

US, Europe push for strong UN action against Iran

Russia, China won't back sanctions, claims Tehran

AFP, REUTERS, Geneva/ Tehran

US and European officials pushed Tuesday for a tough, binding UN resolution against Iran ahead of key talks here on Tehran's nuclear programme, which the West fears could be hiding a drive for the atom bomb.

"The Security Council has no option but to proceed with the Chapter 7," US State Department number three Nicholas Burns said, referring to an article in the UN charter that could lead to sanctions or even military action.

The talks in Paris were to take place late Tuesday involving top political directors of the five permanent UN Security Council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany.

It is designed to lay the groundwork for a meeting of foreign ministers of the world body in New York next Tuesday. The international standoff over

Iran's nuclear ambitions worsened when it failed to comply with a UN deadline last Friday to suspend uranium enrichment, which makes the fuel for civilian reactors but what can also be the explosive core of bombs.

A French foreign ministry spokesman confirmed that the EU three, which had held months of ultimately fruitless negotiations with Iran, backed a resolution that would give "binding force" to the international community's demands.

But while the Western countries put out a hard line, reflecting their fear that Iran is working toward building a nuclear arsenal, Russia and China have signalled opposition and are seeking a more diplomatic approach.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki expressed confidence that those two veto-wielding countries, which are important trading partners, would block a resolution with

UN sanctions.

"There is a very wrong assumption held by some that the West can do anything it wants through the Security Council," he told the hardline Tehran daily Kayhan.

Mottaki insisted there was no question, "absolutely not," of Iran returning to a freeze of its uranium enrichment work.

Also Tuesday, the head of the country's Atomic Energy Organisation, Gholam Reza Aghazadeh, told the ISNA student news agency that Iran had succeeded in enriching uranium to a higher level of purity than previously achieved.

But he said the grade reached -- 4.8 percent purity -- would not be exceeded because "this level suffices for making nuclear fuel".

The clerical regime has insisted its nuclear activities are exclusively for developing atomic energy.

Purity of more than 90 percent is required to produce the fissile core of

an atom bomb -- a weapon Western intelligence assessments say Iran is at least seven years from being able to build.

With a UN consensus on how to tackle the sensitive issue far from assured, several US media have speculated Washington might decide to launch airstrikes on Iranian nuclear targets without UN permission.

US President George W. Bush has declined to exclude the military option and the New Yorker magazine said the use of small nuclear bunker-busters bombs was being considered.

Burns, the US Under Secretary for Political Affairs, said in his briefing with reporters in Paris that "the United States is not taking options off the table".

"We have not lost hope in diplomacy... (but) we are not going to accept a nuclear weapons future" for Iran, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Camelia Granados Mojica (2nd L) walks with her three-year-old sons Adan (bottom R) and twelve-year-old Daniel (C) as they join thousand of others in a march in downtown Orlando in Florida on Monday. Camelia who came to the US from Mexico over 10 years ago, works with her family selling produce in the region. Thousands of protesters took to the streets demanding immigration reforms to help millions of illegal workers gain a legal status.



PHOTO: AFP

International performance artiste and magician David Blaine talks to fans from his glass sphere filled with water Monday at Lincoln Centre in New York where he will spend seven days and nights underwater.

Illusionist Blaine starts new breathtaking stunt

AFP, New York

Illusionist David Blaine on Monday started his latest stunt -- living in a water-filled tank for a week before attempting the world record for holding his breath.

The 33-year-old American lowered himself into an eight-foot (2.5-meter) high water-filled acrylic sphere in the plaza of the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, where he will remain submerged for seven days.

"My only fear is the unknown," said Blaine before descending into the transparent sphere in front of several hundred people. He admitted that the world would see something "pretty insane" if his plan goes wrong.

A mask and air line will keep Blaine alive, while food will be provided in the form of liquid nutrition through a tube.

US, Iraqi forces kill 100 insurgents

Iraq, Afghanistan on 'failed states' index

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad/ Washington

US and Iraqi forces killed more than 100 insurgents last week in the town of Ramadi in the rebel heartland of Anbar province, the US military said yesterday.

Two Iraqi soldiers died in the fighting and no Americans were killed, the military said in a written response, confirming a media report. It did not provide more details.

