

Iran says it would 'cut hand' of any attacker

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday warned that its armed forces would "cut off the hand" of an enemy and Tehran would consider using oil as a weapon if the Islamic republic was attacked over its nuclear programme.

"Our army has a defensive mission and not an offensive one. But it is completely ready to confront any aggressor and cut off their hand," President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad told a military parade to mark army day on the outskirts of Tehran.

"The army and armed forces must be more ready with each passing day," he told the forces outside the shrine of Iran's revolutionary founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Meanwhile, Iran's oil minister refused to rule out using oil as a weapon in the standoff with the West over its nuclear programme, saying that Tehran would use every means if attacked.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran's policy is to supply energy as a responsibility. We are never seeking to cut the energy supplies to the world," Kazem Vaziri-Hamaneh told an energy conference in Tehran.

"But naturally every country, which is subject to danger or attack, should use all its possibilities to defend itself and this is every country's right," he said.

Analysts have said that Tehran could cause oil prices to surge if it cut off the Strait of Hormuz, a key shipping channel, which would trigger a massive disruption in global supplies.

The United States has refused to rule out the option of military action to force Iran to halt its atomic drive which Washington suspects is aimed at making weapons. Iran insists that its nuclear programme is peaceful.

Iran's repeated refusal to suspend sensitive uranium enrichment operations has already brought two sets of UN sanctions targeting its ballistics and nuclear industries.

The military parade in Tehran showed off regiment after regiment of ground forces, tanks, a new set of drones as well as medium-range Nazeat (Meteor) missiles one of which was inscribed "Death to Israel".

However, Iran's longer-range ballistic missiles, which are under the control of the Revolutionary Guards, were not on display and

there was no sign of any hitherto unknown weaponry.

"They think that with sanctions on our weapons we would be paralysed but we have succeeded in producing all we need in arms," said Ahmadinejad in the brief address.

In the military parade, Iran showed off a succession of drones with names like Oqab (Eagle), Sayad (Hunter) and Azaraksh (Thunderbolt) which it said were able to confront "any aerial or ground threat by the enemy."

Also on display were Zelzal-2 (Quake) missiles which are said to have a range of 100 to 400 kilometres (60 to 250 miles) and Nazeat missiles which have a range of around 100 kilometres.

Lanka threatens to expel diplomats

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka warned yesterday it may expel foreign diplomats who meddle in the island's internal affairs and said at least one unnamed envoy was being investigated.

The threat comes amid growing international criticism of Sri Lanka's human rights record and Colombo's resistance to suggestions that United Nations monitors should be sent to the island.

Sri Lanka's government has also been highly critical of international non-governmental organisations and often accuses them of supporting Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

Spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella said several diplomats were interfering in local politics and action was being taken against at least one.

He noted that the country had deported the former British high commissioner (ambassador) David Gladstone in August 1991 after he complained to local police about election rigging.

"We will not compromise our sovereignty and we will take action against anyone exceeding their mandate and meddling in our affairs," said Rambukwella.



Virginia Tech students comfort one another during a convocation ceremony at Cassell Coliseum a day after a gunman shot and killed 32 people before turning the gun on himself on Tuesday in Blacksburg, Virginia.

Anti-Musharraf protests continue in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Nearly 1,500 Pakistanis held fresh protests against military ruler Pervez Musharraf yesterday as the country's top judge attended a hearing into misconduct charges laid by the president.

Lawyers and opposition supporters shouted "Go Musharraf, Go" and waved flags outside the Supreme Court in Islamabad as Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry arrived to a hero's welcome.

A lone pro-Musharraf man who appeared holding a picture of the president on Wednesday was roughed up by female opposition workers outside the court building, an AFP reporter said.

The man was thrashed by the women who surrounded him, snatched Musharraf's poster and tore it to pieces. He was later rescued by plain-clothed security men.

But the turnout was lower than on the five previous appearances by Chaudhry. Last Friday more than 3,000 people protested, while on March 16, a week after the sacking, police fired rubber bullets to contain angry demonstrators.

