

'Iran ready to offer nuke guarantee'

Tehran shrugs off threat of more UN sanctions

AFP, Tehran

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki yesterday said Iran was prepared to offer "necessary" guarantees on its nuclear programme if the issue is withdrawn from the UN Security Council.

Mottaki said in a speech to the International Conference on Disarmament here that Iran was prepared to make efforts to build confidence if the Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany returned the issue to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"Let me seize this opportunity, and in order to show our readiness to resolve the issue, underline that if the five plus one countries refer

back Iran's nuclear issues from the Security Council to the IAEA, my country will be prepared to offer necessary guarantees in order to create confidence regarding non-diversion of its nuclear programme," he said.

He did not specify what guarantees Iran was prepared to give.

Iran yesterday shrugged off the threat of further UN sanctions over its nuclear programme, saying more punitive action would hurt neither the controversial atomic drive nor the country's economy.

"The adoption of another resolution is unwelcome but is not worrying," government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters. "It will not affect our work and will not concern our people."

Elham reaffirmed the govern-

ment's oft-repeated insistence that Tehran has no intention of suspending sensitive uranium enrichment activities, the key demand of the UN Security Council over its atomic programme.

"The issue of suspension is completely ruled out and cannot be brought up. They (the other side) have themselves given up on this," he said.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, angrily brushed off warnings from within Iran that a second Security Council resolution against Tehran would put the country in an increasingly risky situation.

"Those who say that this country is in a critical situation just think they are politicians," Ahmadinejad told the government daily Iran in a

typically combative interview.

"Which part of our country is in a critical condition?" he asked in the interview, the full text of which will be published on Thursday.

The defiant remarks by the government come after Ahmadinejad's reformist predecessor Mohammad Khatami warned on Monday that Iran should act with caution and even compromise to prevent the adoption of a second UN resolution.

An Iranian government spokesman reiterated earlier Tuesday that Iran had no intention of suspending uranium enrichment, the key demand of the Security Council over its atomic programme.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon (L) shakes hands with his Pakistani counterpart Riaz Mohammed Khan prior to a meeting at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday.

700 more US troops arrive in Diyala

AP, Baqouba

More than 700 additional US troops arrived in Iraq's increasingly volatile Diyala province yesterday to try to quell burgeoning violence northeast of Baghdad during a security crackdown in the capital.

The Army's 5th Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division moved from northern Baghdad into Baqouba early Tuesday to supplement about 3,500 American soldiers already stationed there.

The move comes at a time when more than 20,000 new American troops are pouring into Baghdad as part of a US-Iraqi push to pacify the capital. The idea is to bring Baghdad's violence down to a level that is manageable for Iraqi forces, in hopes that the fragile Iraqi government has room to function.

Uttarakhand bus crash kills 19 of a wedding party

REUTERS, Lucknow

Nineteen members of a wedding party were killed when the bus in which they were travelling plunged down a gorge and into a river in Uttarakhand, an official said yesterday.

More than two dozen were also injured late on Monday in Rudraprayag district of Uttarakhand, about 300 km from Dehradun.

Bush tries to reassure Mexico's Calderon on immigration

REUTERS, Merida

President Bush meets Mexico's President Felipe Calderon yesterday looking for a fresh start in relations as he reassures Mexicans he has not given up on overhauling US immigration policy they deeply resent.

The talks in the Yucatan, the two leaders' first summit, pose a complex challenge for Bush on the final stop of a Latin American tour aimed at shoring up his standing and countering the anti-US influence of leftist Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez.

Top Pak judge hits back at Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's top judge launched a blistering attack on the government of President Pervez Musharraf yesterday for trying to sack him and for allegedly detaining him and his family.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry hit out in a written statement to the country's five-member Supreme Judicial Council as it began a closed-door hearing on unspecified allegations against him of misconduct and abuse of authority.

Military ruler Musharraf suspended Chaudhry on Friday, sparking protests by lawyers and opposition parties and warnings of a looming constitutional crisis ahead of parliamentary elections expected this year.

"I will not resign," Chaudhry's lawyer, Aitzaz Ahsan, quoted the 58-year-old judge as saying as he forced his way through a crowd of around 200 protesting lawyers outside the Supreme Court in Islamabad.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani lawyers surround sacked Pakistani Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry (C) upon his arrival at Supreme Court in Islamabad yesterday.

IAEA chief in N Korea as nuclear diplomacy heats up

REUTERS, Beijing

The head of the UN nuclear watchdog arrived in North Korea yesterday on a landmark visit, hopeful of making progress on closing its atomic facilities, but US officials sounded a more cautious note.

Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency have not visited North Korea since the isolated and impoverished state expelled the group in late 2002 as a disarmament deal fell apart. It withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty days later.

Now, as part of a new accord reached in February, the North has agreed to admit the watchdog, which will play a key role in verifying whether it meets a commitment to shut down the Yongbyon reactor at the heart of its nuclear program.

"I hope we should be able to make some progress," IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei told reporters

before leaving Beijing.

He hoped his agency could "work closer with the DPRK after many years of estrangement," he said, referring to the North by its official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Under the February deal, cut at six-party talks in Beijing that group the two Koreas, the United States, China, Japan and Russia, North Korea agreed to shut Yongbyon by mid-April in return for an infusion of energy aid and security assurances.

"This is an important part of the six-party talks' implementing of the initial steps," ElBaradei said of his trip.

"I think obviously these initial steps will be important, significant in fact, in moving the six-party talks forward."

One US official expressed confidence that North Korea would make good on its pledge to shut down Yongbyon.

Japan, Australia sign defence pact

REUTERS, Tokyo

Japan and Australia signed a groundbreaking defence pact on Tuesday that the leaders of both countries stressed was not aimed at reining in China, but the road ahead for a two-way trade deal looked rougher.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Australian Prime Minister John Howard signed off on the agreement, Japan's first such pact with a country other than the United States, after talks in Tokyo.

"The signing of the joint declaration on security and cooperation is a further milestone in the march of a relationship that really began in earnest 50 years ago," Howard told a joint news conference.

Stressing the agreement did not diminish ties of either country with their key security ally the United States, Howard said: "It should not be seen as being antagonistic to anybody in the region."

"It certainly is not. China should not see this declaration in an antagonistic light."

Some Australians still have bitter

feelings about Japan because of World War Two.

"We all have an obligation to recall the past but also to look to the future.... That is the spirit I have brought to the relationship of Japan and Australia," Howard said.

A Japanese official said later that Howard had raised the issue of Abe's recent comments denying the Japanese government directly forced women to become wartime sex slaves for Japanese soldiers, but said the Australian leader had welcomed Abe's latest remarks expressing sympathy for the women and standing by a 1993 apology for their suffering.

Japan has in recent years pushed the limits of its U.S.-drafted pacifist constitution, and Abe wants to rewrite the document to clarify the legal status of its military and facilitate a bigger global security role.

The four-part defence agreement sets priorities for security cooperation in such areas as counter-terrorism, maritime security, border protection and disaster relief.