

Defiant Iran wants to expand nuclear drive

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday shrugged off Western concerns over the announcement it can now enrich uranium on an "industrial scale", saying it still plans to ramp up the contested atomic drive even further. The head of Iran's atomic energy organisation reaffirmed Iran's ultimate aim of installing 50,000 centrifuges to enrich uranium at the Natanz nuclear plant, a figure that would mark a colossal step up from its current capacities.

"The objective of the Islamic Republic of Iran is not just the installation of 3,000 centrifuges at the Natanz plant but we are doing everything to install 50,000 centrifuges," said Gholam Reza Aghazadeh.

"We have entered into the industrial phase and the installation of machines will continue until we reach 50,000 centrifuges," he added, according to the state-run IRNA agency.

In a grand ceremony at its Natanz uranium enrichment plant in central Iran on Monday, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced that the country was now able to enrich uranium on an industrial scale.

Enrichment of uranium is the key sticking point in the standoff between Iran and the West as the process can produce nuclear fuel but in highly extended form can also make the fissile core for an atomic bomb.

Iran insists its nuclear drive is solely aimed at generating energy. However Ahmadinejad did not give figures on how far the Iranian nuclear programme has advanced and Iran's progress towards its medium term goal of installing 3,000 centrifuges was unclear.

Nonetheless the United States,



PHOTO: AFP
A group of women, relatives of the executed Bosnian Muslims from the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica, leave Serbia's special war crimes court in Belgrade yesterday after the war crimes trial of four Serb paramilitaries accused of involvement in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

US close to solving North Korean banking row

Japan extends sanctions

AFP, Seoul/ Tokyo

A banking dispute blocking a disarmament accord with North Korea will be settled "very, very soon," paving the way for the North to start shutting down its nuclear plants, a senior US official said Tuesday.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill was speaking after the US Treasury announced that Macau authorities were prepared to unblock frozen North Korean accounts in a bank there, and that Washington would support such a move.

"This is obviously a very big step when it comes. We have to learn from Macau authorities precisely when (funds will be freed). We understand it will be very, very soon," Hill, the chief US nuclear envoy, told reporters.

"I think it should clear the way for the DPRK (North Korea) to step up the (disarmament) process."

Hill, speaking after talks with his South Korean counterpart Chun Yung-Woo, said he believed Macau authorities "will be saying that account-holders can have access to the funds based on proper identification and other procedures."

Chun said the North was familiar with the necessary procedures and should now take steps "as soon as possible" to shut down its Yongbyon reactor.

Japan has taken the hardest line in the six-nation talks, which group it with China, the two Koreas, Russia and the United States.

On Tuesday it extended sweeping sanctions against North Korea for another six months to press it to give ground in an emotionally charged row over its past kidnappings of Japanese nationals.

The move comes despite a flurry of diplomacy including a US mission to Pyongyang in hopes of meeting Saturday's deadline in a six-way deal for North Korea to freeze a key nuclear site in exchange for fuel aid.

Serbian court jails 4 in Srebrenica ruling

AFP, Belgrade

Serbia's war crimes court on Tuesday jailed four former paramilitaries for up to 20 years after they were filmed taking part in the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of Muslims.

It was the first case in Serbia to deal with the notorious massacre in which 8,000 Muslim men and boys were killed.

"The defendants are guilty ... of killing six prisoners of Muslim origin," said judge Gordana Bozilovic-Petrovic, announcing the verdict, adding it was a war crime against a civilian population.

The longest sentences of 20 years were given to the former commander of the "Scorpions" unit, Slobodan Medic, and his main accomplice, Branislav Medic.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Buddhist monks join a crowd gathered to look at the wreckage left following a collision between a truck and a passenger bus killing 23 at Induruwa some 70 km south of Colombo yesterday.

Australia to double troop deployment in Afghanistan

AFP, Sydney

Australia yesterday announced it would nearly double its military force in Afghanistan to 1,000 troops, warning that the war against a resurgent Taliban would not be won without extra effort.

A special task force spearheaded by 300 elite soldiers would be deployed shortly to help counter an expected summer offensive by the Islamic hardliners, Prime Minister John Howard told a news conference.

"Afghanistan faces a crucial phase as international and Afghan national security forces work to consolidate the gains made since the overthrow of the Taliban regime," he said.

The Taliban were ousted by a US-led invasion after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, and Howard warned that the possibility of Afghanistan again becoming a "bolthole for terrorists" was real.

Indian army kills 8 rebels in northeast

AFP, Guwahati/ Ranchi

Indian soldiers yesterday killed eight separatists, including two women, during an anti-insurgency offensive in northeastern jungles, the army said.

Two-hour gunbattle took place in Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh state, a thickly forested area bordering Assam, army spokesman Colonel Narender Singh told AFP.

The dead were from the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) in the group's biggest single loss in recent years.

"Our soldiers are still conducting raids and carrying out search operations in the area looking for more ULFA hideouts," Singh said.

Two AK-47 assault rifles and pistols were among weapons recovered from the dead rebels.

ULFA, fighting for an independent homeland in Assam since 1979, has been on the run since the military launched a crackdown in January after the outfit killed 80 people, some 60 of them Hindi-speaking migrant workers.

