

# Major powers to resume Iran sanctions move

## ‘Tehran willing to return to negotiations’

AFP, United Nations

Six major powers today will resume attempts to agree on how to censure Iran for refusing to suspend sensitive nuclear fuel work, as Russia hinted Tehran might be willing to return to negotiations.

Ambassadors from Germany and the UN Security Council's five permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- were to hold another round of informal talks on a European draft resolution mandating nuclear and ballistic missile-related sanctions against the Islamic republic today.

The tough sanctions, which include travel bans and financial restrictions on Iranian scientists working on the nuclear and missile programmes, have been the subject of several exploratory meetings among the six envoys. But the hard bargaining to agree a text has yet to begin, diplomats said.

The draft would also allow Russia to continue building a one-billion-dollar nuclear power plant in the Iranian city of Bushehr -- an exemption seen as crucial to efforts to secure Moscow's approval.

Iran's top nuclear negotiator said yesterday that any UN resolution passed against Tehran over its nuclear programme would mean the end of negotiations to find a solution to the standoff, the Mehr news agency reported.

"The passing of a resolution, even with the Russian amendments, would mean a change of the path and represent the end of the path of negotiations," Ali Larijani said, referring to Russian efforts to change the draft text.

"The resolution would mean our partners in talks say 'no' to us," he told reporters after arriving back in Iran from talks in Moscow, the semi-official agency said.

But Russia and China, which both

have significant energy and trade ties with Tehran, view the European draft as too tough and unlikely to bring about Iranian cooperation.

The Russians have offered amendments that would drastically reduce the scope of the sanctions proposed by France, Britain and Germany, the three countries that led inconclusive efforts to coax Iran into scaling back its nuclear ambitions.

But the United States is pushing for even tougher sanctions that are even more unacceptable to Moscow and Beijing.

Monday's meeting follows top Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani's two days of talks with Russian leaders in Moscow on the Iranian nuclear issue.

After Larijani's talks with President Vladimir Putin Saturday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Iran would continue to study a package of economic and security incentives offered by the six

powers if Tehran agrees to halt uranium enrichment.

"Iran has responded to these proposals and we think that in showing its good will, there is a possibility, beginning with the proposals of the Six and taking Iran's response into account, to find an acceptable basis for talks to restart," Lavrov said.

"In the days ahead, we will continue our contacts with the Six, which have proposed to Iran ideas which serve as the basis for the beginning of negotiations," Interfax quoted the Russian minister as saying.

After two round of talks last week, France's UN Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sabliere said the six powers were trying to understand each other's positions before moving to narrow their differences.

## Thai PM urges Thaksin to stay away

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's ousted prime minister should not return home until after elections scheduled to be held a year from now because his reappearance could ignite clashes, the head of the country's post-coup government said yesterday.

Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been living in London, where he owns an apartment, since being deposed by a military coup in September. There have been rumours that Thaksin might try to slip back into Thailand.

"I think the most appropriate time is after we have a general election and a new government," said interim Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, who was appointed by the military after the coup and will remain in office until elections expected in October.

Coup makers have accused Thaksin of massive corruption and abuse of power. They have set up several anti-graft bodies to investigate alleged wrongdoing by the fallen government.



PHOTO: AFP

Several thousands of anti nuclear protesters demonstrate Saturday at Gorleben in Germany against the arrival of a train carrying 12 containers of waste from the La Hague re-processing plant in northwestern France. The containers will complete their journey to the Gorleben storage dump by road.

## Olmert in US for talks with Bush in new political climate

AFP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert arrived in the United States early Sunday for talks with President George W. Bush on Iraq, Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the wake of a landmark US congressional election that may portend foreign policy shifts.

Olmert is scheduled to meet with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice later Sunday and have talks with Bush at the White House today.

Democrats, who wrested control of the US Congress from Republicans last Tuesday, have long called for a reassessment of the US strategy in Iraq, with many calling for redeployment of US forces from the country.

Olmert warned the United States, in an interview published Sunday, against a "premature pullout" from Iraq as US officials pondered a new strategy for the country.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian children, wearing chequered scarves and shirts bearing the picture of later Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, carry wreath during a parade in their Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in the Lebanese southern port city if Sidon yesterday to mark the second anniversary of the death of their historical leader.

## Hezbollah, allies quit Lebanon cabinet

AFP, Beirut

All five Shia ministers from Hezbollah and ally Amal have quit the Lebanese government, including the foreign minister who will miss an Arab League meeting on Sunday, but the premier has said they must stay on.

"We have resigned because the majority insists on exercising power on its own," the head of the group's parliamentary bloc Mohammed Raad said Saturday, referring to the anti-Syrian majority that has balked at forming a unity government without first having guarantees that pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud will step down.

"We don't want ministers who blindly follow the majority," Raad said. "This is about giving a warning to the majority."

But Prime Minister Fuad Siniora immediately issued a statement saying he would not accept the resignations, which he said he heard about from Lebanese media.

"Mr Siniora rejects the resignation of Hezbollah and Amal ministers, even if they officially hand in their resignation, and insists that they take part in government," the statement said.

"This government respects the constitution and principles based on dialogue and consensus, and it insists on cooperating with all parties in order to find solutions which preserve the interests of Lebanon," it added.

The resignations came after the failure on Saturday of a week of talks on forming a unity government and months of political stalemate because of disputes between pro-

and anti-Syrian elements in parliament.

