

Iranian official in Washington

AFP, Washington

The US State Department confirmed Monday a senior official from arch-US nemesis Iran was in Washington but would not say how he got into the country or what he was doing here.

Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Mohammad Nahavandian was in town but added, "He's not here for meetings with US government officials to my knowledge; certainly not with members of the State Department."

McCormack said Nahavandian had not been issued a visa but was in the United States legally. He did not elaborate but said only, "There are a variety of other ways for an individual to arrive in the country."

The Washington foray by Nahavandian, described as an economic aide to Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani, was first reported 10 days ago by Britain's Financial Times newspaper.



Nepalese commuters and their vehicles form a queue and inch towards a petrol station in Kathmandu yesterday. The crippling effects of a nationwide strike in Nepal eased slightly with a few more shops opening on the thirteenth day of a mass pro-democracy movement against King Gyanendra.

PHOTO: AFP

Nepali protests reaching a climax: Diplomats

Unrest 'spinning out of control', says Indian envoy

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Anti-monarchy protests persisted in the Nepali capital Kathmandu yesterday despite bad weather as diplomats said the movement against King Gyanendra appeared to be reaching a climax.

It was the 13th day of a general strike and protest campaign launched by a seven-party political alliance, which wants the king to restore multi-party democracy.

Hundreds of people gathered in various parts of the capital and attempted to start a procession, but were prevented by police. No one was injured.

At least five people have been killed and hundreds wounded in police action against protesters

during the campaign, which has brought the impoverished nation to a standstill.

Diplomats said time appeared to be running out for the monarch.

"We could see him toppled if he doesn't do something in the next few weeks or days," said one. "I am very afraid we are moving into a revolutionary situation."

The king held talks with the US, Chinese and Indian ambassadors on Sunday, and indicated he could meet some of the protesters' demands. But diplomats said they knew of no specifics.

"He has to hand over power to the political parties," the diplomat said. "And if he does not, it's not looking good."

In another sign of mounting

pressure, New Delhi said Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was sending a special envoy to Kathmandu on Wednesday.

India's newly-appointed special envoy to Nepal warned yesterday that civil unrest against the monarchy was "spinning out of control" in the Himalayan nation and called for the resumption of talks with political parties.

"We do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of any other country but the situation in Nepal seems to be spinning out of control," said senior diplomat Karan Singh, who was appointed Tuesday and is set to visit Nepal Wednesday.

Karan Singh, a member of parliament and a former ambassador to the United States, was expected to

have an audience with King Gyanendra, an Indian Foreign Ministry statement said.

"He is also expected to meet political party leaders in Nepal," it added.

Giant neighbour India has been deeply concerned by the turmoil in Nepal and Singh was expected to strongly urge the king to immediately start talks with the political parties to defuse the crisis, a Foreign Ministry official said.

The president of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Haruhiko Kuroda, urged the international community to remain engaged with Nepal and said it would be premature for donors to consider any suspension of aid to the impoverished kingdom.

Israel signals tough response to attack

Hamas blamed for bombing

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel placed full blame on Hamas yesterday for the first suicide bombing inside the country since the Islamists shot to power, and ordered the military to step up pressure on the Palestinians.

Monday's attack by a 21-year-old militant from the Islamic Jihad faction, which killed nine other people at a crowded food stand in Tel Aviv, failed to elicit condemna-

tion from its larger rival, hardline Islamists Hamas.

The organisation, branded a terrorist enterprise in the West, has snubbed massive international pressure to renounce violence and recognise Israel, seeing the EU and US halt direct aid to the cash-starved Palestinian Authority.

But the Israeli government, which has already slapped economic sanctions and travel embargoes on the Hamas government,

united to blame its chief Palestinian enemy for the deadliest bombing in 20 months.

Government spokesman Ranaan Gissin raked Hamas over the coals for "the fact that they allow other terrorist organisations to carry out these horrendous terrorist attacks".

"We are in a war and we are taking all the necessary steps to defend ourselves like US troops are doing in Iraq," he said.

Norwegian mediator 'frustrated' by Lankan parties

AFP, Oslo

The main mediator in the Sri Lankan conflict, Erik Solheim of Norway, said yesterday he was frustrated by the government's and Tamil rebels' lack of flexibility, which he said was endangering talks aimed at saving a shaky truce.

"I have to admit that we've become a bit frustrated these past few days over the fact that the two parties are using so much time making demands on issues that seem like very tiny details and that they are so inflexible," he told Norwegian public broadcaster NRK.

In the space of one week, 64 people have been killed in attacks in northeastern Sri Lanka claimed by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who are fighting for autonomy in the region.

On Sunday the rebels said they were suspending their participation in talks set to take place in Switzerland next week on saving the truce that has been place since February 2002.

In a letter to Norway, the LTTE said they would not attend the talks in Switzerland until Colombo removed "restrictions" on their cadres.

