

# Tehran ready for both 'talks & war' with US

Pentagon panel created for Iran bombing

AFP, REUTERS, Tehran/ New York

Iran is prepared both for war and talks with the United States, a top foreign ministry official said yesterday, amid speculation of American plans for military action against Tehran.

"We have prepared ourselves for any situation, even if war happens," Deputy Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mohammadi told the ISNA news agency.

"Iran is ready for negotiations without preconditions with the United States, but the Americans have not accepted it yet," he added.

"We have had unofficial meetings with Americans over Afghanistan and Iraq, but they say first Iran should accept US conditions and then talks take place."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has insisted she would only hold talks with her Iranian counterpart if Tehran first agreed to a suspension of sensitive nuclear activities.

Mohammadi said that if the UN Security Council adopted a second resolution imposing sanctions over

Iran's controversial nuclear programme, Tehran would press on with its atomic drive.

"If the second resolution is issued we will not react and Iran will continue its nuclear work," said Mohammadi.

US Vice President Dick Cheney reignited speculation of US military intervention in Iran when he said Washington favours a diplomatic approach to Tehran's atomic programme but that "all options are still on the table."

The United States and Israel accuse Iran of seeking nuclear weapons. Tehran denies the charges, insisting its atomic programme is peaceful in nature.

Despite the Bush administration's insistence it has no plans to go to war with Iran, a Pentagon panel has been created to plan a bombing attack that could be implemented within 24 hours of getting the go-ahead from President George W Bush, The New Yorker magazine reported in its latest issue.

The special planning group was established within the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in recent months,

according to an unidentified former US intelligence official cited in the article by investigative reporter Seymour Hersh in the March 4 issue.

The panel initially focused on destroying Iran's nuclear facilities and on regime change but has more recently been directed to identify targets in Iran that may be involved in supplying or aiding militants in Iraq, according to an Air Force adviser and a Pentagon consultant, who were not identified.

The consultant and a former senior intelligence official both said that US military and special-operations teams had crossed the border from Iraq into Iran in pursuit of Iranian operatives, according to the article.

In response to the report, Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman said: "The United States is not planning to go to war with Iran. To suggest anything to the contrary is simply wrong, misleading and mischievous."

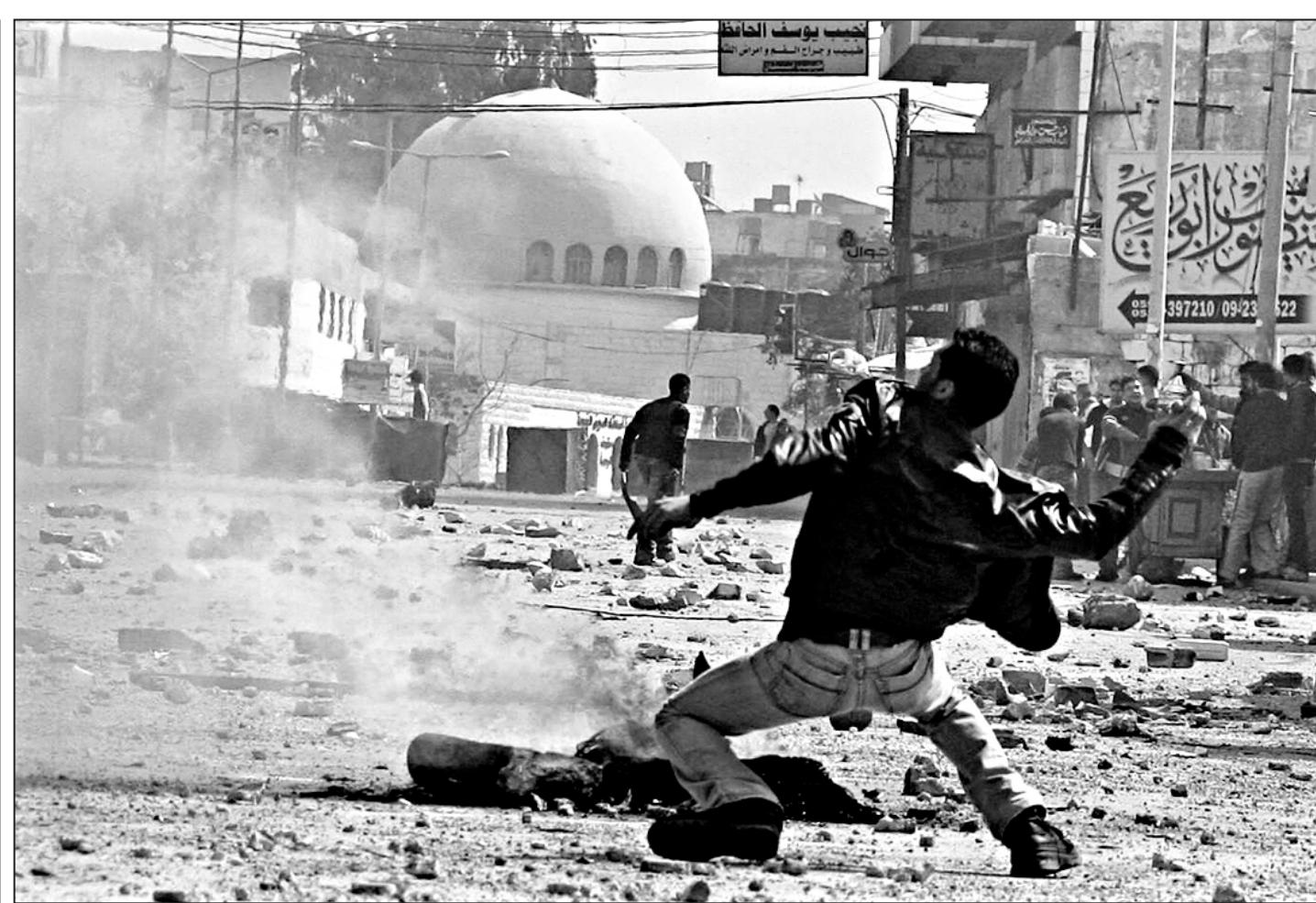
"The United States has been very clear with respect to its concerns regarding specific Iranian government activities. The president has

