

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.

Iranian 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.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

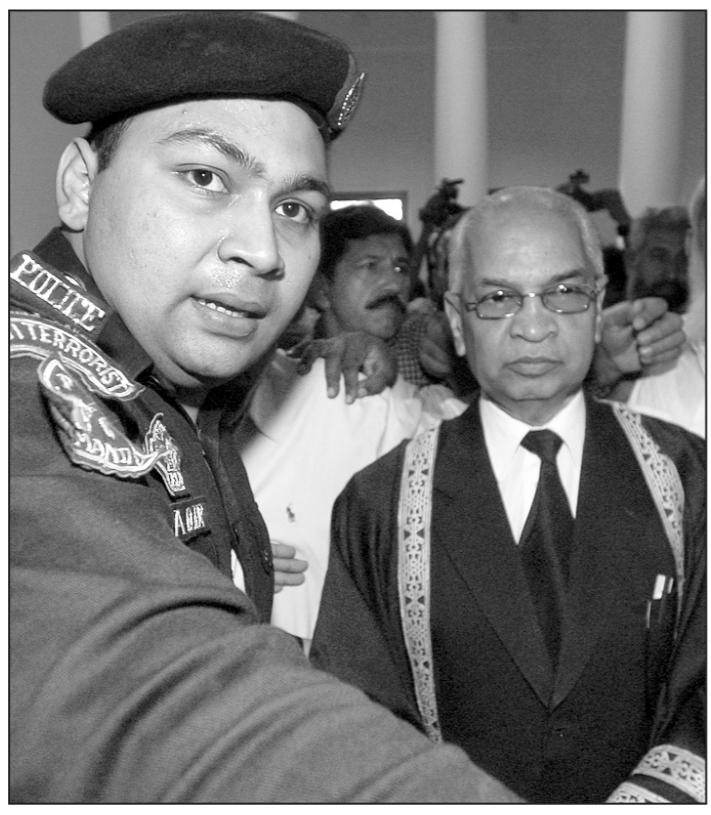
Indian activists of the Trinamool Congress carry posters reading 'blood of farmer tastes best: Buddha' at a protest rally in Kolkata Friday against the state's ruling Left government on the issue of police firing in Nandigram. The demonstrators protested against the killing of 14 villagers in police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

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



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.

Army restores order to Congo capital

REUTERS, Kinshasa

Congo's army restored order to the capital Kinshasa on Friday after two days of heavy fighting with troops loyal to former rebel leader Jean-Pierre Bemba, who the government accused of treason.

Sporadic shooting continued after dark in the downtown area around UN headquarters, where some 900 civilians were earlier evacuated amid shooting and mortar fire, which left the streets strewn with discarded uniforms and bodies.

There were reports of widespread looting in the central African nation's sprawling riverside capital of more than 8 million people. The UN mission in Congo (MONUC) said the battle had caused considerable material damage.

Tight security to avert fresh Nepali clashes

AFP, Kathmandu

New security measures were imposed yesterday to avert more violence in Nepal's volatile south-east, where 29 people were killed in clashes between an ethnic group and Maoists, officials said.

Six people have been arrested on suspicion of involvement in the bloodshed on Wednesday, officials added.

The moves came after Nepal's former Maoist rebels placed the bloodied corpses of their comrades on display in the capital on Friday and threatened retaliation for their deaths.

The 29 leftists were killed in clashes with activists belonging to

the Mahadesi People's Rights Forum, which represents the ethnic group who live in a fertile strip of land known as the Terai along Nepal's border with India.

The clashes, the latest in a string of deadly battles between the leftists and the Mahadesis, have cast a cloud over last November's peace deal, which ended ten years of civil war between Maoist rebels and the government.

"A daytime curfew was imposed on Golbazaar town after we learnt Maoists planned to disrupt a Mahadesi programme," said administrator Shashi Shekhar Shrestha of Siraha district, 140 kilometres (87 miles) southeast of Kathmandu.

AFP, Kathmandu

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 fighters 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 Lankan 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.

Troops, Tigers lock in intense battles

AFP, Colombo

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 Belarusian. Mohamud said on Saturday, adding that their bodies will be flown back to their countries later in the day.