

IAEA meet set to block aid for Iran atom reactor

REUTERS, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog began a politically charged meeting on Monday that is likely to put on ice Iran's request for help with a heavy-water plant due to fears it could yield plutonium for atom bombs, diplomats said.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-nation governing board urged Iran in February to "reconsider" the Arak reactor project. Tehran has vowed to complete it and applied for IAEA technical expertise to ensure the plant meets safety standards.

Although IAEA approval of such requests is usually routine, Western board members say the Arak case must be rejected given Iran's record of evading IAEA non-proliferation inspections and its defiance of UN demands to stop enriching uranium.

But developing nations on the Vienna-based body oppose outright rejection. They say this would impose a politicised precedent for withholding technical aid to peaceful atomic energy programmes they are pursuing or may consider.

Diplomats said the most likely outcome was a compromise in which the board would defer a decision pending guidance from the UN Security Council, where world powers are deliberating sanctions on Iran but are split over how tough they should be.

"Deferral is the most likely option as it would help avoid alienating developing nations on the board and buy time to see what the Security Council will do to resolve this battle elsewhere," a senior IAEA diplomat told Reuters on Monday.

Diplomats said a deal was being considered under which the board would shelve the Arak item while approving seven other aid requests submitted by Iran seen as less problematic.

They include developing radiation therapy for medical ends, help in commissioning a Russian-built nuclear reactor not deemed a proliferation risk, and regulatory aspects of nuclear energy.

The Arak case, on which a board

ruling was expected later in a week-long meeting, has symbolised the diplomatic crisis over the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions.

Mistrust

Tehran says these are limited to generating electricity. The United States and European Union fear Iran is seeking bombs to threaten Israel and Western interests in the Middle East.

If uranium's fissile element is enriched to a low level, it can fuel power plants. Refined to 80 percent or more, it becomes the explosive core of nuclear warheads.

Plutonium, a highly fissile by-product of heavy-water production, is suitable for bombs or power-plant fuel alike.

The 40-megawatt Arak complex is due for completion in 2009. Iran says it will produce radio-isotopes for medical uses, replacing a smaller light-water reactor that predates Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution and is said by Tehran to be obsolete.

Western leaders say there is a high risk Tehran's underlying agenda

with Arak is to yield weapons-grade plutonium.

Iran says the reactor will be built whether IAEA safety aid is granted or not. It is one of 820 proposals from 115 nations to be considered by a board committee Monday through Wednesday and ratified at a full board conference on Thursday and Friday.

Ana-Maria Cetto, IAEA deputy director for technical cooperation, told Monday's gathering that legal experts in the agency's secretariat judged the Arak request legitimate because it did not involve enrichment-related or fuel-reprocessing activities the Security Council ordered to be suspended.

Iranian IAEA envoy Aliasghar Soltanieh, echoing criticism by some fellow members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) developing nations, accused the West of politicising a technical aid process "that should be impartial and professional".



Awami League takes out a huge procession in Tongi yesterday in support of the countrywide blockade programme.

PHOTO: STAR



PHOTO: STAR

Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil speaks at a press conference at the party's Dhanmondi office in the city yesterday.

CA has failed to prove his neutrality: LDP

RU CORRESPONDENT

Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leaders yesterday said President/Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed should resign as the chief adviser and appoint a neutral person as he has failed to prove himself to be neutral.

As the President/Chief Adviser is yet to take effective steps to break the current political impasse, he will be responsible for any consequences, such as civil war, they said at a rally at Alupati intersection in Rajshahi city.

The LDP leaders also threatened to launch a tougher movement along with other political parties if the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) is not removed immediately.

LDP convener Kazi Ahmed, Golam Kabir, Mustak Ahmed and Shahabuddin Ahmed spoke at the rally.

Thai coup leader to visit Pakistan

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's top coup leader General Sonthi Boonyaratglin will make a four-day visit to Pakistan that includes a meeting with President Pervez Musharraf, an official said yesterday.

Sonthi, the first Muslim to head mainly Buddhist Thailand's military, will leave Bangkok later in the day, Thai army spokesman Acar Tiproch said.

