

UN envoys consider new sanctions on Iran

Tehran ready for talks with US sans conditions

REUTERS, AFP, United Nations/
Tehran

In an effort to pressure Iran into suspending uranium enrichment, six key UN ambassadors began a week of negotiations on possible new sanctions but agreement was still elusive.

"I think the basic idea is to expand and strengthen the sanctions regime but how far we will go, I think there are some differences among member states," China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya said after the opening round on Monday.

He said he expected to join envoys from the United States, Britain, France, Russia and Germany for further talks on Tuesday, and thereafter in briefings to the full 15-member UN Security Council.

The negotiations, at Britain's

mission to the United Nations, moved to New York after senior foreign ministry officials consulted three times by telephone over the past week. On Saturday, they were unable to settle all their differences.

Both Wang and Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin said the new resolution would probably give Iran 60 days to comply with demands that it halt its nuclear enrichment work, which can provide fuel for power plants or for bombs.

The United States and leading European countries suspect Iran is seeking to build nuclear weapons under the cover of a civilian atomic programme. Tehran denies the charge and says its programme is for generating electricity only.

The new resolution is a follow-up to one adopted by the Security Council on December 23, which imposed trade sanctions on sensi-

tive nuclear materials and technology and froze assets of key Iranians after Tehran refused to halt enrichment work.

According to Germany's UN Ambassador Thomas Matussek, the discussions evolved around a mandatory travel ban on Iranian officials involved in the nuclear programme, an expansion of the list of banned nuclear material and technology Iran may import and export. Also under consideration is enlarging the list of Iranian officials who assets can be frozen abroad.

But envoys said proposals for a total arms embargo would be dropped because of Russian objections, as would a ban on visas for students studying nuclear technology abroad.

"The slogan we use for this one (resolution) is 'swift and modest,'" Matussek said.

Meanwhile, Iran is prepared to hold negotiations or even reopen diplomatic ties with the United States as long as Washington set no pre-conditions. Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said in an interview published yesterday.

"We have always said that we were ready to have negotiations. On the nuclear issue, we said that they needed to withdraw the precondition of a suspension before negotiating," Mottaki told the Etemad Melli newspaper.

Mottaki was referring to US demands Iran suspends uranium enrichment, a sensitive nuclear process that can be diverted to make nuclear weapons and Iran is refusing to freeze. Iran denies US accusations it wants an atomic bomb.



Video grab taken from local television Metro TV shows earthquake victims receiving treatment in Solok, West Sumatra yesterday after powerful earthquake struck the Indonesian island of Sumatra killing at least 82 people.

Olmert to meet Abbas within days: Officials

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert plans to meet Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas as early as Sunday, before a unity government with Hamas is formed, officials said on Tuesday.

Israel has vowed to boycott the unity government between Abbas's Fatah faction and the Hamas movement unless it recognises Israel, renounces violence and accepts interim peace deals as demanded by the Quartet of Middle East mediators.

The unity government deal, signed last month in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, contains a vague promise to "respect" previous Israeli-Palestinian pacts. But it does not commit the incoming government to abide by those pacts, nor to recognise Israel and renounce violence.

Abbas and Olmert held a three-way summit last month with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that was overshadowed by differences over the power sharing deal.



Indian Additional Secretary for International Organisations on the Indian Ministry of External Affairs KC Singh (2R) speaks with Pakistani Additional Secretary of United Nation and Economic Coordination Tariq Usman (L) during a meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday.

Lankan police, troops involved in abductions

Admits police chief

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's police admitted yesterday that its own security personnel have been involved in kidnappings for ransom and vowed to crack down on mounting abductions and killings of civilians.

Police Inspector General Victor Perera said a "large number" of police officers and troops had been arrested on charges of abduction and extortion.

His remarks came as five bullet-riddled bodies of unidentified men turned up in the north central district of Anuradhapura Tuesday following a similar discovery of five bodies near the capital on Saturday.

The police chief said the identity of the victims was not immediately known but offered "unlimited money" as a reward for information leading to the arrest of those involved in kidnappings.

He said among 433 people arrested since September over "terrorist activities," including abductions and killings, a large

number were either police, soldiers or deserters.

"We have arrested a large number of police and servicemen and even an employee of the defence ministry in connection with these activities," Perera said.

"There is a lot of attention by foreign organisations on the human rights situation here, and these killings and abductions cause big problems for the government internationally," Perera said.

He said a team of UN experts was currently visiting the island to assess the island's human rights situation.

Top police detective Asoka Wijetilleke also said elements in the service were working together with "underworld gangs" to abduct, extort money and kill people, but there could be other groups also operating with impunity.

"The magnitude of the problem is yet to be assessed. There are... groups which include ex-servicemen, serving soldiers and policemen and underworld gangs,"

Wijetilleke said.

