

Khatami urges Iran to compromise on nuclear issue

AFP, Teheran

Iran's former president Mohammad Khatami made a rare intervention to urge his headline successor to compromise and prevent a crisis with world powers over its nuclear programme, media reported yesterday.

Khatami, reformist president from 1997 to 2005, told President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to make concessions over Iran's controversial atomic drive and avoid a second UN Security Council sanctions resolution.

"I believe we should pay a certain price, and pay it bravely, for talks and not head towards crisis as well as guaranteeing our rights in future," Khatami told the economic daily Sanaat va Tose'e (Industry and Development) in an interview.

"We must try to prevent the adoption of another resolution." Khatami gave no indication of what the "price" might involve. The United States has repeatedly said negotiations with Iran are only possible if it first suspends sensitive nuclear work, which it has so far steadfastly refused to do.

Although Khatami did not mention the president or the government by name, his comments will be seen as a clear warning to Ahmadinejad, who has already been criticised in parliament and the press for his confrontational policies.

The government has repeatedly refused to give into the key demand that it suspend uranium enrichment, a process that the West fears could be diverted to make nuclear weapons.

The UN Security Council in December punished Iran's defiance by imposing its first ever sanctions against Tehran and is currently discussing a draft resolution that would step up the measures.

Khatami urged Iran to avoid provocations and act with prudence, in marked contrast to Ahmadinejad who has repeatedly vowed in the most graphic language that the nuclear programme will go on.

"We can prevent a crisis with discretion and courage. In nuclear and regional issues, especially Iraq, we should act with prudence and not provoke," said Khatami.

Ahmadinejad has already stood accused in the press of using overly provocative language, especially when he compared Iran's nuclear programme to a train without either "reverse gear or brakes".

"We have to be alert and apprehensive ... the crisis is very damaging to Iran and it hurts the United States and the region too," said Khatami in the interview, which was picked up on the front page of the reformist Ayandeh-No (New Future).

Since handing over the presidency to Ahmadinejad, Khatami

has until now generally stayed out of day-to-day politics, devoting his time to working as head of a centre for dialogue between civilisations, one of the central planks of his own term of office.

He has rarely made remarks that could be interpreted as critical of the government although he raised eyebrows at home and abroad by staging high-profile visits to Britain and even Iran's arch enemy the United States.

The former president vehemently denied that Iran was seeking nuclear weapons but -- in contrast to the government -- appeared to express understanding for the West's concerns over its nuclear programme.

"Of course we don't want to make nuclear weapons but some people are concerned about proliferation of nuclear weapons. This is an important concern and we agreed to alleviate these concerns."

Khatami's intervention came amid renewed criticism in the press of Ahmadinejad, this time over his plan to attend the UN Security Council's deliberations over Iran's nuclear programme in person.

"When the president has said hundreds of Security Council resolutions are worthless to us, why are we breaking this stance?" asked the conservative daily Tehran Emrouz (Tehran Today).



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani lawyer throws a brick at riot police during an anti-government demonstration outside a court in Lahore yesterday. Thousands of lawyers also boycotted courts as President Pervez Musharraf sacked Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on Friday.

Faint praise, candid criticism as Chirac calls it a day

AFP, Paris

European newspapers yesterday offered at best qualified praise and also sharp criticism for French President Jacques Chirac, a day after he announced he would not be running for a third term.

The French press tried to strike a balanced tone, praising Chirac for his fierce defence of France on the international stage and his opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq.

And while they passed over the corruption allegations still hanging over Chirac from his earlier stint as Paris mayor, they did not hesitate to criticise his 12-year record as president.

"Jacques Chirac didn't succeed in waking up France or the French on the fundamental question of the economy," wrote the business daily La Tribune. "Jacques Chirac will leave a France in trouble."

Chirac was also rebuked for calling a referendum on the European Constitution, then failing to actively campaign for the document. French voters rejected it in 2005.

"Chirac could have left Europe with its head high if he hadn't messed up the ratification of the Constitution in France with his over-confidence and air of indifference," concluded the centre-right La Croix.

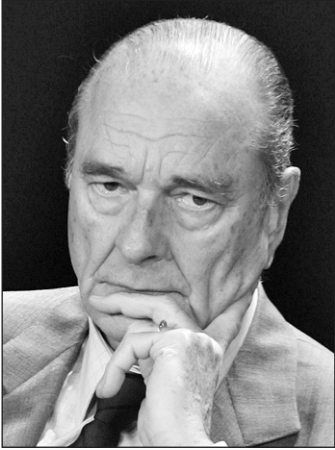
British newspapers were more stinging in their criticism.

"Convention demands that we say nice things about people when they retire but, in the case of Jacques Chirac, it is not easy," said Britain's centre-right Daily Telegraph.

He was widely criticised for flip-flopping on big issues, with the left-of-centre Guardian branding him a "weathervane" and the Financial Times calling him "an eternal opportunist."

However the FT noted that even his critics praise him for getting some things right.

"He is widely praised for admitting France's responsibility for deporting Jews during the German occupation in the Second World War and in 2003 led 'Old Europe' in opposing the US-led invasion of Iraq



and warned of the dangers of American unilateralism," wrote the business daily.

The paper concluded however that "What stands out -- for his detractors -- from Mr Chirac's record is a sense of wasted opportunities."

The German media appeared to agree.

"What did this man do with the chances he had? Very little," left-leaning Berliner Zeitung said, adding that Chirac was leaving France "in the state it was in when he came to power in 1995."

