

Rice, Iran official have little contact

AFP, AP, Sharm el-Sheik

Iran's foreign minister walked out of a dinner of diplomats where he was seated directly across from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on the pretext that the female violinist entertaining the gathering was dressed too revealingly.

"I don't know which woman he was afraid of, the woman in the red dress or the secretary of state," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said Friday, regarding the actions of Iran's Manouchehr Mottaki.

The dinner episode Thursday night amid a major regional conference on Iraq perfectly revealed how hard it was to bring together the top diplomats of the two rival nations.

In a diplomatic turning point for the Bush administration, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met Thursday with Syria's foreign minister and expressed US concerns about the country's porous border with Iraq.

"I didn't lecture him and he didn't lecture me," Rice said after

the first Cabinet-level talks in years between the countries.

Prospects dimmed for a more dramatic face-to-face discussion between Rice and Iran's foreign minister. "We haven't planned and have not asked for a bilateral meeting, nor have they asked us," she said.

The administration has resisted talks with Syria and Iran despite the recommendations of allies, the Iraq Study Group and US lawmakers from both parties.

Meanwhile, Iraq's neighbours on Friday negotiated a declaration that would pledge support for Iraq's embattled Shia-led government in return for more inclusion of Sunni Arabs in the political process.

A draft copy of the six-page declaration said the summit participants would agree to support Iraq's government as long as it ensured the "basic right of all Iraqi citizens to participate peacefully in the political process through the country's political system."

"It's a start," Foreign Minister Walid Moallem said after the 30-minute session.

Iran blames US for terror acts in Iraq

AFP, Sharm el-Sheikh

Iran accused the United States of terrorist acts in Iraq during an international meeting yesterday aimed at discussing security cooperation in the war-torn country.

"To create a safe haven for those terrorists who try to turn Iraqi territory into a base for attacking Iraq's neighbours should be condemned," Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said at the conference.

A spokesman for the Iranian delegation at the two-day conference on Iraq being held in the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh confirmed that Mottaki was referring to the United States.

"Mr Mottaki was referring to countries which, like the United States, carry out acts of terrorism in Iraq," he told AFP.

"When the United States arrests five Iranian diplomats in Iraq, it is an act of terrorism," he said on

condition of anonymity.

The US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, told reporters at the Pentagon that American forces were holding seven Iranians captured in Iraq as suspected members of the covert Qods Forces of Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

On January 11, US troops dropped from helicopters and stormed an Iranian liaison office in Arbil, the capital of the northern Iraqi Kurdistan region, and detained six employees, one of whom was later released.

The United States has said the men had links to Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards and none of them held diplomatic passports.

It is not clear where and when the other two Iranian detainees mentioned by Petraeus were arrested.

The arrests came amid continuing accusations by US commanders that Tehran is arming Shia

militias and inciting anti-US attacks.

Tehran denies any involvement in the violence, while complaining that armed Iranian opposition groups such as Pejak -- a Kurdish guerrilla movement -- are allowed to operate from Iraqi soil.

In his speech Mottaki described the detention of the Iranians as a "brazen contravention of international conventions, the breach of Iraq's sovereignty and obvious dishonouring of the Iraqi people and government."

Mottaki's comments appeared to dash hopes of a rapprochement between Iran and the US, whose top diplomats had a brief exchange over lunch on Thursday.

Speculation had mounted in recent days over possible direct talks between Rice and Mottaki, in what would have been the highest-level bilateral discussions between the two countries since they broke off ties in 1980.



United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (L) and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attend the second day of an international conference on Iraq yesterday in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. Iraq's neighbours and world powers are gathering for a two-day conference to discuss how to bring an end to the deadly violence still plaguing the country.



French right-wing party UMP presidential candidate Nicolas Sarkozy (R) salutes supporters as he visits the French Alps village of Le Petit-Bornand-les-Glières yesterday on the last campaign day for the second round of the presidential election. Sarkozy cemented his frontrunner position as the four latest polls showed he would beat socialist Segolene Royal on May 6 election with 53 percent and up to 54.5 percent of votes against 47 and 45.5 percent for her.

US eyes steps to ease Israel, Palestine row

AP, Jericho

The US has submitted a document with deadlines for easing Palestinian movement and improving Israeli security, including removing Israeli roadblocks in the West Bank and halting Palestinian rocket fire, the chief Palestinian negotiator said yesterday.

The document, published Friday in the Haaretz newspaper, is in line

with a more hands-on approach to peacemaking by the US in recent weeks. The deadlines are not binding.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was expected to return to the region to discuss the deadlines with both sides, but the Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said no date has been set.

Erekat said the Palestinians welcome the document and would study it carefully. "I believe that this is the right approach," Erekat said. "This is

transferring words to deeds."

An official in the office of Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert said some of the ideas contained in the document were already at various stages of implementation, citing relaxed restrictions at the Karmi cargo crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip. "There are a few Israel will not be able to address at present because of security concerns," the official added, without elaborating.

