

# Larijani goes to Brussels today for nuke talks

AFP, Brussels

Iran pushed back until today potentially pivotal talks in Brussels on its nuclear standoff despite growing pressure to quickly respond to an international offer to resolve the impasse.

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana had been due Wednesday to explore whether Iran is ready to accept an international package to curb its atomic ambitions.

The offer, which is aimed at breaking the stalemate between Iran and the West, is made up of economic and political incentives in exchange for the Islamic republic suspending uranium enrichment.

Only hours ahead of his expected arrival in Brussels for talks about the package, Larijani sur-

prised Solana by postponing the meeting until next week.

However, the European Union's top diplomat, eager to sound out the Iranian about Tehran's intentions, warned Larijani that a week was too long and managed to convince him on the telephone to bring the meeting forward to Thursday.

"I have just spoken to Dr. Larijani on the phone and we agreed that we will meet tomorrow (Thursday) in Brussels and that we will continue our discussions on Tuesday, 11 of July," Solana said in a statement.

Pressure is building on Tehran to give its first clear response to the package, which Solana delivered in the Iranian capital nearly a month ago.

"I had made clear to the Iranians and to Dr Larijani that we want to proceed rapidly to examine together the ideas I put to him early last

month," he said.

Nearly a month has already passed since Solana first delivered the offer, drawn up by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

It was put together after the United States and its allies struggled to convince China and Russia to boost the powers of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) after Iran defied the UN's nuclear watchdog.

The Islamic republic has been under Western pressure to say by next week whether the package is acceptable. Iranian officials have suggested that no response is likely before August.

Iran maintains that it is developing nuclear technology to generate electricity, but some in the West fear it is trying to covertly make atomic weapons under the guise of a civil-

ian energy programme.

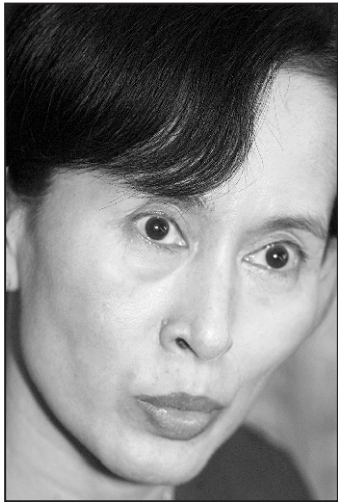
Russian President Vladimir Putin was eager for a response from Tehran as soon as possible in order to be able to announce the start of negotiations before a meeting of the Group of Eight industrial powers in Saint Petersburg next week.

Iran is unlikely to accept being bullied into meeting any deadline.

Larijani was quoted Tuesday as saying that his government might be ready to respond to the offer in early August, while Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has set August 22 as a date.

US President George W. Bush, who refuses to rule out military action, wants a quicker answer.

Under the offer, the six powers affirm Iran's right to develop nuclear energy, support its building of light water reactors and provide for enrichment to take place in Russia.



## Myanmar says release of Suu Kyi 'dangerous'

AFP, Yangon

Military-run Myanmar said Wednesday that freeing democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi would endanger the country and derided as "meaningless" the international outcry demanding her freedom.

In a rare reference to the nation's opposition figurehead, the state press also said her days were "numbered" and that she and her party were heading for a "tragic end".

The 61-year-old Nobel peace laureate has spent 10 of the past 17 years under house arrest at her lakeside residence in central Yangon. The junta extended her detention in May for another year.

"If the restrictions on her are lifted, the release will pose danger to her as well as to the nation," said the official New Light of Myanmar newspaper.

"In fact, for the people of Myanmar, Daw Suu Kyi is just a woman turned alien or a grave danger to the nation," said the junta's mouthpiece.

Following the extension of her house arrest, the United States -- a vocal critic of Myanmar -- said it would pursue an unprecedented UN Security Council resolution calling on the junta to change its repressive policies.

But Myanmar, which has accused Washington of using the United Nations to increase international pressure on the junta, rebuffed global calls demanding Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom.

"The US and liberal groups are making demands for her release. That is, in fact, completely meaningless," the daily said, warning that the democracy icon would remain under house arrest unless she gives up her democracy causes.

