

Iran, Sudan close ranks in face of Western pressure

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on his first visit to Sudan on Wednesday extended full support to his opposite number Omar al-Beshir, blaming the United States and its allies for the region's woes.

On a two-day visit aimed at bolstering ties between the oil-producing Islamic states -- both considered state sponsors of terrorism by Washington --, the Iranian leader held talks with Beshir and several other senior officials.

"The forces of hegemony that are exerting pressure on the government and people of Sudan do not want to see a strong and effective" country, Ahmadinejad said before going into closed-door talks with his Sudanese counterpart.

"We are confident that our brothers, the president of Sudan and his colleagues... will forge ahead and present a united front in confronting those challenges," he said.

Ahmadinejad later met Sudan's First Vice President Salva Kiir, who heads the former southern rebel movement's presence in the national unity cabinet but has often expressed differences with Beshir.

The Iranian president did not explicitly comment on Tuesday's decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to request summonses for two Sudanese officials suspected of war crimes in the western region of Darfur.

The move represented the first attempt to hold criminally liable officials suspected of masterminding the atrocities carried out against

civilians in Darfur over the past four years.

One of the two officials is Ahmed Haroun, the current secretary of state for humanitarian affairs, while the other is Ali Kosheib, a pro-government militia leader.

"Our enemies are trying to destabilise us but we are capable of foiling their plot," said Beshir, who also reiterated Khartoum's support for Iran's nuclear programme, which the West is concerned will be used to manufacture weapons.

Without naming it, Ahmadinejad also blamed the United States for destabilising Lebanon and "planting the seeds of sectarian discord" in Iraq.

The two delegations were expected to hold wide-ranging talks aimed at increasing bilateral cooperation in agriculture and industry

that should culminate Thursday with the signing of a package of agreements.

"Relations are at a very good level... We have many economic and cultural projects, in agriculture, energy and oil exploration in Sudan and culture," Ahmadinejad said before leaving Tehran.

Iran's ambassador to Khartoum, Reza Amiri, said he hoped business partnerships could help increase the volume of two-way trade to 70 million dollars a year from the current level of 43 million dollars.

Iran has also offered its expertise in the oil industry, an area currently dominated by China, India and Malaysia.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian youths gather near Israeli army vehicles during a military operation in the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday. Israeli troops stormed a residential building in Nablus on Thursday, pressing on with a widespread crackdown against suspected militants in the occupied West Bank city.

Indian SC orders probe against Mulayam Singh

REUTERS, New Delhi

The Supreme Court ordered a probe yesterday into allegations that the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh had illegally made around 1 billion rupees.

The order against Mulayam Singh Yadav could prove to be an electoral setback for his Samajwadi Party that currently runs the state and faces polls in April and May.

"It is in the chief minister's interest to have his name cleared," a two-judge bench of the court said, while ordering the Central Bureau of Investigation to conduct the probe.

"A chief minister of a state should not function under a cloud," the court added.

Yadav, a former defence minister, was not immediately available for comment. He has been chief minister of Uttar Pradesh since August 2003.



PHOTO: AFP

North Korea's ceremonial head of state Kim Yong-Nam (L) shakes hands with South Korean Unification Minister Lee Jae-Joong (R) during their meeting in Pyongyang yesterday. Lee heads the South Korean delegates who are in Pyongyang to take part in the first high-level talks between the two Koreas since the North's nuclear test.

Militants to be forced out Says Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf said Pakistan will force foreign al-Qaeda and Taliban militants to leave the troubled tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, state media reported yesterday.

General Musharraf -- told by US Vice President Dick Cheney on a surprise visit earlier this week to crack down on insurgents -- also urged Pakistanis to help by informing the authorities about extremist suspects.

"People have come there from outside. They are living in our mountains and spreading terrorism not just in Pakistan but in the entire world," the official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted Musharraf as saying late Wednesday.