The powerful Hezbollah movement, supported by Syria and Iran and flush from its claimed "divine victory" in the summer war with Israel, had two portfolios in the 24-minister cabinet, which is dominated by anti-Syrian politicians.

Two ministers from Shia ally Amal also resigned, along with Foreign Minister Fawzi Sallukh who is considered close to Hezbollah.

Sallukh had been due to attend a meeting of Arab League foreign ministers in Cairo on Sunday to examine Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip, including a raid that killed 19 Palestinians, mainly women and children, in Beit Hanun on Wednesday.

A government source said Sallukh would not be going, even though the meeting had been called for by Lebanon.

Hezbollah wants to bring in opposition allies, represented by Christian ally Michel Aoun's parliamentary group -- with 21 of parliament's 128 deputies.

It also wants a number of cabinet posts that would ensure it had a "blocking minority", a move opposed by the anti-Syrian majority that sees this as a Syrian attempt to return strongly to Lebanese politics.

Such a mechanism would allow the opposition to prevent the government from ratifying the formation of an international court to try those eventually charged for the 2005 assassination of former premier Rafiq Hariri.

## 13 killed as Somali Islamists take town

AFP, Mogadishu

Islamist gunmen stormed a town in central Somalia on Sunday, seizing it in fierce fighting from a warlord allied with the weak government, as the lawless nation slipped closer to all-out war.

A day after the government rejected a new peace initiative, the powerful Somali Islamist movement pushed to their furthest point north, taking the town of Bandiradley in central Mudug region, witnesses and militia commanders said.

Witnesses said at least 13 people were killed in the battle that is certain to exacerbate already sky-high tensions with the government and brings the Islamists to less than 100km of the semi-autonomous enclave of Puntland, which has vowed to resist their advance.

"We have taken control of Bandiradley after heavy fighting," said Mohamed Mohamud Jama, the Islamist spokesman in Mudug, where the town, about 700km north of Mogadishu, is located.

He told AFP by phone from Bandiradley that the Islamists would now march on Galkayo, a major Puntland town about 70km north.

Such a move would be a major escalation in the deteriorating situation in Somalia that diplomats and analysts fear could erupt into full-scale war and engulf the Horn of Africa region in bloody conflict.

Bandiradley residents said at least 13 fighters were killed in fighting for the town, five Islamists and eight loyal to ex-Mogadishu warlord Abdi Hassan Awale Qeybdiid.

## 'Blair, Bush talk changes to Iraq strategy'

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and US President George W Bush have talked at length over the telephone about changes for the US-led military coalition in Iraq, a newspaper said yesterday.

Asked about the report in The Observer, a spokeswoman in Blair's office confirmed that the two leaders had spoken by telephone on Friday, but declined to say what they talked about.

Blair, according to The Observer, told Bush about the need to involve Iraq's neighbours Syria and Iran in efforts to stabilize the country, which is gripped by spiralling sectarian violence.

Blair will give evidence next week to a US task force looking at future policy in Iraq, his office said Saturday.

Blair will talk via videolink

Tuesday to the bipartisan committee headed by former US secretary of state James Baker, which is seen as the means through which Washington could change course on Iraq.

A Blair spokeswoman said the prime minister -- who has been in touch with the Iraq Study Group since its inception -- would ensure that Baker and his colleagues were "fully briefed on UK ideas".

But she refused to be drawn on reports in The Guardian newspaper Saturday that he would push the US administration to begin talks with Syria and Iran as a way of breaking the deadlock in Iraq and the Middle East.

The newspaper, citing unnamed British officials, said Blair would not call for the withdrawal of coalition troops, but was persuaded that Bush is open to a change of strategy in Iraq.

## Democrats now look to sustain majority

AP, Washington

It's the question Democrats would rather not ask in their moment of revelry: Are their new majorities in the House and Senate sustainable? What if the war in Iraq is over by 2008? Or what if it is still being waged despite Democratic pledges to change the course? What if voter antipathy toward President Bush is irrelevant in two years? After all, he will be on his way out.

"Who knows whether these things are long-term trends or not," Sen Byron Dorgan, D-ND, said last week.

Voters gave Democrats control of Congress but did not undergo an ideological conversion. The Democrats' success had more to do with anger toward President Bush, weariness over the war and contempt for the corruption and scandal in Congress a confluence of negatives that became a political force.

As some Democrats begin looking to 2008 and beyond, the challenge is how to turn antipathy toward Republicans into affection

for Democrats.

"You can't count on that kind of a wave in every election by any means," Democratic pollster Mark Mellman said.

Sen. Charles Schumer of New York, the chairman of the Senate Democratic campaign committee, acknowledged that the Democrats' 51-49 majority in the Senate was the result of the narrowest of victories in six races. "Had 10,000 votes flipped we would have four seats not six," he said.

Democrats do see opportunities ahead.

In 2008, there are 21 Republican Senate seats up for election and only 12 Democratic seats. Eight of the Republicans in those seats won their last election with 55 percent or less of the vote.

In the House, where Democrats held 230 seats and appeared to be in line to win two more, all 435 members face re-election in 2008.

"The good news for Democrats is that we don't need a wave to keep the seats we have," Mellman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers from the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) listen to speech during a ceremony at the headquarters of the 37-nation Nato-led force in Kabul yesterday during a Remembrance Day service for men and women who have died in conflicts around the world.