## Blair's deputy PM in hot water for meeting US casino tycoon

AFP, London

Britain's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was plunged into fresh controversy after disclosing that he had seven meetings with a US gambling tycoon bidding to set up a super casino in London.

The revelation Tuesday prompted the threat of an investigation by the parliamentary standards watchdog just weeks before Prescott takes over responsibility for running the country while Prime Minister Tony Blair goes on holiday.

Blair's office was forced to declare that the British leader retained "full confidence" in his deputy.

The furore emerged after Prescott wrote to the main opposition Conservatives to confirm that his meetings with Philip Anschutz took place over a three-year period, culminating in a visit to the tycoon's Colorado ranch last July.

But he strongly denied that they had discussed the sale of the Millennium Dome in Greenwich, southeast London -- acquired by the Anschutz Entertainment Group in 2002 -- or the award of casino licences.

"I can categorically confirm that no discussion took place about the sale of the Dome -- indeed contracts had been signed three years earlier -- nor about the awarding of regional casino licences," Prescott said in the letter to Hugo Swire, the Conservative spokesman for culture.

Swire, however, was unimpressed by Prescott's comments, telling BBC radio there was a "bad smell around all this".

He said: "Why on earth did the deputy prime minister, the second most powerful political figure in the land, have seven meetings with somebody who wants to bid for the only slot available for a regional casino?"

Upping the pressure, parliamentary standards commissioner Philip Mawer said he was considering a complaint from Swire that Prescott failed to declare the stay at Anschutz's ranch in the register of interests of members of parliament.

Prescott, second in command to Blair since the Labour Party came to power nine years ago, was mired in controversy in April when he owned up to an extramarital affair with a secretary 24 years his junior.

# Taepodong-2 can hit targets in Alaska, Hawaii

AFP, Seoul

The long-range Taepodong-2 missile at the centre of the North Korean crisis could bring the fringes of the United States into range for the first time, military experts say.

A first test of the Taepodong-2 early Wednesday resulted in failure, with US and South Korean officials saying the missile crashed into the Sea of Japan (East Sea) within a minute of launch.

However, North Korea's missile capability is not underestimated by the United States and its allies.

The South Korean defence ministry says the Taepodong-2 can carry a 1,000 kilogramme warhead up to 6,700 kilometres (4,200 miles), far enough to hit targets in

Alaska and possibly Hawaii.

US and South Korean intelligence sources say the North Koreans are also working on a multi-stage Taepodong-2 which could carry a smaller payload over 10,000 kilometres to hit targets on the west coast of the United States.

Since no successful flight tests of the missile have yet been achieved, and its technical specifications remain mostly secret, predictions of its range remain largely the guesswork of military experts.

The Taepodong-2 is a next generation missile after the two-stage Taepodong-1 missile with a range of 2,000 kilometres that North Korea fired over Japan into the Pacific Ocean in 1998, causing an international furore.



# 'Test-fires aimed at forcing US to hold direct talks'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's first ballistic missile test since 1998 is aimed at forcing the United States to hold direct negotiations with the isolated communist state, analysts said here Wednesday.

They said the launch of six missiles, including a Taepodong long-range model, illustrated North Korea's frustration with the six-nation talks process championed by Washington.

And they warned that Washington would eventually have to deal directly with the unpredictable regime of Kim Jong-Il if it wanted to defuse the rumbling standoff over North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes.

"It wanted to shock the United States, attract US attention and force Washington to change its policy towards Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme and missiles," said Paik Hak-Soon of the private Sejong Institute.

"In the short term, the United States will angrily react to the launch but it will see the only long-term

solution is direct talks with North Korea because it has no effective counter-measures," Paik said.

The administration of US President George W. Bush rejected the previous US government's policy of engagement with North Korea when it took office in 2001, setting the stage for five years of confrontation.

North Korea has since restarted a mothballed nuclear reactor, withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and declared itself a nuclear weapons power before breaking its moratorium on ballistic missile launches.

The United States has sought to deal with North Korea through multilateral talks involving China, Japan, Russia and South Korea. However discussions have been stalled since November.

North Korea agreed in principle to scrap its nuclear weapons programme two months earlier, but it later pulled out of the talks, citing US financial sanctions imposed for money laundering and illegal financial activities.