He said the police were yet to complete investigations into the involvement of their own men in the extra-judicial killings and abductions, while authorities were yet to start investigations into "other groups."

International human rights organisations have said rights abuses have increased amid the escalating conflict between troops and separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Local officials said that more than 60 people, mostly civilians, had been killed as a result of the conflict in the northern town of Vavuniya, which is a de facto frontier post for the government, in the past two months alone.

The Tiger rebels and the military have pointed fingers at each other for the increased killings.

At least 4,000 people have been killed since December 2005, despite a truce struck five years ago in line with a peace initiative by Norway.

Nepal ethnic group widens strike

REUTERS, Kathmandu

An ethnic Nepali group which organised an indefinite transport shut-down in large parts of the southern plains last week intensified its fight for autonomy yesterday by extending the strike to shops and industries.

The supply of essential goods and fuel in much of the landlocked nation has already been disrupted due to the transport strike by the Madhesi People's Rights Forum, which says it represents ethnic Madhesis living in the southern plains.

The Forum claims that Nepal's hill-dwelling ruling elite has discriminated against the Madhesi community, which makes up around a third of the country's 26 million population.

The region's residents said the strike's extension had brought life to a standstill in the eastern part of the Terai, the southern plains bordering India.

"Everything is closed," said Guna Dev Lamichhane, who works in a private firm in Biratnagar, 200 km southeast of Kathmandu.



President of India's Congress Party and Chairperson of the country's United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Sonia Gandhi (2-L), Minister of State for Women and Child Development Renuka Chowdhury (L) and Petroleum Minister Manishankar Aiyer (R) applaud during the flag hoisting ceremony at the launch of International Women's Day celebrations in New Delhi yesterday.

Nato launches major Afghan offensive

REUTERS, Kabul

Nato launched its biggest offensive in Afghanistan since the 2001 war on Tuesday, targeting the Taliban and drug lords as hundreds of people rallied in the east against US soldiers killing civilians.

Operation Achilles, which will eventually involve 4,500 Nato soldiers and 1,000 Afghans, began about dawn in Helmand province -- the opium centre of the world's biggest producer, the head of the alliance's southern command Dutch Major-General Ton van Loon said in a statement.

The Taliban over-ran the key Helmand town of Musa Qala a month ago, ending a controversial truce, but a Nato spokeswoman said Achilles was not specifically aimed at regaining the town.

"It signifies the beginning of a planned offensive to bring security to northern Helmand and set the conditions for meaningful development that will fundamentally improve the quality of life for Afghans in the area," van Loon said.

Nato has about 33,000 troops in the country, including support personnel.

The open-ended operation is aimed largely at allowing the repair and expansion of the province's Kajaki dam hydroelectric facility.

"Operations will focus on improving security in areas where Taliban extremists, narco-traffickers and other elements are trying to destabilise the government," van Loon said.

More than 4,000 people died in fighting last year, the bloodiest since US-led forces ousted the Taliban in 2001.

Nato, the US and the Taliban are warning of a bloody spring offensive as the snows melt, with both sides vowing to take the initiative.

The offensive came as hundreds of people protested in the eastern city of Jalalabad, near Pakistan, over the killing of several civilians by US troops on Sunday.

At least 2,000 people blocked the highway between the city and Kabul, a major trade route to Pakistan, chanting "Death to Americans!," witnesses said.

'Asian pollution linked to stronger Pacific storm system'

AFP, Chicago

Increasing levels of industrial pollution in Asia are changing atmospheric conditions over the north Pacific and may explain stronger-than-usual thunderstorms over this part of the ocean during winter months, a study released Monday suggested.

US climatologists say the dramatic increase in pollution from Asia over the past few decades appears to be linked to a sharp rise in the amount of deep convective clouds associated with the Pacific storm track.

The amount of deep convective clouds in the north Pacific increased by between 20 percent and 50 percent between 1994 and 2005 compared to the previous decade, according to satellite data analysed by the climatologists.

The trend reflected the pattern followed by the Pacific storm track, a major weather event during the

northern hemisphere during winter.

The researchers say the trend appears to be unrelated to other climatic conditions, such as changing sea temperatures or the El Nino weather system, but computer modelling suggests it is entirely consistent with the worsening atmospheric pollution over Asia.

The rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of parts of the region, and in particular China and India, have led to dramatic increases in concentrations of atmospheric aerosols, according to long-term satellite data.

Aerosols are particles of sulphur and soot that are expelled during the burning of fossil fuels.

Previous research has shown that atmospheric aerosols can influence the formation and precipitation of clouds, although the extent to which this happened was unclear.



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad looks on during talks with Khaled Meshaal (L), head of the political bureau of Palestinian militant group Hamas, as he makes a point in Tehran yesterday.