"President Musharraf has

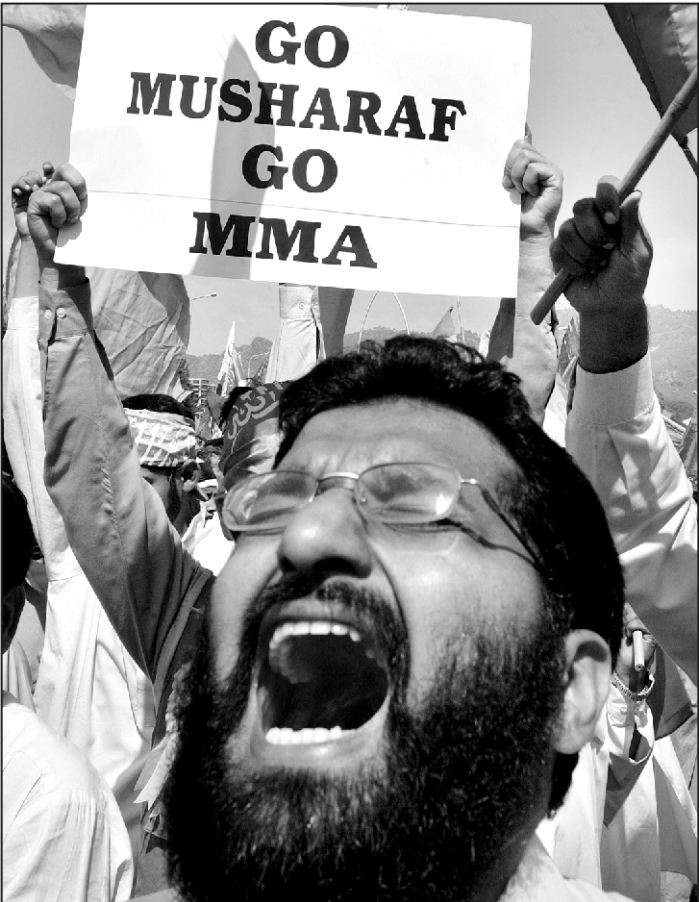
plunged the country into uncertainty by confronting the judiciary," Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the head of Pakistan's alliance of hardline Islamic parties, told AFP at the protest.

Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror," dismissed Chaudhry on March 9, sparking nationwide demonstrations and a tense political crisis in this volatile South Asian nation of 160 million people.

The suspended chief justice has denied charges laid by Musharraf that he abused his position to get his son a senior police job and amassed a fleet of cars.

The hearing was later adjourned until April 24 after the Supreme Judicial Council, a panel of judges which is dealing with the allegations, rejected claims of bias by Chaudhry's legal team, lawyer Munir Malik said.

Opponents accuse Musharraf of dismissing Chaudhry illegally in an attempt to weaken the judiciary and make it easier for him to stay on as army chief past 2007, when the constitution says he is meant to give up the position.



A Pakistani opposition party activist shouts anti-Musharraf slogans outside the Supreme Court building in Islamabad yesterday where suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry appeared for a hearing into misconduct charges against him.

Thailand unveils post-coup draft constitution

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand yesterday unveiled the first draft of its new constitution, which its authors insist will prevent graft and guide the kingdom back to democracy following last year's coup.

The proposed charter contains new clauses addressing corruption and abuse of power, key reasons given for the putsch that overthrew billionaire businessman-turned-premier Thaksin Shinawatra last September.

"The draft constitution aims to fully restore democracy and organise national elections within 2007," the Constitution Drafting Council said in a statement after releasing the charter on its website.

"The 1997 constitution created monopolies, abuse of power, lacked transparency, and created a lack of ethics in politics."

The new charter, which if approved will replace the 1997 version and become Thailand's 18th constitution, will now face public debate and possible revision before a referendum scheduled for early September.

The junta has promised elections for December.

DEADLIEST CAMPUS SHOOTING IN US

Investigators probe the killer's path to murder

AFP, Blacksburg

The US university stricken by a mass murder faced tough questions yesterday about how a South Korean student was able to press on with the massacre, after details emerged of possible missteps in the early hunt for the killer.

Police sifted through seized documents that had belonged to 23-year-old Virginia Tech university student Cho Seung-Hui, associate vice president for university relations Larry Hincker said.

Amid widespread anger among survivors and relatives over the university's failure to lock down the campus when a gunman was on the loose, investigators revealed they may have initially been pursuing the wrong man, US media reported.