"The US government has been

trying to mobilize six-party talks participants to put collective pressure on North Korea in the hope that the North will just throw up its hands under this pressure. This assumption already proved to be wrong," Paik said.

The US stance has won support from Japan, but China and South Korea have favoured a softer line. North Korea has skillfully exploited the differences, especially between Seoul and Washington.

"North Korea went ahead with the missile launch to give an impression that it never succumbs to outside pressure," said Baek Seung-Joo, the head of the North Korean team at the Korea Institute for Defence Analysis.

"The stalemate at six-party talks will continue for a considerable time and inter-Korean relations will be affected seriously," he said.

Analysts say North Korea's development of its missile and nuclear programmes is driven by genuine fear of US attack, reinforced by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, as well as diplomatic brinkmanship.

# Israeli planes strike Palestinian interior ministry in Gaza

AFP, Gaza

Israeli planes attacked the Palestinian interior ministry headquarters in the Gaza Strip overnight, causing heavy damage and injuring four people as Israel kept up the pressure over an abducted soldier, Palestinian sources said early Wednesday.

In the West Bank, Israeli troops in 15 jeeps surrounded the building in Ramallah where Palestinian parliamentary speaker Aziz al-Dweik lives, a Palestinian security source said.

A medical source said that four people were injured in the attack on the interior ministry which was also hit by an Israeli air strike last week, which set the building ablaze.

Israeli air force planes also bombed a training camp used by the ruling Hamas Islamist movement in the Gaza Strip's southern Rafah district, the security source added, without giving details. Planes also attacked and damaged a Hamas-run school in the northern Gaza Strip.

An Israeli spokesman in Tel Aviv confirmed to AFP that Israel air force "planes targeted the interior ministry in Gaza and a Hamas position in the southern Gaza Strip."

The military action came hours after Israel accused Hamas of inciting a grave "escalation in terror," after a homemade rocket struck an Israeli school, and vowed more military action to secure the release of captured 19-year-old army corporal Gilad Shalit.

That attack caused no casualties but marked the first time a Qassam rocket had landed inside the town of Ashkelon, signaling an

upgrade in militants' weaponry and sparking fresh words of warning from Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

"This strike on the heart of Ashkelon is a very serious incident which constitutes an escalation of unprecedented gravity in the campaign of terror waged by Hamas, which leads the Palestinian Authority," Olmert said.

Olmert called a meeting of security officials for later Wednesday after having earlier vowed to continue an offensive aimed at freeing the captive conscript.

Following the expiry of an ultimatum set by the corporal's Palestinian captors, Olmert again ruled out any negotiations with militants and promised to strike anyone linked to them, in a thinly veiled reference to Syria.

Israel said the captive soldier remained alive after being seized and wounded ten days ago in a Palestinian raid.

His captors had set a 6:00 am (0300 GMT) Tuesday deadline with demands that Israel release prisoners or "face the consequences".

Israel has sent tanks and troops back into the Gaza Strip for the first time since leaving last September after a 38-year occupation in a bid to free its soldier, leaving the premier staring down the barrel of the worst crisis of his two-month leadership.

The shadowy Army of Islam, one of three groups that claims to be holding Shalit in the Gaza Strip, said Tuesday he would not be killed.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian interior ministry which was targeted during an early morning air raid on Gaza City yesterday. This is the second Israeli attack on the ministry causing heavy damage to the building.

## WILMUT SAYS DECADE AFTER BIRTH OF DOLLY

# Another 50 years needed to reap full benefits of cloning

AFP, London

The British scientist who a decade ago created Dolly the Sheep cautioned Wednesday that another half-century would be needed to reap the full benefits of the cloning breakthrough.

Speaking on the 10th anniversary of the birth of Dolly, the first mammal to be cloned from an adult cell, Ian Wilmut also said Britain had failed to exploit the landmark work, letting the United States and Japan take the lead on animal cloning.

"If you look back and consider any new development, whether it is IVF or anything which is introduced for the first time, it does take quite a long time to bring it through to its full maturity," the embryologist

said.

"To the full maturity of this technology, I think we are talking 50 years," he told BBC News in an interview at Edinburgh's Roslin Institute, where Dolly was born on July 5, 1996.

