

European diplomats seek breakthrough on Iranian crisis

AFP, Vienna

European countries will seek a breakthrough in the crisis over Iran's nuclear programme when top Iranian negotiator Ali Larijani attends a security conference in Germany this weekend, diplomats told AFP. The goal is to use informal contacts with Larijani to get Iran "to come up with some realistic, achievable proposals" to meet the UN's demand for it to suspend uranium enrichment, a European diplomat said in Vienna, where the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is headquartered.

The crisis is at a clear standoff as Iran rejects the UN Security Council resolution of December 23, which imposed limited sanctions to force it to stop enriching uranium.

The process, which uses centrifuges to make fuel for civilian nuclear power reactors but can also be used to make explosive material for atom bombs, is at the heart of US charges that Iran is hiding work to develop nuclear weapons. Tehran insists its programme is a peaceful one designed to generate electricity.

A diplomat said the best outcome, on the sidelines of the Conference on Security Policy being held in the southern German city of Munich from Friday to Sunday, would be for European Union powers Britain, Germany and France, along with Russia and China to hold a meeting with Iran.

"They might agree on some sort of framework or concept under which the Iranians will pull the plug on centrifuges for a couple of months" -- opening the door to wider talks including the United States -- and for the Security

Council to take "no action for that period" on sanctions.

Moscow supports a proposal by IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei for a "time-out" in order to encourage further dialogue, under which Iran would suspend uranium enrichment while the United Nations held off imposing sanctions.

But diplomacy in Munich could be stalled by the long shadow of the United States, and perhaps hardline allies like Britain, which reject such simultaneity and want any Iranian enrichment pause to come first and be unconditional in order to keep Iran from winning additional time to continue strategic fuel work.

US officials have pointed out that once Iran met its commitments to stop such fuel work, the Security Council would suspend its sanctions, as the resolution makes clear.

6 opposition workers killed in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Unidentified gunmen ambushed a van carrying activists from the main opposition Pakistan People's Party yesterday, killing six of them and wounding two others, police and a party official said.

The attack occurred in the town of Attock, 120km west of the capital Islamabad, police officer Nabab Khan told AFP. "We do not know what the motive is behind the attack. We are investigating," he said.

PPP spokesman Farhatullah Babar said the attack was meant to frighten party workers in a district where Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has said he will contest general elections that are due late this year or in early 2008.

"It seems to us that now the elections are near, a message has been sent to the PPP supporters to desist from supporting the party," Babar told AFP.

"We demand the arrest of the culprits. One of the men murdered in the attack was a local office-bearer (a party leader at village level)," he said, adding the dead included three brothers.

India, Bhutan amend Friendship Treaty

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a changed international scenario, India and Bhutan on Thursday signed a revised landmark Friendship Treaty, which will enable the landlocked Himalayan kingdom greater say over its foreign and defence policies.

The revised agreement, signed by Bhutan's 26-year-old King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk and Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee at the Hyderabad House here, ended India's 57 years of direct dominance in guiding Thimphu's foreign and defence policies.

The signing of the treaty also marked the young monarch's debut on the world stage after his 51-year-old father Jigme Singye Wangchuk abdicated in favour of his son and promised to usher in electoral democracy under a constitutional monarchy.

The revised agreement between the two countries, which came after talks between Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, removed an Article of the 1949 treaty, which says Bhutan

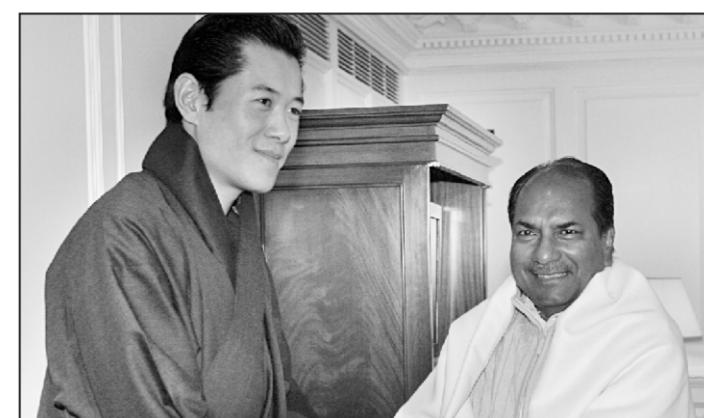


PHOTO: AFP
King of Bhutan Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck talks with Indian Defence Minister AK Antony (R) during a meeting in New Delhi yesterday.

