 50,000 women and children had gathered for a ceremony to commemorate the birth anniversary of the Prophet Mohammad.

The stampede was triggered when a girl fell while the women were leaving the Sunni Muslim Faizan-e-Madina mosque in the city's eastern district, he said.

"The latest death toll is 26," Siddiqui told AFP. He said seven bodies were

brought to the city's Jinnah Hospital and another 19 to the Liaquat National Hospital. The dead were 20 women, four girls and two boys.

Siddiqui said seven of the 19 women admitted to hospital are in critical condition.

The victims were mostly aged women, said doctor Seemi Jamal at Jinnah Hospital. Several women were unconscious, she added.

"I saw a large number of women coming out of a small gate just after the annual women's congregation ended," said Mohammad Altaf, brother of an injured woman.

"Several women were crushed by the crowd coming out of the hall."

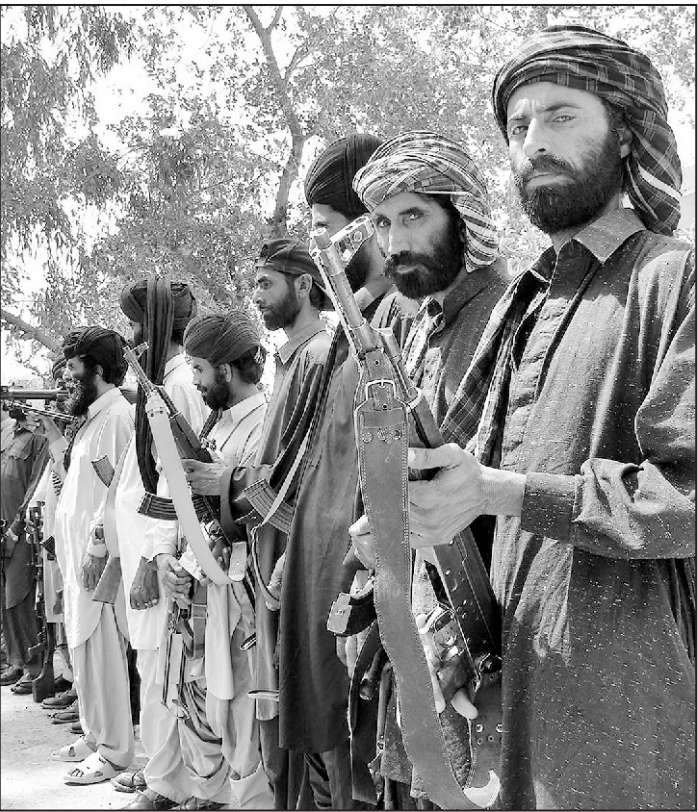


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani rebels line up with their arms after surrendering to the authorities in the town of Sui Saturday. A group of about 40 rebels surrendered to authorities in Pakistan's restive southwestern province of Baluchistan.

US immigration reform trumped by election year politics: Experts

AFP, Washington

Immigration reform has fell victim to election-year politics, lawmakers and experts said, as a bill that would allow millions of undocumented workers to normalise their status floundered in the US Senate.

"Politics got ahead of policy on this," lamented Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, a key proponent of a compromise Senate bill.

"It's not going forward because there's a political advantage for Democrats not to have an immigration bill," added Republican Senator Arlen Specter.

The senators spoke after their colleagues failed Friday to approve a compromise immigration bill brokered by Republican and Democratic Party leaders, indefinitely delaying any attempt to plug the porous US borders or address the status of nearly 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States.

With lawmakers headed out on a

two-week break, it was not clear when they would resume the debate, which has deeply divided Republicans controlling the Senate.

Democrats appeared to be watching the clock ahead of the recess, and announced they had blocked debate on hundreds of amendments to the bill for fear they would drastically alter it.

Republicans and US President George W. Bush were swift to lay blame with the Democrats.

"Unfortunately the Senate minority leader prevented voices from being heard and amendments from being considered. He is preventing comprehensive immigration reform from moving forward," White House spokesman Scott McClellan accused.

But political scientists consulted by AFP applauded Democrats for taking advantage of deep divisions within the Republican majority in an election year.