

Attack on Iran to drag ME into hell: Mussa

AFP, Davos

Arab League Secretary-General Amr Mussa, said yesterday that military action against Iran "would bring the whole of the Middle East into hell."

Speaking to AFP, he said: "I said the war in Iraq would open the doors of hell and it did. This time, it would bring the whole of the Middle East into hell itself."

Mussa added that "any military action now anywhere in the Middle East is to be discouraged."

His comments were echoed by the United Nations nuclear chief Mohamed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who said Friday that military action would be "bonkers".



Amr Mussa

There is increased speculation that either the United States or Israel could eventually decide to bomb Iran in order to prevent it from making nuclear weapons.

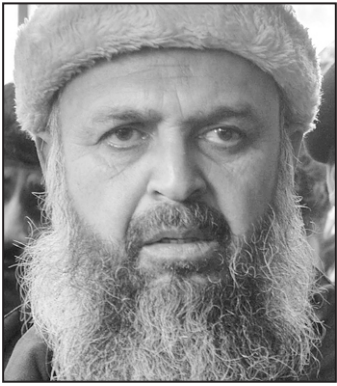
The UN Security Council

imposed sanctions at the end of last year to get Iran to stop uranium enrichment, which produces fuel for civilian nuclear reactors but also the explosive core of atom bombs.

Moussa, head of the Arab League since 2001, also called for a six-month deadline to be imposed for the settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, stressing that 2007 was a vital year for negotiations.

"There has to be a time limit and an endgame. Everyone needs to agree to give ourselves six months," he said. "It has to be this year."

He said 2007 was essential because of presidential elections in the United States in 2008, which would paralyse US involvement in the conflict.



Prominent HR activist held in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police have detained a prominent human rights activist working for release of suspects picked up by secret agencies in the fight against terrorism, official sources said yesterday.

Plain-clothed intelligence operatives "kidnapped" Khalid Khawaja, chief of an organisation called Defence of Human Rights, from outside his Islamabad home early Friday, his family said.

Khawaja's daughter Rabia said on Saturday that police rang the family to inform them he was being held at a police station in the Pakistani capital but gave no reason of his detention.

"This is blatant violation of human rights, first they kidnapped him and now they say he was in the police custody," she told AFP.

Khawaja's organisation has been leading a campaign to find missing people widely believed to be held by secret agencies in the "war on terror".

Pakistan's Supreme Court recently took up the cases of some 41 missing people after petitions by relatives who believed they were being held in the custody of intelligence agencies for undisclosed reasons.

The government later told the court 25 people had been traced and released, but the remaining 16 could not be found.

Fresh violence in Nepal as curfew lifted in 3 towns

AFP, Kathmandu

Protesters burnt tyres and hurled stones in new violence in southeastern Nepal yesterday following clashes that left five people dead and dozens injured in the last eight days.

The protests have erupted in a country which only recently saw an end to ten years of civil war between government forces and Maoist insurgents.

The violence flared as authori-

ties lifted a curfew yesterday in three towns in the Terai region and maintained it in two others, including Birgunj.

"Protesters are trying to break the curfew by burning tyres," Shambhu Koirala, chief district officer told AFP from Birgunj.

"Some protesters pelted stones (at police) and tried to burn two police posts in the town. The situation is tense and there are reports of clashes between police and

demonstrators but no arrests have been made," he said.

The protests began after a teenage boy was shot dead on January 19 during a fight between Maoists and activists belonging to the Mahadhesi community which is demanding greater political representation.

Mahadhesi leaders have said the group accounts for a third of impoverished Nepal's 27 million people and that the Maoists are

over-represented in the nation's new parliament.

The parliament was set up after the Maoist rebels and coalition government signed a peace deal to bring the rebels into government.

The Mahadhesi dominate the Terai plains region, known as Nepal's bread basket, and have long complained of discrimination by highland communities.

The protests, which began in Lahan Bazaar town and spread into four other towns, became ethnic clashes after the Mahadhesi began attacking people from the hill regions.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators belonging to Nepal's Madhesi Janadhikar Forum, representing the country's Mahadhesi ethnic group, burn tyres during protests at Jaleswor, Mahottari, 375 kilometres south of Kathmandu on Friday.

Two more killed in fresh flare-up of Gaza clashes

AFP, Gaza City

Two Palestinians were killed yesterday in a fresh flare-up of violence in the Gaza Strip between supporters of rival factions Hamas and Fatah, medical officials said.

Their deaths bring to 17 the number of people killed in deadly clashes between the two factions in the beleaguered coastal strip since the violence erupted late Thursday, according to medical sources.

At least 43 people have been injured.

Those killed Saturday were identified as Mahmoud Khalil Khatib, 17, who appears to have been an innocent bystander and Mohammad Khattab, 33, an officer in the national security force, medical sources said.

The two were among three people injured after automatic gunfire erupted near the headquarters of the Fatah-dominated preventative security force in Gaza City and near the Shifa Hospital just a few blocks away.

They died soon after in hospital.