"These people are putting Pakistan in danger. These people should leave and go, otherwise we will have to deal

with them and we are dealing with them," he told a large public meeting in southern Sindh province.

The impact of terrorism was being felt throughout Pakistan and it was the public's duty to help, Musharraf said. "Identify and point out those who have such tendencies and inform the law enforcement agencies," he said.

Musharraf, who has escaped three assassination attempts blamed on Islamic militants opposed to his fight against extremism, also said that the country's development was being harmed by fundamentalism.

"We have to check such tendencies, otherwise the country will not be able to move on to the path of progress and development," he added.

Cheney on Monday said Washington was concerned that al-Qaeda was regrouping in Pakistan's northwestern tribal zone

and that Taliban rebels based there were preparing for a spring offensive against foreign troops in Afghanistan.

The US vice president's brief trip to Islamabad came amid reports that US aid could be cut if Pakistan did not take more action to hunt down Islamic militants.

The next day Cheney was forced to take shelter when a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up at the gate of the main US base in Afghanistan. Cheney was unhurt but Afghan officials said 20 people were killed.

Pakistan says it has killed up to 1,000 militants and lost 700 soldiers in military action in the tribal areas since 2003, but it has since signed peace deals with militants in North and South Waziristan districts.

US and Afghan officials say attacks across the border have soared as a result of the pact.

Tiger proxies urge India not to give warship to Lanka

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil National Alliance, seen as proxies in parliament for the Tiger rebels, yesterday asked India not to help Sri Lanka's navy.

According to the English-language daily The Nation and other local media, India has loaned a "Vikram class" coastal patrol ship to the Sri Lanka Navy as a temporary replacement for a similar ship provided by India in 2000.

That vessel is being refurbished by the Indian government at no cost to Sri Lanka, according to the Nation.

"These reports have come against the backdrop of repeated assurances given by the Indian leadership that India, as a matter of policy, will not provide any lethal weapons to Sri Lanka," the Tamil National Alliance said in a statement.

The ship carries machine guns and cannon on board, according to the Indian coast guard web site.

Indian High Commission spokeswoman Nagma Malik said India provides "some training and other support to Sir Lanka's defensive capabilities but we do not comment on the details."

New Delhi is thought to be wary of becoming embroiled in the conflict after its attempt in the late 1980s to disarm the rebels ended with the deaths of some 1,200 Indian troops and India's subsequent withdrawal from the island.

But there have been growing calls by Sri Lanka's government for India to take a more active role amid an escalation in the conflict over the past year following the unravelling of a Norwegian-brokered 2002 ceasefire deal.

Iran kills 17 rebels in northwest province

AFP, Tehran

Iranian security forces killed 17 rebels in the latest clashes in West Azarbaijan province close to the Turkish and Iraqi borders in northwest Iran, a Revolutionary Guards commander said yesterday.

"Seventeen rebels who entered Iran to carry out sabotage work have been killed," Colonel Jalil Babazadeh of the elite force told the IRNA news agency.

Four members of the Guards were also killed in the clashes, including one commander, two lieutenants and a rank-and-file member, the commander said, without specifying when the fighting took place.

West Azarbaijan province has been the scene of a string of deadly clashes in recent days between Iranian security forces and rebels linked to the Kurdish separatist group Pejak.

Guards chief Yayha Rahim Safavi said on Wednesday around 30 rebels had been killed by security

forces in the clashes, which have coincided with an upsurge of unrest in the Sistan-Baluchestan province in the southeast of Iran.

The authorities have repeatedly accused the United States and Britain of seeking to stir unrest amongst ethnic minorities in sensitive areas close to the Turkish, Iraqi and Pakistani borders.

Fourteen Iranian military personnel were killed in a helicopter crash last week during an operation against rebels in West Azarbaijan province that the authorities said was an accident due to bad weather.

Pejak, a group linked to Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), claimed shooting down the helicopter and killing 20 soldiers and senior officers.