Dolly triggered a storm of medical dreams, dread and ethical polemic that has never abated.

She unleashed huge investments in cloning research in the quest for cures for cancer, heart degeneration, Alzheimer's and other crippling disease. But critics say advances have been few and overblown claims have been many.

Wilmut argued encouraging developments were happening in therapeutic research, including cows whose milk makes human

antibodies.

"It was always going to be a long-term project," he said. "We shouldn't be too disappointed just yet."

The scientist lamented the lack of research into animal cloning in Britain, despite it being the birthplace of Dolly, who was put down in February 2003 after developing a lung infection and arthritis.

"It is disappointing that in the general area of the bio-medical research it wasn't continued in Britain," said Wilmut.

"I think that it is very difficult for a small country like this to develop fully something which does have international value because once that is recognised the science will move elsewhere and in a sense that is a compliment to the science," he said.

"The technology was very important and is now being exploited commercially in Japan, the United States, all sorts of different countries."

The technique that led to Dolly is called somatic cell nuclear transfer and has remained essentially unchanged over the last decade.

After Wilmut's breakthrough, other cloned species swiftly followed: horses, bulls, pigs, mice, rats, rabbits, cats and dogs and others.

But the miscarriage rate of transplanted eggs is extremely high, and of those embryos that make it to term, many have deformities or (as happened with Dolly) die prematurely, raising concerns about the practice.



AFP FILE PHOTO

Ian Wilmut (L), the scientist who created Dolly the sheep (R), the world's first cloned mammal, ten years ago on July 5, 1996.

## Most Britons against illegal immigrant amnesty

AFP, London

More than seven out of 10 Britons would be opposed to an amnesty for illegal immigrants and the majority believe immigration has changed Britain for the worse, a poll showed Wednesday.

The survey of 2,400 people found that 45 percent were strongly against the idea of an amnesty, 27 percent merely disagreed, while 11 percent were in favour. The rest said they did not know.

In addition, 55 percent agreed that Britain had been changed "for the worse" by immigration because "something of our traditional culture has been lost".

Last month, Immigration Minister Liam Byrne refused to rule out the prospect of offering an amnesty to illegal immigrants living in the country.

The government estimates that Britain harbours between 310,000 and 570,000 illegal immigrants and it could take 10 years to deport them.

Pollsters YouGov carried out the survey for Migrationwatch, which campaigns against mass migration.

"One of the most fundamental responsibilities of government is the control of a nation's borders," said the think-tank's chairman Sir Andrew Green.

"However you dressed it up, an amnesty would be a clear admission of failure and an invitation to others to try their luck."

"Wherever amnesties have been held they have failed to deal with the problem of illegal immigration."

"In fact they have simply made a bad situation worse."

Green said such an amnesty in Britain would cost the taxpayer at least 500 million pounds (920 million dollars, 720 million euros) a year.

# Discovery astronauts start their first day in orbit



PHOTO: AFP

Space shuttle Discovery after lift off from launch pad yesterday at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida.

AFP, Houston

Space shuttle Discovery's seven astronauts began their first full day in orbit Wednesday, planning to test equipment and gear up for spacewalks, after a successful launch into space the day before.

Discovery's crew members -- Commander Steven Lindsey, pilot Mark Kelly and mission specialists Michael Fossum, Lisa Nowak, Stephanie Wilson, Piers Sellers and European Space Agency astronaut Thomas Reiter of Germany -- were to spend their first day in space testing the functioning of the shuttle's equipment, including its robotic arm.

Using the robotic arm and a camera, the crew members planned to inspect the protective heat shield on the shuttle wings' leading edge. They will also search for any damage that may have been caused by the small pieces of foam insulation that broke off in the first few minutes after launch.

The astronauts will then configure their spacesuits in preparation for two or three spacewalks after the shuttle docks with the International Space Station (ISS) on Thursday.

Tuesday's launch marked just the second shuttle mission since the February 2003 Columbia disaster, in which the shuttle splintered apart upon re-entry into Earth's atmosphere, leading to the grounding of shuttle flights for nearly two and a half years.

But NASA appeared pleased with the performance of Discovery's external fuel tank, which lost only small pieces of foam insulation Tuesday, without posing any serious threat to the shuttle's heat shield.