Islamist Hamas, which heads the Palestinian government, announced Friday it was suspending talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party on the formation of a national unity government due to the outbreak of violence.

The rival factions had on Tuesday begun a new round of negotiations on forming a unity government acceptable to Western donors, just two days after Abbas held talks in Syria with exiled Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal.

Tensions had flared after Abbas, the head of the Palestinian Authority, had called on December 16, 2006, for early elections.

Hamas, which won a resound-

ing election victory one year ago Friday and has struggled to govern since then in the face of international isolation, denounced the call as a "coup d'etat".

Subsequent clashes between Fatah and Hamas supporters killed more than 30 people between mid-December and early January.

But the two-week lull that followed revived hopes of a deal to form a unity government that could overcome the political and finan-

cial impasse that has paralysed the Palestinian Authority for months.

In addition to the deaths since Thursday, nine members of Hamas and five members of Fatah were kidnapped in tit-for-tat abductions in Gaza and the occupied West Bank Friday, and nine Hamas members were kidnapped in the northern village of Kafr Qalil by Fatah, security sources said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women mourn during the funeral of a relative as factional clashes flared anew in the Gaza Strip yesterday between the ruling Hamas movement and leader Mahmud Abbas's Fatah party, killing 17 people in barely 48 hours.

11 girls killed in Indian school collapse

AFP, New Delhi

Eleven girls were killed and 14 injured when a school in western India collapsed, burying them under rubble, officials said yesterday.

Nine bodies were recovered late Friday from the building in a village in Gujarat state.

Another two bodies were found during the night as rescue workers using cutters and hydraulic cranes shifted the debris, working under floodlights.

"Rescue workers removed two more bodies from the rubble during the night-long search," Surat district official Vatsala Vasudevan told the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency.

"The operation is over as there do not seem to be any more people trapped in the debris. Workers are sifting through the rubble," she said.

The 14 injured schoolgirls were being treated in hospital, she added.

AFP, Baghdad

Four of five US soldiers killed in a raid by militants last week in Iraq's shrine city of Karbala were abducted and executed by men wearing "American-looking uniforms," the military revealed yesterday.

The grim details of the January 20 attack were released for the first time by the US military after the new Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, made a surprise visit to Iraq.

Pelosi pressed Baghdad to take "primary responsibility" for the country's security, even as Iraqi and US officials said they were targeting Iranian agents in Iraq under a tough new policy aimed at depriving sectarian violence of outside support.

"It makes sense that if somebody's trying to harm our troops, or stop us from achieving our goal, or killing innocent citizens in Iraq, that we will stop them," US President George W. Bush told reporters in Washington Friday.

A US military statement said the Karbala raid had been "well rehearsed", with gunmen getting past Iraqi checkpoints in "a convoy consisting of at least five sport utility vehicles."

One soldier was killed in the

initial assault while four others were shot dead after being kidnapped by the insurgents, who fled with them in the SUVs.

Iraqi police later found the vehicles near the town of Al-Mahawil, east of Karbala.

"Two soldiers were found handcuffed together in the back of one of the SUVs. Both had suffered gunshot wounds and were dead. A third soldier was found shot and dead on the ground," the statement said.

"Nearby, the fourth soldier was still alive, despite a gunshot wound to the head." He was rushed to a nearby hospital but died on the way.

In an initial statement released on January 21, the military had said five US soldiers were killed and three wounded "while repelling the attack."

The Internet site icasualties.org, which tracks US losses in Iraq, identified the five as Captain Brian Freeman, Lieutenant Jacob Fritz, Specialist Johnathan Chism, Private 1st Class Jonathan Millican

and Private Shawn Falter.

Saturday's statement said "an estimated nine to 12 armed militants" with US-type weapons had stormed the Provincial Joint Coordination Centre in Karbala, where they opened fire and hurled hand grenades at US troops.

After damaging three US vehicles with explosives, "the attackers broke off the assault, withdrawing from the compound with four captured US soldiers."

"The precision of the attack, the equipment used and the possible use of explosives to destroy the military vehicles in the compound suggests that the attack was well rehearsed prior to execution," US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Scott Bleichwehl said in the statement.

"The attackers went straight to where Americans were located in the provincial government facility, by-passing the Iraqi police in the compound," Bleichwehl said.

"We are looking at all the evidence to determine who or what was responsible for the breakdown

in security at the compound and the perpetration of the assault."

Security issues were high on Pelosi's agenda as she and five other US representatives met Friday in Baghdad with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and President Jalal Talabani.

"The sooner Iraqi leaders make necessary political accommodations, including amending their constitution to resolve outstanding differences among all Iraqi communities, the better the chances for ending the sectarian violence," the visiting US lawmakers said later in a joint statement from Washington.

In their several meetings in Baghdad, the US envoys stressed their belief that Iraqis must rapidly assume responsibility for security in the country.

"The delegation's view is that American forces should quickly begin the transition from a combat role to one focused on training, counter-terrorism, force protection, and controlling Iraq's borders," their statement said.