

Iran wants to stay within int'l nuke regime

Tehran ready for talks

REUTERS, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad marked the 28th anniversary of Iran's revolution yesterday pledging to maintain the country's nuclear programme but saying he wanted to remain within international rules.

"We are ready for talks but will not suspend our activities," he said in a speech broadcast on state television.

Thousands of people with banners gathered in Azadi (Freedom) square to hear Ahmadinejad, who had said Iran would celebrate its nuclear achievements on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

His comments had prompted

talk Iran might say it had begun installing 3,000 centrifuges at its Natanz uranium enrichment plant, defying a UN sanctions resolution which gave Tehran until February 21 to suspend enrichment or face more measures.

Iran already runs two cascades of 164 centrifuges at the Natanz underground plant, but plans to install thousands of centrifuges and start "industrial-scale" enrichment.

However, some officials had suggested Tehran had no intention to take provocative steps and Ahmadinejad's comments in the end mixed defiance with conciliatory elements in a speech which made no major announcements on the nuclear programme.

"Based on the law, we have the right to have the full (nuclear) fuel cycle," he said.

"The Iranian nation is interested in continuing its nuclear activities in the framework of the (International Atomic Energy) Agency's regulations and treaties," he said.

He added that it would be a "humiliation" for Iran to abandon its nuclear programme and that sanctions would not harm the country.

The United States has accused Iran of having a secret programme to build nuclear weapons. Tehran says its nuclear programme is only for power generation.

Public buildings, mosques and streets were covered with flags,

lights and portraits of the late founder of Iran's Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and his successor, Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"Death to America," shouted demonstrators, repeating the ritual chant of the revolution which toppled the US-backed Shah in 1979 and swept the Shia Muslim clergy to power.

"I am so proud of Iran's atomic achievements. Nuclear technology is our right," said government employee Ebrahim Ahmadizadeh, 24, wrapped in a white shroud symbolising his willingness to become a "martyr" for his country.

Officials had called for a big turnout to show Iranian unity in the face of Western pressure.



An Iranian man carries a placard in support of nuclear technology as another waves a portrait of Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a rally to mark the 28th anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Tehran yesterday.

Work on Jerusalem holy site resumes

AP, Jerusalem

Construction work resumed Sunday on a ramp leading to a disputed holy site in Jerusalem, despite objections from the Muslim world and two days of violent Palestinian protest.

Under heavy Israeli police guard, workmen returned to the site in the walled Old City after a break Saturday for the Jewish Sabbath.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld reported no fresh incidents Sunday morning and said the repair work on the walkway, on the edge of the hilltop known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as the Temple Mount, was scheduled to proceed throughout the day. He said police on duty in and around east Jerusalem would stay at an increased strength of around 2,000 officers and restrictions barring men under the age of 45 from praying at Muslim holy sites would remain in force.

More snow in the forecast for New York

AP, Paris

Blue skies turned gray in the blink of an eye as another severe snowstorm brought snow to an area already inundated by more than 8 feet.

It wasn't good news for this winter-weary region when the flakes began to fall again Saturday. A warning in effect until Monday morning said 2 to 4 more feet of snow was possible with wind gusting up to 24 mph.

"That's all we need," Mike Avery said as he took a brief break from loading dump trucks with snow to be hauled to a pile outside town. "It's getting monotonous."

Persistent bands of lake-effect snow squalls fed by moisture from Lake Ontario have been swinging up and down this part of central New York along the lake's eastern shore since last Sunday.

The National Weather Service said Parish about 25 miles northeast of Syracuse reached a milestone early Saturday with 100 inches of snow during the past seven days. That was pushed to 110 inches by early Sunday with fresh snowfall.

Mild quake jolts northern Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

A mild 4.8 magnitude earthquake jolted northern Pakistan yesterday, but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, officials said.

Tremors were felt in Gilgit, a remote mountain city, at 9:39 am (0439 GMT), a seismological department official said.

The earthquake's epicentre was located about 350km northeast of Islamabad, he said.

Police and emergency rescue officials said there were no reports of deaths or injuries, or of damage to property.

Separately, two earthquakes measuring 4.1 and 4.0 were felt in quake-hit northwestern Mansehra district at 2.26 pm (0926 GMT) and 7.41 pm (1441 GMT) respectively on Saturday, with no damage or casualties reported.

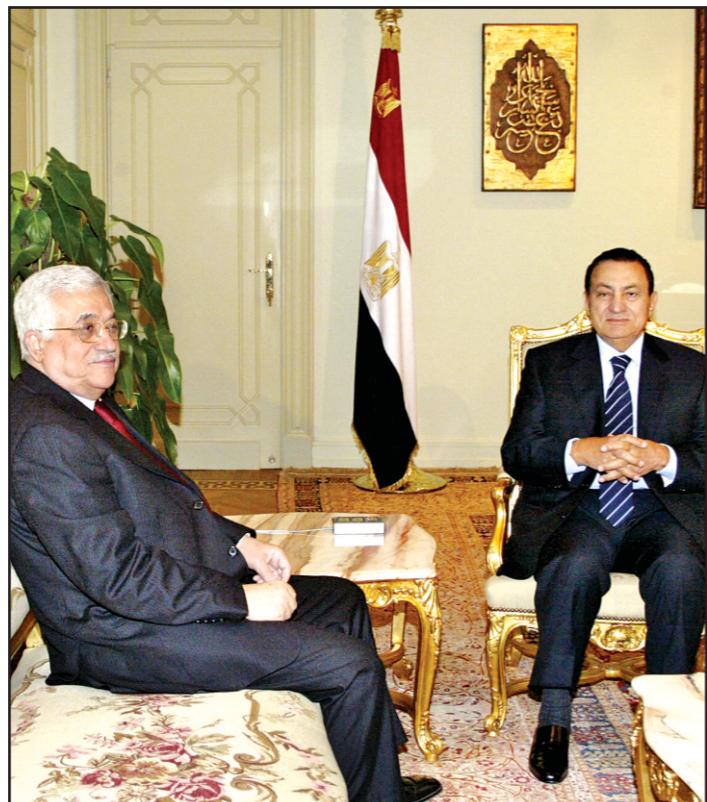


PHOTO: AFP
Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) meets with Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas (L) in Cairo yesterday. Abbas arrived in Egypt yesterday to brief Mubarak on the results of the Makkah meeting with Hamas representatives.