had allowed Bhutan to import arms, ammunitions, machines and war materials or stores for its welfare but with India's "assistance and approval." But the revised agreement allows Bhutan to import non-lethal military equipment from other countries without India's consent.

Ruling on Indian dam next week

AFP, New Delhi

An expert appointed by the World Bank will announce Monday whether a controversial dam India is building in the disputed Kashmir region violates a water-sharing treaty with Pakistan, the bank said.

Pakistan fears the one-billion-dollar project could deprive its wheat-bowl state of Punjab of vital irrigation water. It says the plant violates a 45-year-old water-sharing treaty brokered by the World Bank.

But India says the Baglihar hydroelectric project on the Chenab River does not violate the pact and could go a long way to ending routine 12-hour blackouts plaguing the Himalayan state.

The decision will be handed down in Bern, Switzerland, the World Bank said in a statement.



Anna Nicole Smith dies

REUTERS, Hollywood

Anna Nicole Smith, the small-town Texas girl turned Playboy Playmate who fought all the way to the US Supreme Court over her billionaire husband's estate, died suddenly on Thursday at the age of 39.

Smith, a voluptuous platinum blonde who grew up idolizing the late screen legend Marilyn Monroe, was pronounced dead at a Hollywood, Florida, hospital.

A favourite subject of the tabloid media, Smith was rushed to the hospital after a private nurse who had apparently been alone with her in her room at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel and Casino telephoned a hotel operator to ask for medical help.

Disease fears rise in Indonesia's capital

REUTERS, Jakarta

Fears of disease gripped Indonesia's flood-hit capital on Friday with thousands of people living in cramped emergency shelters and some streets still inundated a week after the city's worst floods in five years.

Authorities are on guard for outbreaks of diarrhoea, cholera or skin disease as torrential rains overnight triggered fresh flooding in the low-lying city of around 14 million people.

"We are concentrating on health issues to prevent diarrhoea, cholera and leptospirosis (a disease spread by rats and mice) outbreaks by clearing up places and water sanitation," Rustam Pakaya, the health ministry's crisis centre chief, told Reuters.

"There are three cases of leptospirosis reported. All of the

patients are treated. No cases of tetanus have been reported."

The floods in Jakarta have killed 57 people and more than 250,000 are still displaced from their homes, many sheltering under flyovers or in plastic tents near graveyards.

A group of horse carriage operators huddled under one East Jakarta flyover with their carriages and horses as ankle-high manure spread around and mixed with cooking utensils.

Several blocks away in a seaside slum, children tried to net small fish in a wide gutter where brownish water gushed while a flock of ducks swam on a garbage-filled river nearby. Traffic moved slowly and several cars broke down as parts of a city highway were inundated by water following the floods that have also caused blackouts and cut telecommunications.

US, N Korea caution on hope for deal

REUTERS, Beijing

The prospect of initial steps toward ending North Korea's nuclear arms programme brightened yesterday as negotiators considered a plan for Pyongyang to suspend operations at a nuclear plant within two months.

But both North Korea and the United States warned against reading too much into the first day of talks and "counting chickens before they hatch."

"There is a realisation that the first step we're looking at is a big first step, so to some extent it's going to require a little bit of a jump for them," the chief US negotiator, Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, told reporters after meeting the North Korean delegation.

Echoing a comment by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Thursday, he said: "I think we can be cautiously optimistic but don't want to count our chickens before they hatch."

