

Iran invites West to help build nuke plants

AP, Tehran

An Iranian official invited Western nations Friday to help build nuclear power plants across Iran, reiterating his country's insistence on pursuing an atomic programme as a European official said the two sides had agreed to discuss the standoff next week.

The invitation is a test of the West's "good will" and could help restore Iran's trust in the West after subjecting Iranians to intense pressure to suspend nuclear work, Vice President Gholam Reza Aghazadeh said.

He commented as a European Union official said negotiators for Iran and the EU would meet Wednesday for the first time since February to assess the possibility of resuming negotiations over Tehran's suspect nuclear programme.

The official, who spoke on

condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to discuss the meeting, gave no details of the planned talks between EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Iran's chief international negotiator, Ali Larjani.

"It will not be negotiations in themselves. We will examine the possibilities of what can be done," the official said.

Solana led largely unsuccessful diplomatic efforts to persuade Iran to suspend uranium enrichment before the UN Security Council imposed sanctions over Tehran's defiance of the council's demand that it halt such work.

Solana negotiates on behalf of the permanent Security Council members the United States, France, Britain, Russia and China as well as Germany.

Those nations have offered Iran a package of economic and other

incentives, including assistance for a peaceful nuclear power programme to produce electricity, but insist Tehran first stop uranium enrichment.

The US and other nations suspect Iran's government is trying to develop nuclear weapons. Iran denies that, saying its only goal is the peaceful use of nuclear reactors to generate electricity.

Iran has started feeding small amounts of uranium gas into centrifuges that can enrich it to weapons-grade level and is already running more than 1,300 of the machines, according to an International Atomic Energy Agency document obtained this week by The Associated Press.

The confidential document, a letter to Iranian officials from a senior IAEA staff member, also protests an Iranian decision to prevent the agency's UN inspection

tors from visiting the country's heavy water reactor that, when built, will produce plutonium. Both enriched uranium and plutonium can be used to construct nuclear warheads.

Aghazadeh told Iran's official IRNA news agency that the government will never again stop uranium enrichment and vowed it will work around the clock to install even more centrifuges at its underground enrichment plant in Natanz.

Aghazadeh said Iran showed "good will" when it suspended uranium enrichment in 2003 for three years, but lost trust in Western nations after learning they were "seeking a permanent halt to Iran's nuclear activities" rather than guarantees the programme would not be diverted to weapons making.

"Therefore, we won't repeat this experience," he said of another suspension.

Cancer rates in Asia set for dramatic increase by 2020

AP, Singapore

can be prevented by simple changes in lifestyle."

Cancer of the lungs, stomach and liver are the biggest problems in Asia followed by breast and colon cancers. The total number of new cancer cases in the region is projected to balloon from 4.5 million in 2002 to 7.1 million in 2020 if nothing changes.

"This will put a tremendous burden on patients, their families and the health care system in each country," said Singapore Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan. "Singapore will not be spared. Cancer is already our top killer and we are bracing ourselves for the disease burden to increase as our population ages."

Lung cancer is the biggest problem in Asia, with 600,000 new cases reported annually. Smoking is considered a major contributor.

In several Asian nations, more than 60 percent of the male population smokes, said Dr. Donald Max Parkin, a research fellow at the University of Oxford's Clinical Trial

Service Unit and Epidemiological Studies Unit.

"Asia is the epicenter of the smoking epidemic at the moment," Parkin said.

Stomach cancer is also on the rise in Asia, but the risk can be greatly reduced by regular exercise and having a healthy diet that's low in salt and fatty foods.

Large populations of Asians have moved from the countryside to cities where their lives have become more sedentary and their eating habits have changed, with people consuming less vegetables and more meat and fried foods.

Preventing hepatitis B through vaccination also helps lower the chances of developing liver cancer, also a major problem for the region, Parkin said.

Worldwide, there are 11 million new cancer cases reported annually and 7 million people die from the disease each year, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

Cow urine used to 'purify' school pupils in India

AP, New Delhi

An Indian teacher has sprinkled cow urine on a school and its pupils in an effort to "purify" his workplace after taking over from a lower-caste principal, reports said yesterday.