Global warming debate heats up in US

AFP, Washington

Global politicians and business leaders aim to turn the unfertile territory of Washington into a hotbed of action against climate change this week.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel will be among those addressing a two-day forum on Capitol Hill that comes at a time when scientific warnings about the catastrophic potential of global warming are reaching a fever pitch.

"The science has become more clear, more certain and more urgent," says British Environment Secretary David Miliband, who will attend the forum at the US Senate along with World Bank president Paul Wolfowitz.

"There's a major shift in the science and there's a major shift in

the way that this issue is conceived," he told reporters on a conference call.

The Republican administration of US President George W. Bush insists that it takes the issue of man-made climate change seriously, but remains opposed to endorsing the Kyoto treaty against global warming.

Heavyweight US senators including 2008 presidential contenders Joe Biden (Democrat) and John McCain (Republican) will speak at the forum to drive home the message that not everyone in the United States opposes action.

With the Democrats back in control of Congress, initiatives such as enforced caps on greenhouse gas emissions from industry, and European-style carbon markets, are getting a new hearing.

Jakarta flood clean-up could take months

REUTERS, Jakarta

More Indonesians began clearing mud and debris from flood-damaged homes on Sunday after days of relatively dry weather, but for many it could be one or two months before they can actually move back into their homes.

At the height of the flooding that began more than a week ago, officials reported over 400,000 people displaced by the high water in the Jakarta metropolitan area of 14 million.

By Sunday estimates had declined to 77,196 for Jakarta proper and a combined total of 218,583 for nearby West Java and Banten provinces, which stretch well beyond greater Jakarta.

However, for tens of thousands

still in cramped and sometimes unsanitary temporary shelters, the wait to return home could be lengthy.

In one South Jakarta neighbourhood some 30 policemen worked with residents on Sunday to clean up mud one to two meters deep left inside their houses by the floods, which began with torrential rains more than a week ago.

"It is impossible for the residents to return to their homes (to live) soon. The mud is piled too high inside," Jakarta police officer Sukadi told Reuters by telephone.

"There is nothing left here in our house. Everything is soaked in the mud," said resident Uki, 28.

He and his family were evacuated a week earlier to the nearest shelter.

Gates recalls Cold War in push for Nato spending

REUTERS, Munich

Defence Secretary Robert Gates told Europe on Sunday it must boost defence spending and commit more troops and money to Afghanistan if Nato is to remain a potent military alliance.

He said failure to provide the needed resources to win the war in Afghanistan, now more than five years old, would be a "mark of shame" for the world's richest countries.

"An alliance consisting of the world's most prosperous industrial nations, with over two million

people in uniform -- not even counting the American military -- should be able to generate the manpower and materiel needed to get the job done in Afghanistan," he told the Munich Security Conference, a gathering of world leaders.

Gates, appointed as Pentagon chief in December, sought to lift the debate among Nato allies over resources needed for Afghanistan by casting the war and threats worldwide as a test of their continued dedication to democracy and shared values.

Hopes for N Korean nuclear deal dim

AFP, Beijing

Other participants in the six-nation talks -- which also include the United States, Russia, South Korea and hosts China -- also were downbeat.

"It looks unreasonable to expect a breakthrough today," South Korean envoy Chun Yung-Woo told reporters.

The latest round of the long-running six-nation talks began on Thursday amid optimism that a deal could be reached on a draft accord by Kenichiro Sasae told reporters in Beijing on the fourth day of North Korean disarmament talks.

"The gap between North Korea and our side still remains wide and severe."

But, as has happened many times before in the nearly four-year-

US lawmakers gird for the battle over Iraq

AFP, Washington

which is not bound by the Senate rules, takes the ball on the rebound.

The Democratic leadership plans on Monday to submit the largely symbolic text to a gruelling three-day debate.

The draft will appeal to the largest number of Democrats possible and to enough Republicans to stave off the House members' disagreement with the Senate's January 10 announcement of a troop "surge," while showing the lawmakers' support for the troops.

"This is a very serious debate," Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said

Thursday, seeking to hush criticism over the absence of teeth in the resolution that could force a change in policy.

"For four years the Congress has been complacent and complicit ... in the policies that have been pursued," he said. "But the Congress of the United States has the responsibility to set the overall policies. We intend to take the responsibility."

Republican leaders seek to minimize any fallout from the debate they call meaningless political theatre.



Big Brother winner Shetty flies home

AFP, Mumbai

Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty, who became a household name in Britain after winning a controversial reality television programme last month, flew home to India Saturday, her publicist said.

Shetty, who grabbed the prize January 28 after being subjected to alleged racist bullying during the show, visited the crowded Siddhivinayak temple on arrival in Mumbai from London.

Shetty was not immediately available for comment.

The 31-year-old actress was voted the winner of the Big Brother show by viewers. Critics said the programme was marred by bullying by three of her co-participants.

Among the controversial comments made against her, Shetty was called a "dog", asked whether she lived in a shack and told to clean toilets with her teeth.

Shetty's torment churned up a diplomatic incident, with Indian ministers vowing "appropriate action" and British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his finance minister Gordon Brown being forced to speak out on the issue.