'US manipulated intel to link Saddam with al-Qaeda'

AP, Washington

A "very damning" report by the Defence Department's inspector general depicts a Pentagon that purposely manipulated intelligence in an effort to link Saddam Hussein to al-Qaeda in the runup to the US invasion of Iraq, says the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"That was the argument that was used to make the sale to the American people about the need to go to war," said Sen Carl Levin, D-Michigan. He said the Pentagon's work, "which was wrong, which was distorted, which was inappropriate ... is something which is highly disturbing."

The investigation by acting inspector general Thomas F. Gimble found that prewar intelligence work at the Pentagon, including a contention that the CIA had underplayed the likelihood of an al-Qaeda connection, was inappropriate but not illegal. The report was to be presented to Levin's panel at a hearing

India plans to design, build medium combat aircraft

AFP, Bangalore

India plans to design and develop a medium-combat aircraft at a cost of up to 2.27 billion dollars as it seeks to strengthen its military manufacturing prowess, a senior official said yesterday.

The Defence Research and Development Organization (DRDO) is in talks with European, US and Russian companies interested in collaborating on the project, said M. Natarajan, the head of research and development at the agency.

The medium-combat aircraft, or MCA, will be a twin-engine plane with stealth capabilities and may take 15 years to develop, Natarajan told reporters at the Bangalore air show.

"We see the potential to build 200 to 300 MCAs," said Natarajan who is also scientific advisor to the defence minister. "You will see economic benefits over the lifecycle of the programme."

Rice authorises talks with Syria on Iraqi refugee crisis

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice revealed Thursday that she had authorised diplomatic talks with Syria about the Iraqi refugee crisis, despite a continuing freeze on high-level contacts with Damascus.

Rice told a congressional panel that she had instructed the US charge d'affaires in Damascus, Michael Corbin, to meet with the Syrians as part of a new US initiative to tackle a growing Iraqi refugee crisis.

"We have a charge there who does have discussions with the Syrians about a variety of things," she said.

"But I have authorised him explicitly to talk to the Syrians about the issue of refugees."

Officials made clear this did not represent a break with standing US policy not to have high-level diplomatic dealings with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which Washington accuses of back-

ing anti-US extremists in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian areas.

"This is consistent and in keeping with our existing relationship with Syria and not something that represents any kind of change in that approach," a senior State Department official said.

"Syria plays into it only to the extent that Syria is a prime location for Iraqi refugees," the official said. Between 600,000 and one million Iraqis are believed to be living in Syria.

The administration of President George W. Bush has been under pressure from domestic critics and overseas allies alike to enter into a dialogue with Syria and Iran as part of a broad diplomatic push to stabilize Iraq and further peace efforts in Lebanon and between Israelis and Palestinians.

But he and Rice have refused, arguing that the allied states would seek unacceptable concessions in exchange for their help.



PHOTO: AFP
Editors of Pakistan's national newspapers Rehana Hakeem (L) of Newsline, Najam Sethi (C) of Daily Times and Mehmood Shaam (R) of Jang listen to Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon during an editors' conference in New Delhi yesterday. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs and the Media Development Foundation organised the two-day conference of editors from Saarc countries in New Delhi that began yesterday.

Palestinian deal hinges on West, Israel

AFP, Ramallah

The success of the Palestinian unity agreement hinges on whether Israel and the West will lift a debilitating political and economic boycott that precipitated months of unparalleled crisis.

Signed by Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Hamas chief Khaled Meshal, the deal has been billed as chance to end fighting in which 100 Palestinians have died in two months, win back Western aid and resume peace efforts.

But Palestinian analysts predicted that while Arab and some European countries could soften a crippling boycott imposed on the current Hamas-led government, they doubted the accord would satisfy Israeli and US conditions.

Prime minister Ismail Haniya, head of the previous Hamas-led government, is to keep his job, the finance ministry goes to internationally respected Salam Fayyad, the foreign ministry to a moderate and the interior to an independent.

The accord itself, however, makes no explicit reference to Israel or respecting agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Instead, Abbas calls on Haniya

to "respect" agreements signed by the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which Hamas never formally joined, in a letter formally tasking his old nemesis with forming the new cabinet.

Commentators said respecting PLO agreements would amount to implicit recognition of Israel -- but Hamas rejected any question of recognition.

