

Iranian president wants nuke face-off with UN

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad refused again yesterday to stop sensitive nuclear work and prepared to confront the UN Security Council face to face over a proposal for wider sanctions against Iran.

"The Iranian nation possesses the nuclear fuel cycle and will not go back on that," he told a rally in central Yazd province, cited by the semi-official Fars news agency.

"Don't think you can block the Iranian nation's pathway with these sittings and meetings," Ahmadinejad told world powers, which fear Iran's nuclear programme could be diverted towards weapons development.

"The Iranian nation is moving speedily on the path to progress, and the enemies' pressures and threats do not affect the nation's will," state news agency IRNA quoted him as saying.

On Thursday, six major world powers agreed on a package of new UN sanctions against Iran for its repeated refusal to suspend uranium enrichment -- a process that can be used to make nuclear fuel as well as atomic weapons.

Their ambassadors reached a deal on a new sanctions resolution

that was submitted to the Security Council's 10 non-permanent members ahead of a vote expected next week.

That set the stage for a dramatic confrontation with Ahmadinejad, who has formally asked to attend the council meeting, even though on Thursday he said the world body was illegitimate.

"Should the American government issue a visa, I will definitely participate in the Security Council meeting and defend Iran's nuclear rights," Ahmadinejad told Fars on Friday.

"I don't regard a probable consensus among the 5+1 as an obstacle to my trip and I insist on my presence at the Security Council," he said.

As a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran says it has a right to uranium enrichment, insisting its nuclear programme is aimed at peaceful energy ends.

Under the provisions of the UN Charter, a country that is not a member of the council is entitled to attend council deliberations that directly concern it and to speak, but without the right to vote.

The compromise text appeared after 10 days of negotiations by the council's five veto-wielding permanent members -- Britain, China,

France, Russia and the United States -- plus Germany.

The agreement virtually ensures that measures to broaden existing sanctions and impose some new ones will be approved by the 15-member council when the draft is put to a vote.

"It's a good, balanced, incremental step," acting US ambassador Alejandro Wolff said. In Washington, the White House said US President George W. Bush hoped for a vote soon.

The draft builds on sanctions imposed by the Security Council in December after Tehran ignored repeated UN demands to freeze uranium enrichment.

Those measures included a ban on the sale of nuclear and ballistic missile-related materials to the Islamic republic and a freeze on financial assets of Iranians involved in atomic and ballistic missile work.

The new resolution would bar Iran from exporting arms and restrict the sale or transfer to Tehran of equipment including battle tanks, combat aircraft, attack helicopters and missiles.

It calls for a voluntary travel ban on additional officials and companies involved in Iran's "proliferation-sensitive" nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

It also urges voluntary restrictions on "new commitments for grants, financial assistance and concessional loans to Iran" as well as extending an assets freeze to additional entities and individuals linked to Iran's nuclear and missile programmes.

The text would give Iran 60 days to comply with repeated UN demands or face "further appropriate measures" (economic sanctions but no military action) under Article 41 of the UN Charter.

The United States, which accuses Iran of seeking to secretly develop atomic weapons, says it wants a diplomatic solution to the standoff, but it has never ruled out a military option to curb Iran's nuclear drive.

French Defence Minister Michele Alliot-Marie on Friday called for diplomacy to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis, warning that military action risked inflaming the Islamic world.

"This crisis should be resolved through diplomatic pressure," she said in Tokyo. "One cannot completely rule out military intervention, but that represents a real risk."

Nato troops open fire on Afghan police: 5 killed

AFP, Kandahar

Nato troops opened fire on a police patrol in southern Afghanistan, apparently mistaking them for hostile forces, and killed five policemen, a senior police official said Friday.

Another six policemen were missing after the shooting late Thursday in the volatile Gereshk area of the southern province of Helmand, provincial deputy police chief General Isau Khan told AFP.

They had been travelling in a vehicle that was not a conventional police type, he said.

Khan was unable to say what had prompted the soldiers to open fire, adding that "the incident is being investigated."

The media office of Nato's International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) could not confirm the incident.

However, a military official in southern Afghanistan said on condition of anonymity that there had been an incident between Nato forces and the police overnight, which was believed to have caused police casualties.