repeatedly stated publicly that this country is going to work with allies in the region to address those concerns through diplomatic efforts," Whitman said.

Pentagon officials say they maintain contingency plans for literally dozens of potential conflicts around the world and that all plans are subject to regular and ongoing review.

The article, citing unnamed current and former US officials, also said the Bush administration received intelligence from Israel that Iran had developed an intercontinental missile capable of delivering several small warheads that could reach Europe. It added the validity of that intelligence was still being debated.

The article also included an interview conducted in December with Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, who said that while he had no interest in initiating another war with Israel, he was anticipating and preparing for another Israeli attack sometime this year.



A Palestinian throws a stone towards Israeli army jeeps during an incursion in the West Bank town of Nablus yesterday. The Israeli army raided the northern West Bank town of Nablus, arresting 15 Palestinians and triggering clashes that left six people wounded.



A family uses a barge to go through a flooded area in Camiaco, 98 Km from Trinidad, Province of Beni, Bolivia, on Saturday. Authorities say two months of rain and floods have left 35 people dead, 10 unaccounted for, and affected hundreds of thousands of people.

## 'Most US intelligence on Iran inaccurate'

AFP, Washington

Most US intelligence on Iran shared with the International Atomic Energy Agency has proved to be inaccurate and failed to lead to discoveries of a smoking gun inside the Islamic Republic, The Los Angeles Times reported on its website Saturday.

Citing unnamed diplomats working in Vienna, the newspaper said the US Central Intelligence Agency and other Western intelligence services have been providing sensitive information to the IAEA since 2002.

But none of the tips about Iran's suspected secret weapons sites provided clear evidence that the Islamic Republic is developing a nuclear arms arsenal, the report said.

"Since 2002, pretty much all the intelligence that's come to us has proved to be wrong," the paper quotes a senior IAEA diplomat as saying.

Another official described the agency's intelligence stream as "very cold now" because "so little has panned out," The Times reported.

US officials privately acknowledge that much of their evidence on

Iran's nuclear programme remains ambiguous, fragmented and difficult to prove, the report said.

The IAEA has its own concerns about Iran.

In November 2005, UN inspectors discovered a 15-page document in Tehran that showed how to form highly enriched uranium into the configuration for the core of a nuclear bomb, The Times said.

Iran said the paper came from Pakistan, but has rebuffed IAEA requests to let inspectors take or copy it for further analysis.