"During the visit, Sonthi is expected to meet the president," Acar said but gave no further details.

Led by Sonthi, the Thai military overthrew the government of premier Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup in September. More than two months after the putsch, the military still keeps martial law in place across the kingdom.

Sonthi is also expected to give financial assistance to survivors of last year's devastating South Asian earthquake, which killed some 74,000 people.

The Thai army general is to return to Bangkok on Thursday, the army spokesman said.

CA's sitting on the fence vexes top businesses

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Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), Mahbubur Rahman, president of International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICC-B), MA Momen, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Latifur Rahman, president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), SM Fazlul Haque, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), MA Awal, chairman of BTMA, SM Safiuzzaman, president of Bangladesh Oushad Shilpa Samity, AK Azad, president of Bangladesh Chamber of Industries (BCI), Syed Manzur Elahi, president of Bank Association of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Employers Federation and Saifuzzaman Chowdhury, president of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), signed the statement.

Talking to reporters after the

meeting, Mir Nasir said that the business community is in a state of panic due to the political unrest during the last couple of weeks.

"It is true that we have no mechanism to end the present political deadlock. The government is the only authority to find a mechanism acceptable to all for avoiding further political unrest," the FBCCI chief said.

Asked about the demonstration programme they are planning, he said they are yet to decide on the form of the programme. "But we are determined to do something for maintaining a peaceful business environment."

Meanwhile, president of Bangladesh Economic Association Prof Quazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad told The Daily Star that a temporary economic loss could be accepted for greater and long-term benefits.

Agreeing that the current political unrest is damaging the country's economy for the time being, he posed question "But why such

political deadlock has been created?"

It is the responsibility of the CA, the interim caretaker government and the Election Commission to ensure a free and fair election, as it is the wish of the common people, he said.

"If the chief adviser and the chief election commissioner (CEC) have goodwill and work with conscience and morality, we can easily get rid of this confrontational politics and avoid economic losses," Prof Kholiquzzaman said.

BGMEA'S SIT-IN PROGRAMME

The garments factory owners yesterday did not stage their scheduled sit-in on Bangabhaban premises. A decision in this regard will be taken after a meeting today.

On Sunday at a press conference, the BGMEA leaders gave a 12-hour ultimatum to the chief adviser to break the current political deadlock.

Govt body at core of human trafficking

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recruiting agent said.

Sources named Manjur Rahman, director (Emigration and Protocol), as the most corrupt official who allegedly used to bribe Tk 5 lakh monthly to former state minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment Major (Retd) Quamrul Islam and former director general of BMET SM Wahid-uz Zaman when they were at their respective offices.

One of the key officials, Manjur could manipulate the issuing of immigration clearances, as there is no clear policy of the government on a number of countries, sources said. For example, workers can go to Lebanon, but not always. At present, the government is unwilling to send workers to Lebanon, as there is no Bangladesh mission there and considering the situation that developed following the Israeli attack on Lebanon.

The migration to Lebanon is possible if the Lebanese employers send visas for Bangladeshi workers attested by the Bangladesh's consul general in Lebanon, an agent said.

He said knowing the fact that visas of the 31 workers were valid and that there will be no problem for the women to enter Lebanon, the BMET officials could issue fake immigration clearances.

On contact, Manjur Rahman outright denied the allegations brought against him and blamed the brokers and the immigration police for their involvements in the illegal migration processes.

"Immigration police are responsible for checking the documents. How did the women get past immigration when their documents were invalid?" he said.

Asked why the BMET officials first told police that their computers were "out of order," when checking of the documents were required, he said computers can go out of order any time. "It is not mandatory that the welfare desk check the workers' documents, it is the duty of the immigration," he added.

Officer-in-charge (Immigration) Shamima Shabnam, however, said the BMET welfare desk is mainly responsible for checking the documents of the out-bound workers, as only they can crosscheck the information of the

workers in their computer network.

"The immigration allows the workers if the BMET okayed them," she told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that this is the reason they cannot put the blame on immigration police.

Replying to a question Manjur said, "There might be connivance of the officials of the welfare desk and immigration police. The BMET main office, however, is not involved with it in anyway."