The circumstances of the incident were unclear, the official added.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani protesters burn tyres as policemen look on during a demonstration against the sacking of the Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani riot police fired tear gas and arrested a top Islamist leader amid noisy demonstrations over the sacking of the country's top judge.

This was world's warmest recorded winter: US

REUTERS, Washington

This has been the world's warmest winter since record-keeping began more than a century ago, the US government agency that tracks weather reported on Thursday.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said the combined global land and ocean surface temperature from December through February was at its highest since records began in 1880.

A record-warm January was responsible for pushing up the combined winter temperature, according to the agency's Web site, <http://www.noaa.gov>.

"Contributing factors were the long-term trend toward warmer temperatures as well as a moderate El Nino in the Pacific," Jay Lawrimore of NOAA's National Climatic Data Centre said in a telephone interview from Asheville, North Carolina.

The next-warmest winter on record was in 2004, and the third warmest winter was in 1998, Lawrimore said.

The ten warmest years on record have occurred since 1995.

"We don't say this winter is evidence of the influence of greenhouse gases," Lawrimore said.



PHOTO: AFP

Fire fighters extinguish burning motorbikes parked at the A T Road area after a bomb blast in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam yesterday. Six people were injured in a powerful explosion in Assam as the region's most powerful separatist group marked the founding of its military wing.

Dispute over N Korean funds over: US

AP, Beijing

The top US nuclear envoy said yesterday a dispute on North Korean funds held in a Macau bank has been resolved, potentially removing a key stumbling block that has bedevilled progress on dismantling Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

The Treasury Department wrapped up an investigation of Macau's Banco Delta Asia bank and said Wednesday it is severing ties between the bank and the US financial system because of its alleged money laundering for North Korea.

At the same time, however, the department is expected to provide guidance to help overseas regulators identify highest-risk and lower-risk account holders. This risk assessment, in turn, could be used by Macau to release some North Korean money that has been frozen and is being held by the bank.

North Korea has yet to respond publicly. But a pro-North Korean newspaper linked to regime on Friday praised Washington's action.

"This can be called a very positive sign in that the US showed its will to carry out" a Feb. 13 agreement on initial steps for the North to disarm, the Japan-based Choson Sinbo newspaper wrote in a column. The paper is linked to an association

of North Koreans in Japan tied to Pyongyang, and its articles reflect North Korea's position.

The bank had been blacklisted by the Treasury Department since September 2005, leading to a freeze of some \$25 million in North Korean accounts.

The North boycotted nuclear talks for more than a year over the bank issue, during which time it conducted its first nuclear test in October. But North Korea agreed to move toward disarmament after the US promised to resolve the bank issue.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill said Friday there was no question that the issue had been solved.

"I think they want assurances that the Banco Delta Asia issues are resolved and we can give them those assurances that it is resolved," Hill told reporters.

A senior US Treasury Department official, Daniel Glaser, is to travel to Macau to share the report's findings with officials there on Saturday. That could lead to the Macau government releasing some of the North Korean funds deemed to have resulted from legitimate business.

NANDIGRAM KILLING OF FARMERS Strike shuts down West Bengal

REUTERS,Kolkata

A strike called to protest the killing of 14 villagers demonstrating against a planned industrial hub shut schools, offices, and shops in communist-ruled West Bengal yesterday.

The streets of Kolkata and its suburbs, where 10 million people live, were nearly empty barring police patrols and the occasional government bus and private car.

Many strikers blame Wednesday's killings at Nandigram, 150 km southwest of Kolkata, on the state government which wants to set up a chemical industrial hub on farming land despite opposition from villagers.

Police fired on villagers during the clashes as officers tried to enter the farming land earmarked for development.

"They called themselves communists but they fire bullets at poor farmers," said Gopi Mondal, a 65-year-old taxi driver, shaking his head.

The killings have become a national controversy and put the spotlight on India's policy of setting up low tax Special Economic Zones

(SEZs) by acquiring land from farmers.

At least eight strikes have been called in West Bengal in the past six months against the left-wing state government's economic reforms, including its SEZ policy.

In recent years, the state's communist rulers, who initiated India's most successful land reforms in the 1970s and 1980s benefitting millions of peasants, have switched from their pro-rural stand and pushed for industrialisation of the state.