And one of Cho's former teachers, Lucinda Roy, told CNN she had warned long before the killings of concern about Cho.

"There were several of us in English who became concerned when we had him in class ... I contacted some people to try to get some help for him," Lucinda Roy, one of Cho's professors, said.

Roy said she privately tutored him for a time, and added that throughout her teaching career she had never seen a student as troubled as Cho.

Virginia state governor Timothy Kaine ordered an independent review of how the university handled the massacre, other US media reported. He said it would look into

female and male student were killed, and the second in which 31 were killed, they were pursuing the boyfriend of the female victim, the New York Times reported.

A police affidavit quoted in the New York Times said the female victim's roommate, a student at nearby Radford University, had guns at his house. Police believed he may have been the gunman, but as they questioned him, further shooting was reported at the Norris Hall engineering building.

The delay meant Cho apparently had time to take weapons and ammunition and head to the engineering building where he chained doors shut from the inside before shooting dead 30 people then turning his weapon on himself.

Police search warrants said a bomb threat note was found in the vicinity of Cho's body, which they believed he had written. Cho was also carrying knives, and at least one more knife along with prescription medications for depression were found in his room.

Police recovered a 9mm handgun and a .22 caliber handgun from the crime scene.

Cho, who came to the United States from South Korea in 1992 when he was eight years old, reportedly left behind a rambling note venting his rage and complaining about "rich kids," "debauchery" and "deceitful charlatans" on campus.

Fellow students in a theater script writing class remembered the killer as a quiet classmate who wrote gory dramas in a juvenile tone.

"The plays had really twisted, macabre violence that used weapons I wouldn't have even thought of," wrote former classmate Ian MacFarlane who posted two of Cho's plays on aol.com.

"His writing, the plays, were really morbid and grotesque," student Stephanie Derry told the college newspaper, the Collegiate Times.

"He would just sit and watch us, but wouldn't say anything. It was his lack of behavior that really set him apart. He basically just kept to himself, very isolated," Derry said.



Cho Seung-Hui

Nigerian troops kill 25 Islamic militants

AFP, Lagos

Nigerian soldiers killed at least 25 Islamic militants yesterday, the second day of violent clashes in the northern city of Kano, an army spokesman said.

"I understand that our troops killed at least 25 members of the criminal group terrorising Kano. The operation to flush them out is

still on," Colonel Ayo Olaniyan told AFP.

On Tuesday, members of the Islamist group attacked a Kano suburban police post in broad daylight killing the station chief, his wife and 11 officers.

A combined police and army operation was mounted on Wednesday morning to dislodge the militants after they briefly occupied

the police post before escaping to a nearby waterworks complex.

The violence comes amid tensions over Nigeria's forthcoming presidential elections on Saturday.

Nigerian opposition parties have threatened to boycott the vote and say it should be cancelled, the national election commission disbanded and further elections

postponed until "transparency and fairness" could be guaranteed.

A senior official with the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) said on Wednesday that the vote will go ahead as planned.

Security has been stepped up countrywide following weekend violence across Nigeria that claimed 21 lives in the wake of regional elections.

Olaniyan gave no details of any army casualties in Wednesday's clash in Kano, but one eyewitness spoke of seeing the bodies of three soldiers and an AFP reporter saw some 500 residents fleeing the fighting.

"The entire place is under the troops' bombardment. That is why we have to flee," a resident told AFP.

Tuesday's attack on the police station had prompted the authorities in Kano, the most populous city in northern Nigeria, to impose a dusk-to-dawn curfew ahead of next

weekend's presidential vote.

The city is a flashpoint for both religious and communal violence. Last Friday assailants shot and killed a radical Muslim cleric and two of his followers in a mosque in a Kano suburb.

According to local police the group involved in the latest violence is known locally as the Taliban because of its admiration for the former rulers of Afghanistan.

"This has nothing to do with politics. It is purely religious," Kano State police spokesman Baba Mohamed said on Tuesday, adding that the same group was behind attacks in 2004 and 2005 in two other northern Nigerian towns, Yobe and Borno.

This weekend's vote is expected to usher in Nigeria's first civilian-to-civilian handover since the country gained independence from Britain in 1960.