The Frankfurter Rundschau meanwhile insisted Chirac "was leaving behind a country searching for its identity," while The Spiegel weekly published a damning editorial on its website, saying: "Not

much will remain of the legacy of Chirac, who over 40 years helped to shape French politics."

The Russia media voiced far more praise for Chirac, with the financial daily Kommersant claiming that "no future French president will hold as much weight" as Chirac, adding that he "figures among the top 'euro-saures' who, in accordance with the laws of evolution, must give way to a new kind of leader."

"An entire era is coming to an end," public broadcaster Rossia chimed in, lamenting that "there will never be another French president with such (warm) feelings for Russia."

Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique called Chirac the "greatest politician of his generation," adding however that "we really have trouble finding a clear political line" in Chirac's action, after he for "40 years has contradicted himself."

And Belgium's Le Soir referred to the exiting French president as an odd "father of the nation," criticising him for being a "political weathervane, a feeble strategist but an excellent demagogue."

Austrian newspaper Der Standard hailed Chirac's defence of his country abroad: "His political programme breathed France. Chirac was neither right nor left, he was a Gaullist, meaning a fervent Frenchman."

The paper added however that Chirac's limited support for presidential hopeful Nicolas Sarkozy, showed that he "only thought about himself."

"Maybe his succession doesn't matter to him ... For that reason too, he can hardly expect applause as he steps down."

US plotting coups, killings in Latin America:Chavez

AFP, El Alto

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez launched fresh attacks Sunday against his US counterpart George W. Bush, and claimed the US administration was plotting coups and assassinations in Latin America.

"I am warning: the US embassies are continuing to launch plans for assassinations and coups in our countries. I accuse the US government of being behind these plans," Chavez said during a visit to a military base near the Bolivian capital La Paz.

He insisted the United States

"would be sorry" if anything happened to him or his Bolivian ally and fellow-leftist President Evo Morales.

His trip to Bolivia was part of a Latin American tour that rivaled the one US President George W. Bush is leading.

Chavez claimed Bush's tour was marked by "false promises and manipulations."

He once again called the US president "political dead meat" as he had already done at a 35,000-strong anti-Bush rally he headlined in Buenos Aires on Friday.

Abbas-Olmert meeting sees no breakthrough

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas met for more than two hours on Sunday for the second time in less than a month, but with no apparent breakthrough in the stalled peace process.

In what one senior Palestinian present described as a "difficult but frank" encounter, the two leaders held talks at Olmert's Jerusalem residence, first in the presence of aides and then one-on-one.

Abbas called for a "need to revive a meaningful peace process that would lead to the implementation of the roadmap," chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat told reporters afterwards.

The internationally drafted roadmap to Mideast peace calls for the creation of a viable Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, but has been largely dormant since its launch in 2003.

Olmert called for a halt to rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and for the release of an Israeli soldier captured

nearly nine months ago by Gaza-based militants, which has been a major stumbling block in relations between the two sides, a senior Israeli official told reporters.

Israel reiterated that it would not recognise a Palestinian unity government if it did not agree to abide by Western conditions of renouncing violence, recognising Israel and agreeing to abide by past peace deals, Mohammad Dahlan, a senior Abbas aide, told AFP.

Sunday's encounter took place amid low expectations from both sides, and amid deep disagreement over the Palestinian coalition cabinet due to be unveiled soon, which will unite Islamist Hamas -- blacklisted by the West as a terror group -- and Abbas's secular Fatah.

The two rivals have been trying to form a government since a power-sharing agreement in Saudi Arabia on February 8, an accord which does not mention Israel other than Abbas calling for the new administration to "respect" agreements reached by the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

Six killed in fresh Sri Lankan clashes

AFP, Colombo

Six people died in fresh clashes between government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels in Sri Lanka's embattled north and east, the military said yesterday as aid groups warned of a refugee crisis.

Suspected Tiger rebels set off a roadside bomb that killed a government security guard in the north

Monday while troops were on a routine patrol in the area, the defence ministry said.

A guerrilla was killed in an

exchange of fire with troops along the frontline in the northern district of Jaffna where the rebels also lost four fighters late Sunday, the military said.

The killings came as charities operating in the embattled east Monday expressed serious concern for the safety of civilians in the troubled Batticaloa province where there are more than 120,000 refugees.

More than 40,000 people have fled their homes in recent days following shelling between the Tamil Tigers and government forces in the district of Batticaloa, adding to the 80,000 who were already internally displaced.

Suicide blast in Casablanca kills bomber

AFP, Casablanca

A suicide bomber blew himself up, wounding three people, after being blocked from consulting radical websites at a Casablanca Internet cafe, Moroccan officials and police said yesterday.

Police believe the Internet cafe was not the intended target of the Sunday evening blast, but that the bomber was trying to receive instructions on where to detonate his explosives.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the blast in the Casablanca suburb of Sidi Moumen, in which the bomber was killed.

Police said two men entered the Internet cafe and tried to access radical websites, but were blocked from doing so by the son of the cafe's owner, police said.

"One of the two individuals was then blown apart by explosives hidden under his clothes and died on the spot," said a police official.

The other person, only slightly injured, fled the scene but was later arrested by security services.

7 climbers die on Indonesian volcano

AFP, Jakarta

Seven climbers have been found dead on the slopes of Indonesia's second highest volcano, a park ranger said yesterday.

Their bodies were found on Mount Rinjani, an active volcano rising to 3,726 metres above sea level on the island of Lombok, ranger Moeslim Arif Toengkagi told AFP.

Preliminary findings indicated they had died of exposure, he said, adding that they all came from Lombok.

Climbers had been banned from the mountain in January due to poor weather and low temperatures. The volcano last erupted in 2004.