On Friday, protesters put banana leaves on overhead wires of electric trains, stopping their operations while others blocked state highways, police said.

In Kolkata, two buses were set on fire. In Siliguri, in the north of the state, protesters set fire to railway tracks at a station.

"The government will now find out that it can no longer play with the lives of innocent villagers," said Mukul Roy, general secretary of the Trinamul Congress, the state's main opposition which has called the day-long strike.

'Israel must work with Abbas to defeat Hamas'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel must boycott the incoming Palestinian unity government but continue to work with president Mahmud Abbas to defeat Hamas, Deputy Defence Minister Ephraim Sneh said yesterday.

"Israel cannot give legitimacy to the Palestinian unity government by cooperating with it while it rejects the principles of the Quartet," Sneh told Israeli public radio.

"To cause the failure of Hamas, we need a moderate Palestinian alternative and for that purpose we must negotiate only with Abu Mazen (Abbas)," he added.

Abbas and Palestinian prime minister designate Ismail Haniya on Thursday finalized an agreement on a national unity government combining their rival Fatah and Hamas factions.

The new government will be presented on Saturday to the Palestinian parliament for approval.

Hamas will take 12 of the 25 portfolios in the incoming cabinet, while Abbas's Fatah faction will take six. Seven ministries, including the powerful finance, foreign and interior ministries, will go to independents and smaller factions.

Palestinians hope the new

coalition will break an international boycott and end deadly infighting, but the unity government's political programme so far stops short of agreeing to meet Western conditions for resuming aid.

They are demanding that the government renounce violence, recognise Israel and abide by past interim peace agreements -- all conditions that Hamas has consistently refused to accept.

Israel immediately said it would not work with the new coalition, while the United States and European Union have taken a wait-and-see approach.

Pakistan cracks down on media amid judicial crisis

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani media and international watchdogs Friday accused the government of fresh attempts to censor their coverage of an escalating row over the sacking of the country's top judge.

The private Geo television station said the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority had ordered it to stop airing its flagship daily news programme "Today with Kamran Khan" until further orders.

Other outlets said they had been pressured not to show Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who

was suspended by President Pervez Musharraf a week ago, in a positive light.

"We have been told not to make Chaudhry a hero and to avoid undue coverage of lawyers' protests," said Talat Hussain, head of the news section of Aaj television, another private station.

"We are working under tremendous pressure. We are being threatened with being taken off air or even with the cancellation of our licence if we give undue coverage to the chief justice trial," Hussain said.

Indian police scours forests to 'avenge' Maoist killings

REUTERS, Raipur

Thousands of police poured into the dense forests of eastern India on Friday after Maoist rebels massacred 55 people in a makeshift police camp in the region.

The operation, involving about 8,000 police, was described by the Chhattisgarh government as an act of revenge for the Maoist attack.

"Police have launched one of the biggest exercises in Chhattisgarh on Friday to avenge the killings," the state's Home Minister Ramvihar Netam told Reuters.

"The rebels have to pay the price."

The attack was one of the deadliest in recent years by Maoist rebels, who are also called Naxalites after the village in West Bengal where the group's campaign on behalf of poor peasants and landless workers began in 1967.

Between 300 and 400 rebels attacked the camp in the state's south in the early hours of Thursday, throwing grenades and petrol bombs and shooting people fleeing the burning buildings before escaping with weapons and explosives, police said.

The rebels killed 16 officers from the state's armed forces and 39 members of local tribes recruited to a police militia, police said.

The state has recruited about 5,000 tribal people into its militia, paying each about 1,500 rupees a month. Most are armed only with bows and arrows.

"I never witnessed such a gruesome scene of killings," said Netam, who visited the site on Thursday. "Some of the bodies were repeatedly axed and heads were smashed."



PHOTO: AFP

German Environment Minister Sigmar Gabriel (3rdR) greets his counterparts from (LtoR) US Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Stephen L. Johnson, IUCN (World Conservation Union) Secretary General Julia Marton-Lefevre, EU Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas and United Nations Environment Programme (Unep) Executive Director Achim Steiner prior to the Group of Eight (G8) environment ministers' conference yesterday at the Cecilienhof Castle in Potsdam, near Berlin.