Safavi on Wednesday warned that the Revolutionary Guards reserved the right to pursue Kurdish rebels inside Iraq's frontiers if Baghdad failed to expel them from border zones.

Ex-PM's party threatens to quit Iraqi govt

US Army chopper makes 'hard landing'

AFP, AP, Baghdad

The secular party led by former Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Allawi threatened yesterday to quit the country's embattled government of national unity, accusing officials of sectarian bias.

Allawi's Iraqi National List is the only major political party in Iraq to include high ranking members from both the Sunni and Shia community. It has five ministers and 25 members of parliament.

If Allawi's supporters were to quit Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's coalition, it would strike a blow to attempts to portray the government as a moderate, non-sectarian force in an Iraqi increasingly divided by violence and extremism.

The List says Maliki's Shia-led government has failed to honour promises to allow more Sunnis into public service and of persecuting its enemies under the guise of fighting corruption and terrorism.

"We strongly fear that the government's announced security plan will suffer setbacks because of disagreements and clashes between senior officials," the List said, in a statement sent to reporters.

"In this context, the Iraqi List feels it will soon no longer be able to accept the responsibility of being in this government, because of its sectarian domination and narrow-mindedness," it warned.

"We wouldn't have joined government in the first place but for

pressure on us to serve the national interest, but in the last few months the government has done the opposite, and committed despicable acts against many citizens."

The coalition that was formed in June last year, after Iraq's first election since the fall of Saddam Hussein, is a fractious collection of often feuding parties, many of them with links to militias engaged in sectarian violence.

Allawi was appointed as Iraq's interim premier in June 2004 when the US occupying authorities returned Iraq's sovereignty, but his secular party lost out to Shia Islamists in the later elections.

The party did not set a deadline for its withdrawal, but party spokesman Ibrahim al-Janabi told AFP that the day would soon be at hand.

"This is a final ultimatum to withdraw from the government. The decision has not been taken yet but it will be in the short run rather than the long run."

Meanwhile, a US Army helicopter made a "hard landing" in northern Iraq yesterday, but the military said the problem was mechanical and not the result of hostile fire.

Two pilots were injured and evacuated to an American military hospital in Kirkuk, about 180 miles north of Baghdad, the military said in a statement. There was no word on the extent of the pilots' injuries.

Congress gets wake-up call from prices, polls

REUTERS, New Delhi

Stung by soaring prices, state election defeats and a resurgent opposition, the ruling Congress party will likely stay in damage control mode with an eye on polls in the next two years.

The party, which came to power in 2004 after disenchantment with the previous government's failure to spread prosperity, finds itself in a similar corner as voters complain they are not benefitting from record economic growth, analysts said.

The coalition has promised investments in education, health care and the farm sector in its annual budget.

But the results are not expected in time to boost its chances in the 2009 national polls. As a result, the ruling coalition is expected to resort to populist measures and put off tough economic decisions.

"I think this government is in serious trouble," said Mahesh

Rangarajan, an independent political analyst. "This is a budget of a government on the retreat. It was brilliant political grandstanding with no content. They're very worried."

The Congress-led coalition, which depends on Communist allies for its survival, has made growth the centrepiece of its agenda, as Asia's fourth-largest economy expands at around 9 percent, its fastest rate in 18 years.

However, much of this growth has been concentrated in the industrial and service sectors, leaving out millions of rural poor.

The expansion has resulted in higher inflation as supplies failed to keep pace with demand and infrastructure such as ports and power has struggled to cope.

Prices of everything from wheat to vegetables have soared, triggering public discontent and panic among politicians who have to fight three more state elections this year, 10 in 2008 and national polls due in early 2009.

Embattled Israeli PM faces fresh scam

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was yesterday accused of unlawfully appointing scores of political cronies from his former Likud party in the latest scandal to mar his beleaguered leadership.

The allegations were sparked when private Channel 10 television revealed a document drawn up by Olmert aides listing dozens of appointments they arranged for party members when he was trade and industry minister from 2003 to 2006.