It is the brokers who made fake seals for the immigration clearance, he said.

Investigation officer (IO) Shahadat Hossain of Special Branch (SB) on Sunday said they

Dutch fear int'l backlash over burqa ban

AFP, The Hague

An internal memo of the Dutch foreign ministry warns that the proposed burqa ban in the Netherlands could cause a backlash against the country in the Muslim world with possibly violent protests, the Algemeen Dagblad newspaper reported yesterday.

On Friday the Dutch government announced that it will introduce a bill to ban the wearing of face-covering clothing, including Muslim veils like the burqa and the niqab in public places.

According to the document unearthed by the Algemeen Dagblad the foreign ministry warned that such a ban would incite anger in Muslim countries that could lead to violent riots like those seen after the publications of cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed earlier this year.

But foreign ministry spokesman Herman van Gelderen told AFP that he did not recall seeing such a memo.

"We are watching what the reactions are, so far we have only seen a reaction by Malaysia," he said.

On Sunday the Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar criticised the proposed Dutch ban blasting it as discriminatory.

"Why can't people have the freedom to dress the way they want to dress," he asked.

"People can go naked and wear scanty dresses and yet you do not condemn them. And when people want to cover themselves that is their right," Syed Hamid added.



PHOTO: STAR

Communist Party of Bangladesh stages a demonstration in the city yesterday demanding reforms in Election Commission.

Trades stop dead on tracks at all ports

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scale took place at the port yesterday but delivery of goods in and out of the port stopped completely.

Activities at Chittagong Container Terminal (CCT) however remained suspended since November 12 due to the 14-party blockade and a serious row over operation of four gantry cranes.

The port operated partially for four days from November 16 due to suspension of the programme.

At Mongla port, cargo handling took place but delivery of goods was stopped. A ship-- M V Western Sea-- left the port yesterday morning while another ship -- M V Sakura Harmony anchored, sources said.

A Thai flag carrier-- Chada Nari -- is waiting at the jetty for export cargo.

In Chittagong, nine gearless ships that cannot handle cargo without gantry cranes have been stuck up due to non-functioning of the cranes.

The ships are loaded with around 6,000 containers with import goods, mainly raw materials for garment items.

Two of the ships --Eagle Poiner and Eagle Progress-- are at the container jetty and seven are at the outer anchorage.

Port sources however claimed that a large number of containers entered the port yard in the last four

days and those are being handled. Besides, a number of containers were released from the port yard during this time, creating space for other containers.

Some ships also sailed with export items and some others anchored at the port jetty. Two ships -- Dali and Cape Harry-- left the port yesterday morning with around 1,300 containers, sources said.

To two local flag carrier vessels-- Banga Biraj and Banga Lanka-- anchored at the port jetty with 1,100 TEUs containers yesterday.

As cargo handling inside the port has been kept out of the purview of current political programme, port workers may be able to unload a few containers from the anchored ships.

Meanwhile, dock workers have kept the CCT besieged demanding cancellation of the agreement signed with a private company-- Saif Powertec Ltd -- for operating four gantry cranes.

The port authorities have been negotiating with the agitating workers and the private company for an amicable solution to the problem.

The company has served a notice demanding Tk 50 lakh as compensation for suspension of work for the first five days without any 'valid reason'.

They will serve another notice demanding Tk 10 lakh as compen-

sation per day if the suspension of work continues. "But we want to settle the dispute amicably," said Tarafdar Ruhul Amin, managing director of the company.

The business community also issued a joint statement yesterday and re-iterated their call to the president and chief advisor to the care taker government for taking immediate steps for a practical solution to the existing political impasse.

They threatened of launching a united protest programme comprising representatives of business leaders from all over the country if the existing crisis is not solved immediately.

President of Bangladesh Federation of Chamber of Commerce and Industry FBCCI Mir Nasir Hossain, President of Metro Politan Chamber of Commerce and industry MCCI Latifur Rahman, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry DCCI MA Momen, president of Bangladesh Garments Mnaufacturers and Exporters Association BGMEA S M Fazlul Haque were among the top leaders who signed the statement.

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