Millions of people in India are discriminated against on the basis of their caste, and the reports added that local police have registered against the high-caste head teacher.

Sharad Kaithade took over the village school in the western state of Maharashtra earlier this month, and asked a fellow upper-caste colleague to spray cow urine on school children as they were taking exams, wetting their faces and their answer sheets, the Times of India said.

The female colleague also ordered some lower-caste students in one of the classes to get some urine and sprinkle it on themselves. The cow is held sacred by India's Hindu majority population and its urine is considered to have purifying powers.

The teacher said the sprinkling "was for our well-being," Sonali Meshram, a student, also told the CNN-IBN news channel.

Another lower-caste student Rajat Washnik said the woman teacher said they would "study well after getting purified."

People viewed as being lower caste make up around two-thirds of India's one-billion-plus population.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh noted last year that social discrimination was rampant in India even decades after independence from British rule in 1947.

Last year, India set aside 22.5 percent of university and medical college seats for the lower castes in addition to the existing 27 percent, a move that riled many upper-caste students leading to weeks of protests across the country.

Last month, however, India's Supreme Court ordered a stay on the government's affirmative action plan.



PHOTO: STAR
Women wait for their turn to collect water from a roadside tap at Nayabazar in the old part of the city yesterday. Residents of the area have long been suffering from water crisis.

Japan won't increase military spending to keep up with China

AP, Tokyo

Wall Street Journal.

China has recorded double-digit spending increases for its 2.5 million member military nearly every year since the early 1990s.

The growth has prompted the Defence Ministry to list Beijing's military expansion as a top regional security concern, while Japanese officials have called China a potential threat.

Abe urged China to be more transparent about the spending rises during Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's visit to Tokyo earlier this month.

It was not clear if Abe's comments meant that Japan did not plan to keep pace with China's military spending, or if Japan did not plan to increase spending in the future.

"However, we must also be certain about Japan's defence

capabilities," Abe was quoted as saying without elaborating to the newspaper.

The government will cut Japan's overall defence budget by 0.3 percent for the fiscal year that began on April 1, the fifth straight year it has reduced military spending, according to the Defence Ministry.

In light of China's military buildup, Abe said the US military presence in the region was "important" for security and economy and added that he hopes to strengthen Tokyo's already close ties with Washington when he meets with Bush.

"I want to build a relationship of trust with President Bush," Abe was quoted as telling the newspaper. "The Japan-US alliance is vital for maintaining peace and security in East Asia, and I want to strengthen it further."

China's surging economy, meanwhile, stands to benefit others, Abe was quoted as telling the Wall Street Journal.

"China's economic development represents a chance for Japan and the rest of Asia," as there are benefits the region can enjoy that growth creates, the official quoted Abe as telling the newspaper.

China's gross domestic product grew 11.1 percent in the first three months of 2007 from a year earlier, according to data released Thursday. That was faster than growth of 10.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2006 and exceeded expectations of 10.3 percent growth.



Children take part in an art competition at Patua Qamrul Hasan Art School at Mirpur in the city on Friday. The school organised the competition on the occasion of Bangla New Year.

Bombers wreck American school in Gaza Strip

AFP, Gaza Strip

Masked gunmen stormed the Gaza Strip's only private school early yesterday and detonated a series of bombs inside, causing serious damage, witnesses and security sources said.

The gunmen overpowered and then bound three security guards but there were no casualties in the assault on the American school in Beit Lahiya, an interior ministry official told AFP.

The gunmen took the guards with them when they made their getaway but released them an hour later.

"We are going to carry out a thorough investigation to find those responsible," added the official, who asked not to be identified.

An AFP correspondent saw extensive damage to classrooms and assembly halls in the school.

Principal Iyad al-Saraj vowed that the "cowardly crime" would not prevent the school from providing its 150 pupils with an education, accusing the bombers of wanting to "leave the Palestinian people in ignorance".

"We will continue teaching in our school even if we have to do so under canvas," he said.