

EU presidency urges Iran to release British sailors

UK sailors detained for illegally entering Iranian waters: Tehran

AFP, Berlin/ Tehran

The German presidency of the European Union on Saturday urged the immediate release of 15 British naval personnel seized by Iranian forces in the Gulf.

"We demand the immediate release of the British soldiers," German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier told reporters ahead of a meeting of European socialists.

Steinmeier said the 27 leaders of the EU, who have gathered in Berlin to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the bloc, would issue a joint statement later demanding the freedom of the sailors and marines.

He added he was "confident" that the United Nations Security Council would pass a resolution introducing harsher sanctions against Tehran for failing to suspend uranium

enrichment.

The 15 British personnel were seized in the Shatt al-Arab waterway between Iran and Iraq Friday as they conducted "routine" anti-smuggling operations.

The semi-official Fars news agency in Iran said the 15 had been taken to Tehran for questioning for "failing to respect international frontiers and for illegally entering Iranian territorial waters."

The 15 UN Security Council members reached broad agreement late Friday ahead of a vote Saturday on an amended draft resolution that expanded UN sanctions imposed on Iran in December for spurning repeated demands to freeze its sensitive nuclear fuel work.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday insisted that 15 British sailors it

seized had illegally entered Iranian waters, denouncing what it called a "blatant aggression" and accusing Britain of trying to cover up an incursion into its territory.

Fifteen British sailors and marines detained off Iraq by the Iranian navy have admitted illegally entering Iranian waters, senior Iranian commander General Alireza Afshar said on Saturday.

"They are currently being questioned and have admitted to violating the territorial waters of the Islamic republic," Afshar, the official spokesman of the army chief of staff, told the semi-official Fars news agency.

He told the Arabic language service of state television: "We have solid evidence that they were detained in our territorial waters. They themselves have confessed

and admitted their mistake."

The tough comment came after Britain demanded the return of the sailors and denied they had strayed into Iranian waters while searching for smugglers off Iraq's coast.

The eight Royal Navy sailors and seven Royal Marines had just searched a merchant ship when they and their two inflatable boats were intercepted by Iranian vessels Friday at around 10:30 a.m. near the disputed Shatt al-Arab waterway, US and British officials said. The Iranian vessels surrounded them and escorted them away at gunpoint.

Iran's semi-official Fars news agency reported that the 15 Britons have been transferred to the capital Tehran "to explain their aggressive action." There was no immediate official confirmation of the move.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian activists of the Trinamool Congress carry posters reading 'blood of farmer tastes best: Buddha' at a protest rally in Kolkata Friday against the state's ruling Left government on the issue of police firing in Nandigram. The demonstrators protested against the killing of 14 villagers in police firing in the village of Nandigram while protesting over forced land acquisition to make way for industrial parks.

US House approves 2008 Iraq troop withdrawal

REUTERS, Washington

The US House of Representatives on Friday voted to impose a September 1, 2008, deadline for withdrawing all American combat troops from Iraq, prompting a quick veto promise from President George W Bush.

In a mostly partisan 218-212 vote, House Democrats succeeded in attaching the deadline to legislation spending more than \$124 billion in emergency funds, most of it for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan this year.

"The American people do not support a war without end and neither should this Congress," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, calling the Iraq war "a grotesque mistake."

The narrow margin of the vote was far short of what Democrats would need to override any presidential veto.

Debate now shifts to the Senate, which could vote as early next week on its version of the war-spending bill.

Senate Democrats have crafted slightly different timetables for removing troops from Iraq. Under

their plan, which Republican leaders oppose, the Pentagon would begin withdrawing troops no later than four months after enactment of the legislation. The measure sets a "goal," not a requirement, of finishing a withdrawal by March 31, 2008.

Some centrist senators, who could cast the pivotal votes, were still mulling their positions.

The House vote was a significant victory for Pelosi and her fellow Democrats, who took control of Congress in November on a pledge to end the unpopular war in Iraq.

Two years ago, most lawmakers shied away from speaking out against the war and Friday's vote underscored the change.

"One of the things that accounted for this result," said Massachusetts Democrat Barney Frank, "is that public opinion has continued to move. ... People are

very anti-war."

Despite polls showing broad dissatisfaction with the war, Bush has increased US troop strength to quell violence in Baghdad. While that appears to have slowed attacks, violence spiked on Friday when a suicide bomber blew himself up, wounding Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Salam al-Zobaie.

Bush, who as commander-in-chief does not want Democratic lawmakers meddling in the war, condemned the House vote.