However, diplomats working for the IAEA were less convinced in 2005 by documents recovered by US intelligence from a laptop computer apparently stolen from Iran, the paper said.

The documents included detailed designs to upgrade ballistic missiles to carry nuclear warheads, drawings for subterranean testing of high explosives, and two pages describing research into uranium tetrafluoride, known as "green salt," which is used during uranium enrichment.

## Home-grown terrorists plotting attacks in UK

Reuters, London

More than 2,000 home-grown al-Qaeda terrorists are plotting suicide attacks in Britain, the Sunday Telegraph newspaper reported, citing a secret intelligence document.

The security threat is at its highest level since the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States and the planning of attacks against British targets will increase further in 2007, the "Extremist Threat Assessment" document said, according to the newspaper.

"The scale of al-Qaeda's ambitions toward attacking the UK and the number of UK extremists prepared to participate in attacks are even greater than we had previously judged," the Sunday Telegraph quoted the document as saying.

Britain suffered its worst peacetime attack in July 2005 when four British Islamists blew themselves up on London's transport network, killing 52 commuters and wounding hundreds.

## Clashes erupt as Israeli troops raid Nablus

AFP, Nablus

Israeli troops raided the northern West Bank town of Nablus yesterday, arresting 20 Palestinians and triggering clashes that left six people wounded, security sources and witnesses said.

The Palestinians slammed the operation as an "outrageous aggression," warning that it could undermine stability in the region, and appealed to the international community to intervene.

Israeli troops in dozens of jeeps and armoured vehicles rolled into the centre of town early on Sunday, imposing a curfew and surrounding several buildings and two hospitals, in what the military said was an operation to find weapons caches and arrest wanted militants.

It was the largest Israeli military operation in the occupied West Bank since January 4, when four Palestinians were killed during a raid in Ramallah, and the largest in Nablus in seven months.

Four Palestinians were lightly wounded by rubber bullets in the clashes, medics said. The army said

two soldiers were also lightly wounded.

"There were brief exchanges of fire and our forces also used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse Palestinian demonstrators who had thrown rocks at them," an army spokesman said.

In what Israeli army radio called an "unlimited" operation, troops continued to conduct house-to-house searches in the early afternoon, arresting 20 people, Palestinian security sources said.

The streets in Nablus's old city remained deserted, with many blocked, as residents remained indoors, witnesses said. Shops were shuttered and schools closed. Sounds of occasional explosions were heard throughout the day.

The army had distributed flyers in the town saying the raid was aimed at arresting nine wanted people, security sources said.

"Our forces are operating in Nablus to discover caches of arms and explosives and to arrest those responsible for attacks against Israel."

## Ghost of Bofors scam haunts Congress

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The ghost of high-profile Bofors gun purchase scam in mid-1980s seems to have come back to haunt ruling Congress party after a news that an Italian businessman, wanted in India for allegedly receiving kickbacks in the deal, was detained in Argentina.

The BJP-led opposition has dropped enough indications in the last three days that it is going to raise the issue in a big way when the budget session of Parliament resumes today.

The BJP and its allies have sought to know from the government why the news about detention of the businessman Ottavio Quattrochi in Argentina on February 6 had been kept under wraps and announced only on February 23.

A resolution passed by a meeting of BJP office bearers here on Saturday also accused the government of withholding information of Quattrochi's detention to prevent negative fall-out on the party's prospects in assembly polls in three states.

Quattrochi was detained in Argentina on February 6 and India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) made the announcement of

his detention on last Friday. There was an arrest notice issued by Interpol on a request from CBI.

The opposition is likely to ask Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to reply in Parliament why the CBI held back such important information about Quattrochi's detention.

BJP General Secretary Arun Jaitley charged the Congress-led government with holding back the information to save itself from "embarrassment" during the elections in the three states—Punjab, Uttarakhand and Manipur.

"The secrecy was also meant to delay the process of CBI complying with legal formalities to enable Quattrochi's extradition," he alleged.

Under international law, the CBI with the Indian External Affairs Ministry has to complete the procedure for seeking the Italian businessman's extradition by March 5.

India does not have an extradition treaty with Argentina.

Even the Left parties, which support the Congress-led government from outside, have joined the demand for quick extradition of Quattrochi, adding to the pressure building up on the ruling coalition to seek Quattrochi's extradition and trial in India.