The more than 100 alleged fixed jobs include senior positions in public bodies, such as local councils and the postal authority, which require open competition at public tender.

"Every week or two, I would be summoned to the minister's office... during these meetings I got a list of people who they wanted appointed to the postal service," Avi Moskovitch, a former senior postal official, told army radio.

McCain enters 2008 US presidential race

AFP, Washington

Influential Republican Senator John McCain announced Wednesday that he will run for the White House in the 2008 race.

McCain, who lost his party's nomination in 2000 to now-President George W. Bush, made the announcement on an unusual venue: CBS television's "Late Show with David Letterman," a popular comedy show.

"I am announcing that I will be a candidate for president of the United States," McCain said on the show.

He later said that he will be making the formal announcement in April. "You drag this out as long as you can," he said, half-joking. "You don't just have one rendition."

The outspoken Arizona senator, 70, once a front-runner among Republican faithful, has seen his standing in the polls slip. A Wednesday survey placed him well behind his main rival, former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

McCain has long supported the unpopular Iraq war, arguing that more soldiers were needed to flush out insurgents, crush militias and train Iraqi forces -- a position since taken up by the president.

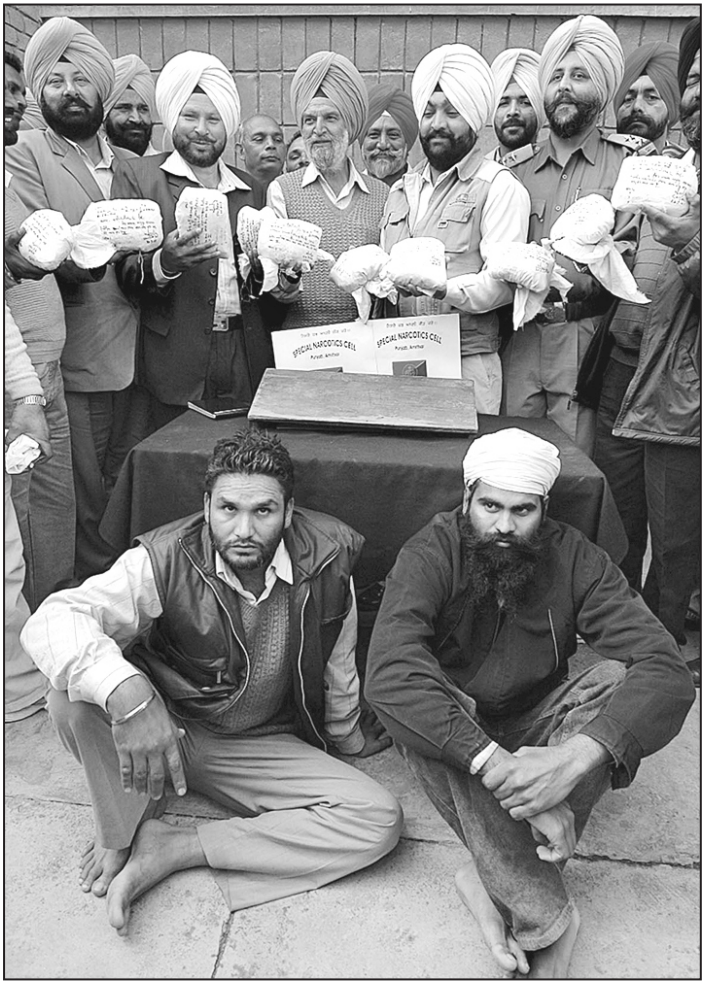


PHOTO: AFP

Officials from the Special Narcotics Cell of India's Punjab police force pose with sacks containing 10 kilograms of heroin seized after they arrested two alleged smugglers, Balwinder Singh Binda (Foreground-R) and Harpal Singh Happy (Foreground-L) at a press conference in Amritsar yesterday. Officials recovered 10 kilograms of heroin, which were allegedly smuggled into the country from Pakistan.