"They set rigid restrictions that would require an army of lawyers to interpret. They set an arbitrary date for withdrawal with no regard for conditions on the ground. And they tacked on billions in pet projects that have nothing to do with winning the war on terror," Bush said.

Pakistan gets Hindu acting chief justice

AFP, Karachi

A Hindu judge took over as new acting chief justice of Pakistan here yesterday in the shadow of a judicial crisis that has jolted the country's military leader Pervez Musharraf.

Rana Bhagwandas, the senior judge of the Supreme Court, along with four other senior judges, will deal with the fate of chief justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, who was suspended and charged with misconduct by the president on March 9.

National and regional bar associations boycotted Bhagwandas' oath-taking ceremony held at the branch office in Karachi of the Islamabad-based top court amid tight security.

The 64-year-old judge from Sindh province replaced justice Javed Iqbal who was as acting chief judge for two weeks as Bhagwandas was on leave to India.

Lawyers have held daily country-wide protests since the suspension of Chaudhry. Eight judges and a deputy attorney general have already resigned in protest.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani policeman clears the way for newly appointed acting Chief Justice of Pakistan Rana Bhagwandas after taking the oath of office during a ceremony at the branch office in Karachi yesterday. Bhagwandas, a Hindu judge, took over as new acting chief justice of Pakistan in the shadow of a judicial crisis that has jolted the country's military leader Pervez Musharraf.

Taliban attack Afghan police post: 9 dead

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban fighters attacked police posts in southern Afghanistan provincial capitals overnight, sparking battles that left seven rebels and two policemen dead, police said yesterday.

The attacks occurred late Friday, the same day a commander announced Taliban fighters had ambushed a convoy ferrying supplies to foreign troops, killing at least 14 guards and drivers in one of the biggest incidents of its kind.

Insurgents stormed a police post near the Uruzgan capital Tirin Kot, touching off a battle that lasted hours, provincial police chief General Mohammad Qasim told AFP.

"Five Taliban and two police were killed and another 10 Taliban and four police were wounded," he said.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi said the movement was responsible.

In a separate incident, the Islamist militants attacked a police post on the Kabul-Kandahar highway in Qalat, capital of Zabul province, police detection commander Mohammad Asif told AFP.

Troops, Tigers lock in intense battles

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops and Tamil Tiger rebels were locked in intense battles in the island's northeast yesterday, for a second straight day, as both sides reported heavy casualties.

The defence ministry placed its losses at nine soldiers killed and 45 hospitalised while military sources listed another 45 troopers as "walking wounded."

The ministry said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and security forces were locked in combat near their de facto border in the Vavuniya district and that a total of 20 rebels were killed in the past two days.

However, the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website said the Tigers lost only six fighters and reported

killing 60 Sri Lankan troopers and beating back a military advance.

"The Sri Lanka army soldiers were forced to flee the battlefield with tractor loads of dead bodies," Tamilnet quoted an unnamed Tiger official as saying.

Following the fall of the former Tiger bastion of Vakarai in January, the military has vowed to flush out the rebels from the east of the island.

The guerrillas said about 2,000 families in the area were displaced by the latest heavy fighting.

Defence ministry spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said the military had moved to neutralise Tiger gun positions and that the offensive was not aimed at capturing rebel territory.

Khatami vows Iran will never build nuclear arms

AFP, New Delhi

Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami has pledged the Islamic Republic will never develop nuclear weapons and called for the crisis over Iran's atomic programme to be settled through talks, a report said yesterday. Khatami's appeal on Friday in the Indian capital, New Delhi, came 24 hours before the UN Security Council was set to slap new sanctions on Iran over its refusal to suspend all uranium enrichment activity.

"Iran will never go for nuclear weapons," Khatami told a media conference in the city, according to the Indian Express newspaper.

"Weapons of mass destruction have never been our objective," he said.

Iran was always ready to give an "objective guarantee" on its commitment not to develop nuclear weapons and the issue should be solved "through negotiations," he added.

11 crew die after plane shot down in Somalia

AP, Mogadishu

The 11-person crew of a cargo plane that was shot down by a missile during takeoff died, officials said yesterday.

The downing of the plane, which on Friday delivered equipment for Ugandan peacekeepers in Mogadishu, came at the end of a particularly violent week in the Somali capital. Dozens of people, most of them civilians, were killed in fighting.

Ten of the crew died in Friday's crash. Rescuers found a wounded crew member and took him to a Mogadishu hospital where he died while being treated, said Hussein Mohamed Mohamud, spokesman for Somalia's president.

All crew members were either Ukrainian or Belarussian, Mohamud said on Saturday, adding that their bodies will be flown back to their countries later in the day.