"The success of this government depends on the international community's policy towards it," said George Giacaman, director of the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy.

"I think the Europeans are more or less ready to deal with it. In my opinion, the Americans and Israelis won't for the moment," he said.

But the Palestinian press unanimously hailed the agreement, hopeful that it would see the West end its debilitating boycott of the Hamas administration.

"Israel no longer has any pretext to boycott Hamas," trumpeted Al-Quds, the leading daily, saying the deal should fulfil Western conditions to ending the boycott and resuming peace efforts after a six-year impasse.

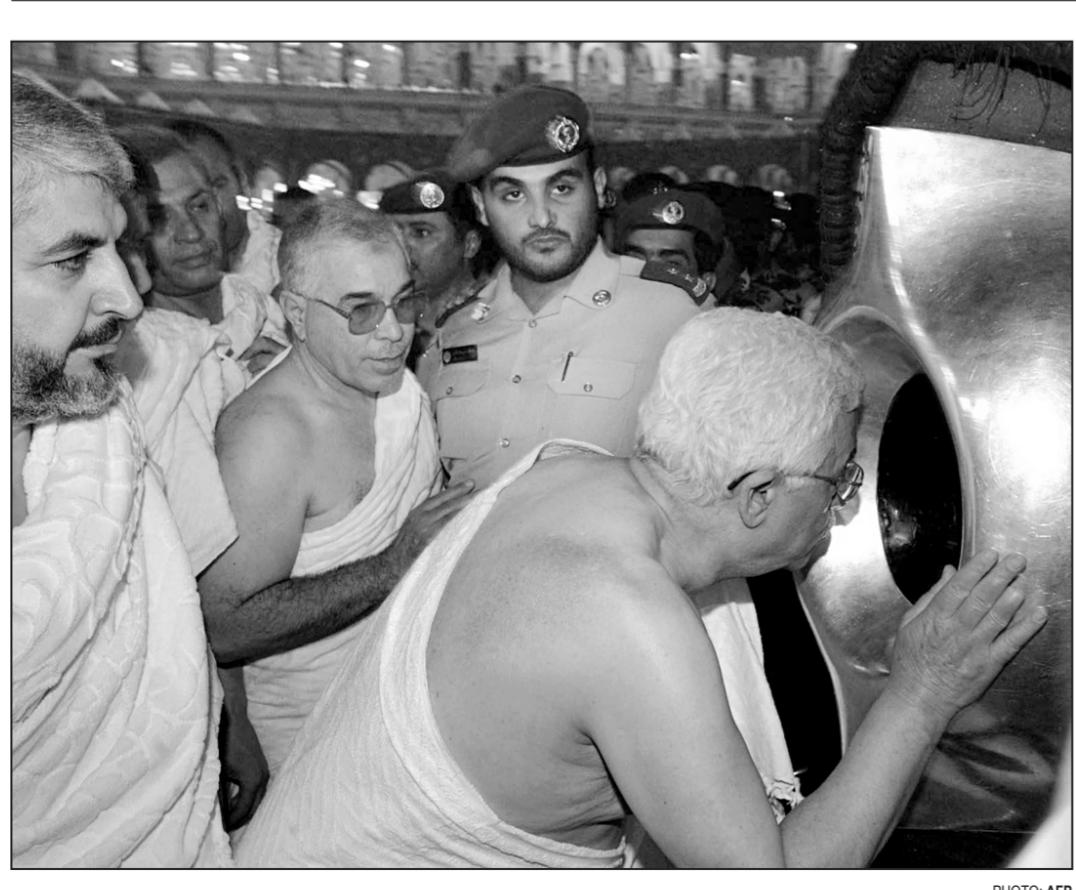


PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas (R) and exiled leader of the ruling Islamist Hamas movement Khaled Meshal performing Umrah, a minor pilgrimage to the Saudi holy city of Makkah. Rival Palestinian factions signed a historic deal to form a national unity government after marathon talks in Makkah, hoping to end lethal infighting and win back Western aid.