Meanwhile, at least nine Maoist guerrillas were killed in an inter-ethnic clash in the insurgency-racked Indian state of Jharkhand, police said Tuesday.

Six others were wounded in the firefight late Monday in Latehar district after members of India's largest Maoist force attacked the leadership of a splinter unit called the Third Preparation Committee.

The committee has refused to join forces with India's two largest left-wing guerrilla groups -- the People's War Group and the Maoist Communist Centre -- since September 2005.

Pakistan blocks radical mosque's website, radio station

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani government said yesterday it had blocked the website and radio station of a radical mosque that has launched a Taliban-style morality campaign in the heart of the capital.

The move comes after the Lal Masjid or Red Mosque in Islamabad issued a "fatwa" against a female minister pictured hugging a foreigner following a charity paragliding trip, and also threatened to carry out suicide attacks.

"We have blocked the website of Lal Masjid and also blocked the radio station," Deputy Information Minister Tariq Azeem told AFP.

"We will block anything that promotes religious hatred, calls for suicide attacks -- this cannot be tolerated," he added.

Azeem said the government blocked the website and the illegal FM radio station under laws brought in five years ago by President Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally and proponent of moderate Islam.

"The law says that no such activity can be allowed. This website was projecting what was prohibited by law," he said.

The mosque's clerics were not immediately available for comment.

Top cleric Abdul Aziz said on Friday that the mosque was setting up a self-styled Islamic court and warned that his students would carry out suicide attacks if the government tried to clamp down on him or his followers.

Two days later the court issued the "fatwa" against Tourism Minister Nilofar Bakhtiar for posing in "obscene" pictures with a French instructor after going paragliding to raise money for earthquake victims.

Female students from a religious school attached to the Red Mosque in March kidnapped an alleged brothel owner and made her publicly repent. Their male counterparts briefly abducted two policemen at the same time.

The mosque's baton-wielding devotees have also set up so-called morality patrols telling shops at popular local markets not to sell "un-Islamic" music and movies.

They have occupied a nearby children's library since January in protest at plans to demolish several illegally-built mosques in Islamabad.

Millions face hunger from climate change

AP, Bangkok

Warming temperatures could result in food shortages for 130 million people by 2050 and threaten to cause drought and higher seas in Australia and New Zealand by 2030, according to a UN report released yesterday.

The climatic changes threaten ecologically rich sites like the Great Barrier Reef and sub-Antarctic islands, according to the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

A summary of the full, 1,572-page document written and reviewed by 441 scientists was released Friday. The latest document, the second of four reports including the summary, tries to explain how global warming is changing life on Earth.

Further details were unveiled Tuesday in a series of regional press conferences around the world.

The report suggests that a 3.6-degree increase in mean air temperature could decrease rain-fed rice yields by 5 percent to 12 percent in China. In Bangladesh, rice production may fall by just under 10 percent and wheat by a third by the year 2050.

The drops in yields combined with rising populations could put close to 50 million extra people at risk of hunger by 2020, an additional 132 million by 2050 and 266 million by 2080, the report said.

"Unchecked climate change will be an environmental and economic catastrophe but above all it will be a human tragedy," Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nations Environment Program, said in a statement.

"It is absolutely vital that international action is taken now to avoid dangerous climate change," he said.

"Otherwise the consequences for food and water security in Asia, as for many other parts of the world are too alarming to contemplate."

Water shortages will also become more common in India as the Himalayan glaciers decline, while nearly 100 million people annually will face the risk of floods from seas that are expected to rise in Asia between 0.04 inches to 0.12 inches annually, slightly higher than the global average.

For Australians and New Zealanders, the warming temperatures will be felt mostly through more extreme weather.

"Heat waves and fires are virtually certain to increase in intensity and frequency," Kevin Hennessy, the coordinating lead author on the chapter for Australia and New Zealand, said in a statement.

1,000 killed in clashes in Mogadishu: Elders

AFP, Mogadishu

Recent heavy clashes between Ethiopian forces and Islamist fighters backed by clan militia killed more than a thousand people in the Somali capital, Hawiye clan elders said yesterday.

The fighting, which erupted late last month when Ethiopian forces launched a bloody crackdown on suspected insurgents in the Somali capital, also left 4,334 people wounded, Hussein Aden Korgab, the Hawiye clan spokesman, told AFP.

"Our assessment team counted 1,086 people killed ... (and) 4,334 wounded," he said.

Korgab said the death toll was collected by a clan panel that was formed to hold talks with the Ethiopian forces after active fighting subsided.

"We assessed battle fields, spoke to civilians, visited hospitals and areas that were affected by the clashes," he said when asked how the figure was reached.

Without giving specifics he added that damage to property by the four days of heavy fighting was an estimated "1.5 billion dollars (1.1 billion euros)".

Humanitarian groups have described the clashes, which occurred mainly in southern Mogadishu, as the worst in 15 years.



PHOTO: AFP
Lebanese youths, sporting images of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war and wrapped in a Lebanese flag, observe a peaceful sit-in at Tayoune area in Beirut yesterday, which was a demarcation line that split Beirut into two halves, to mark the 35th anniversary of the war that started on April 13, 1975.