Reuters witnesses in Ramadi, 115km west of Baghdad, said there were heavy clashes last week between US forces and insurgents inside Ramadi but could not independently confirm such a high number of insurgents killed.

Ramadi is a stronghold of Sunni

Arab insurgents fighting US and Iraqi forces and the Shia and Kurdish-led government in Baghdad.

Despite large-scale US support, Iraq and Afghanistan rank among the world's 10 most vulnerable states, according to a private survey being released yesterday.

In its second annual "failed states" index, Foreign Policy magazine and the Fund for Peace concluded that Sudan is the country under the most severe stress because of violent internal conflict.

Eleven of the 20 most vulnerable countries of the 148 examined in the survey are in Africa. The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Ivory Coast, both chronically volatile in recent years, ranked second and third.

5 killed in sectarian riots in Gujarat

AFP, Vadodara

The death toll from sectarian riots in the western Indian state of Gujarat climbed to five yesterday when one person died of injuries suffered in clashes over the demolition of a Muslim shrine, police said.

"The death toll has gone to five today (Tuesday) as another person died," said Deepak Swarup, police chief of Vadodara (formerly known as Baroda) in Gujarat.

Police said it was not clear whether the fifth victim was injured by police firing on Monday when clashes erupted after authorities demolished a small Muslim shrine, saying it was constructed on government land.

Four people died on Monday. Two were killed in police firing while two others were stabbed in clashes.

New Nepal PM names 7-member cabinet

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's new Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala named a seven-member multiparty cabinet yesterday with the task of negotiating peace with Maoist rebels and curbing the king's powers.

King Gyanendra, who bowed to bloody street protests last week and handed power back to political parties, appointed the cabinet on Koirala's recommendation, a statement from the palace said.

"We believe this council of ministers will receive the cooperation of all in the discharge of its duty for the welfare and prosperity of Nepal and the Nepali people," the king said in the statement.

The cabinet formation was delayed amid reports in the local media that members of a seven-party alliance -- which led a mass campaign for democracy -- jostled for positions.

Ram Sharan Mahat, a liberal economist, was named finance minister and Khadga Prasad Oli was appointed deputy prime minister in charge of foreign affairs in the new cabinet.

Koirala, who was sworn in on Sunday, kept the key post of defence and more than a dozen ministries to himself.

Tuesday's announcement came two days after Nepal's parliament unanimously approved a proposal by the new prime minister to hold elections for a special assembly to write a new constitution to decide the future of the monarchy.

No date has been fixed for the vote.

The cabinet, which is an interim arrangement, faces the difficult task of holding talks with the Maoist rebels, win their backing for the election to the assembly and reverse laws introduced by the king to maintain his grip on power.

The king appointed Koirala as prime minister last week on the recommendation of the seven parties that launched weeks of anti-king protests in which at least 15 people were killed and thousands wounded.

The Maoists, who have been pressing for the assembly, have not reacted to parliament's proposal for the vote. But a senior rebel leader called it positive.

"We have taken this positively," Sunil, a rebel leader who goes by one name, told Reuters.

"But it is not complete. There can be a conspiracy against the people," he said without elaborating.

Lanka seeks truce talks despite bloodshed

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka has stepped up moves to revive talks with Tamil Tiger rebels as eight more guerrillas were reported killed yesterday after the bloodiest month since a truce took effect in 2002, officials said.

A breakaway faction of the Tamil Tigers attacked a base of the mainstream guerrillas in the northeastern port district of Trincomalee, killing at least eight, military sources said, citing intercepted rebel radio communication.

There was no immediate word from the rebels but similar clashes on Sunday killed at least 10 members of the Karuna breakaway faction and eight on the main Tiger rebel side, according to the military.

Bombings and attacks over the past month killed at least 200 people but Colombo has been pressing

peacebroker Norway and aid donors to help bring the Tigers to the table, the government's top official handling the peace bid said.

"We are optimistic. I am an optimist," Palitha Kohona told AFP late Monday.

"We hope the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) will come for talks in Switzerland at the earliest. We are awaiting responses to the proposals we have made."

Colombo and the Tigers failed to keep an April 19 date to discuss ways of saving their truce. The Tigers asked for a five-day postponement and later put off the negotiations indefinitely, citing logistical and security concerns.

At the root of the problem is a dispute over transporting Tiger leaders for consultations from the island's east to the north where the main guerrilla leadership is located.