INDIA SAYS

Training camps for rebels flourishing in Pakistan

AFP, Srinagar

Camps for training Kashmiri militants to fight Indian troops in Kashmir are "flourishing" in Pakistan, a senior Indian politician said yesterday.

"It is unfortunate, but it is true, that across the border the camps are flourishing," home secretary V.K. Duggal said.

Speaking to reporters in the Indian Kashmir summer capital of Srinagar, Duggal said New Delhi knew how many militants were being trained and how many were likely to infiltrate Indian territory.

"But we are also ready to take that challenge and meet them effectively as we have done in the last few years," he said.

Pakistan, which also controls part of Kashmir, denies arming or training militants and Islamabad has said it is trying to prevent armed men crossing the de facto border dividing the region between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

The insurgency, which began in 1989 has cost more than 44,000 lives.

Infiltration of militants into Indian Kashmir usually picks up during summer when snows in the

Himalayan passes start to melt.

Pakistan and India have been engaged in a slow-moving peace process since January 2004. Contact between politicians and traders has picked up, and while the Kashmir dispute has yet to be addressed, the Indian military acknowledges that violence has gradually declined in the region since the talks began.

Duggal spent the day in Kashmir to review the internal security situation following a series of bombings in Srinagar last Friday that killed five people and injured 43.

Pakistan blocks part of its Afghan border

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has sealed a section of its western border with Afghanistan to stop militants fleeing a US-led offensive on the Afghan side from sneaking into the country, the military said yesterday.

US and Afghan government troops launched an air and ground assault, code named Operation Mountain Lion, last week to clear militants from the eastern province

of Kunar, bordering Pakistan.

Military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan said Pakistan had deployed troops in its tribal areas, opposite Afghanistan's Kunar and neighbouring Nangarhar provinces, to stop militants infiltrating into Pakistan.

"We do block certain routes whenever an operation is carried out on the other side of the border to prevent terrorists from crossing the border," Sultan said.

Bus crash kills 63 in Mexico

AFP, Veracruz

At least 63 people died Monday after a bus they were riding veered off a mountain road in central Mexico and fell down a ravine, authorities said.

"We have 63 people confirmed dead," Ranulfo Marquez, head of regional rescue services, told W Radio. "Three (men) survived, they are in critical condition."

Marquez called the accident among the worst along this stretch of roadway, considered one of the most notorious in Mexico for its treacherous curves and steep ravines.

US pressuring Russia to drop weapons sale to Iran

AFP, Moscow/ Tehran

Russia is coming under US pressure to cancel a contract to deliver Tor-M1 mobile air defence systems to Iran due to concerns about Tehran's nuclear programme, a respected business daily reported yesterday.

"Observers say that under pressure from the United States, Russia could cancel this deal and are already saying that it has been suspended," the Vedomosti daily said.

The newspaper cited a political analyst close to the Kremlin, Sergei Markov, as saying that delivery of the air defence systems had been delayed until the autumn out of consideration for US worries.

But the paper also referred to a source close to Russia's arms export agency, Rosoboronexport, as saying that the delay in fulfilling the order -- originally signed last November -- was due to the need to train personnel.

"The deal with Iran could only be broken in the event of the purchaser failing to pay. Cancellation of the

contract under pressure from the United States would damage Russia's reputation as an arms exporter," the paper quoted an analyst, Konstantin Makiyenko of the Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, as saying.

Under the contract, signed in November, Iran is to pay more than 700 million dollars for 29 of the sophisticated short-range air defence systems, Russian defence sources said earlier.

Russia is a key ally of Iran's and has been building Iran's first nuclear power station at Bushehr, in the south of the country.

Washington suspects that Iran's stated aim of developing civilian nuclear power is a front for developing nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad vowed yesterday that Iran would "cut off the hand of any aggressor", as the Islamic republic's army put on a show of strength in their annual military parade.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (C) attends a military parade outside the mausoleum of the late founder of Islamic republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, during the Army Day memorial yesterday. Iran's armed forces must be ready and to "cut off the hand of any aggressor", the hardline president said in a speech to mark the National Army Day.

Thailand extends emergency rule in violence-hit south

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's government said yesterday it will extend a state of emergency in southern Thailand as part of measures to combat a Muslim insurgency that has left over 1,000 people dead.

Shortly before the announcement, a 24-year-old man was shot and killed by suspected insurgents on his way to work at a factory in Yala province, part of the region covered by the state of emergency. The man, identified as Suebsak Chansupha, was shot by a man riding on the back seat of a motorcycle, said local police Lt. Suwat Chanchao.

The state of emergency, due to expire Thursday, was first imposed in Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat provinces in July and extended at three-month intervals. It allows the government to impose curfews, prohibit public gatherings, censor and ban publications, detain suspects without charge, confiscate property and tap telephones.

It also makes officials immune from "civil, criminal and disciplinary penalties" while carrying out acts including killing civilians under its provisions.