No troop cut in Kashmir despite drop in killings

AFP, Srinagar

India should maintain massive troop levels in its part of divided Kashmir even though the daily death toll from a Muslim insurgency has fallen to an all-time low, a senior official said yesterday.

"The daily rate of killings of civilians, security personnel and militants has dropped from 10 in 2002 to three in 2006 (and) two a day lately," Jammu and Kashmir state governor Srinivas Kumar Sinha said in a statement.

Police officials told AFP that the current average daily toll was the lowest since the start of the Muslim revolt against Indian rule in 1989.

The governor said the security situation in Kashmir, which is divided between India and Pakistan, was improving -- but asserted "the guard cannot be lowered as the threat of violence continues."

"Once peace returns in the state, the forces can return back to their barracks," he said.

India has an estimated half a million troops and paramilitary soldiers in Kashmir, the cause of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their 1947 independence from the British.

With violence down thanks to a peace process between the South Asian rivals, Pakistan and separatists have linked the region's demilitarisation to lasting peace.

But India's army opposes an early withdrawal of troops, saying this could help the rebels whom it says operate with Pakistan's support. Islamabad denies the charge.

According to official figures, the insurgency has left more than 42,000 people dead. Human rights groups put the toll at 70,000, including 10,000 people who have disappeared since 1989 and are presumed dead.

Lanka storms leave 15 dead

AFP, Colombo

At least 15 people have died following heavy monsoon rains and flash floods in Sri Lanka's capital and nearby coastal areas, police and hospitals said yesterday.

Three people were killed in the capital on Thursday, all of whom drowned after falling into unprotected drains or manholes, a spokeswoman for the Colombo National Hospital said.

Heavy showers also damaged the roof of the country's parliament, while parts of the main Galle Road in Colombo were washed out, police said.

Schools in Colombo were closed Friday following poor attendance on the previous day as approach roads to the capital were submerged.

Rains in neighbouring Gampaha and Kalutara districts and the southern port district of Galle claimed a further 12 lives, police said.

Lankan Airlines halts night flights

Fresh violence kills 3

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's national carrier announced yesterday it was halting night flights in and out of the island's only international airport with immediate effect amid fears of more nocturnal Tamil Tiger raids.

The decision came the day after officials said airlines had to stop night operations by May 10, when Bandara Naik International Airport near Colombo will limit its hours to between 4:30 am (2200 GMT) and 10:30 pm (1700 GMT).

SriLankan Airlines, which is partly owned and fully managed by Emirates airlines of Dubai, said its newly scheduled flights would operate well within that window.

"The safety of our passengers, crew and aircraft is our prime concern and one that we will not compromise

under any circumstances," SriLankan Chief Executive Peter Hill said.

The airport shares a runway with the Sri Lankan Air Force, the target of the first ever Tiger air raid on March 26.

Another attack a week ago also saw the flying Tigers again cross international flight paths, and several passenger jets had to be diverted to the southern Indian city of Chennai.

Meanwhile at least three people were killed in fresh clashes between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels in northern Sri Lanka, the guerrillas said Friday.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they beat back an attack by around 300 Sri Lankan army troops along their frontline in the Wannai late Thursday and killed two soldiers.

Lifestyle changes key to fighting global warming

Say experts

AFP, Bangkok

Individuals have an important role to play in tackling global warming, not just governments and industry, experts said here Friday as they called for people to change their lifestyles.

Taking the train to work instead of driving, turning the temperature up a degree or two on the office air conditioner and eating less meat are just some of the options to consider in the fight against global warming, they said.

Lifestyle change was one key issue highlighted in a landmark report released here on Friday by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that looked at ways to save the world from the worst impacts of global warming.

"Changes in lifestyle and behaviour patterns can contribute to climate change mitigation across all sectors," said the final report,

which was agreed on by delegates from 120 nations at the week-long IPCC meeting.

But the experts said lifestyle changes did not mean people in rich or poor nations had to suffer or go without.

"It's not a matter of sacrifice. It's a matter of change. We can do development in a much more sustainable way than we have done in the past," said Ogunlade Davidson, a co-chair of the IPCC working group.

"You can achieve a low greenhouse gas emission lifestyle and still get the same economic benefits."

IPCC chairman Rajendra Pachauri called on people to follow former US president Jimmy Carter's call in the 1970s for people to use less heating at home during the winter, and instead wear a cardigan.



Sri Lankan motorists brave a flooded street following torrential rains in the capital Colombo yesterday following torrential rains. Police reported at least 15 deaths related to the flash floods and lightning as the monsoon rains set in.

Turkish ruling party pushes for reforms

Early polls on July 22

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's ruling party has formally submitted a package of major reforms to parliament, including a proposal to elect the president by a popular vote, following a political crisis that triggered mass protests.

Officials from the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) said Friday that the raft of reforms was backed by a small opposition party, the Motherland Party, which has long advocated the popular vote.

The reform draft was submitted late Thursday and followed a crisis sparked by parliament's failure a

week ago to elect a president, amid widespread secular opposition to the sole candidate, Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, a former Islamist.

The fallout forced Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to bow to opposition calls for early general elections. Parliament Thursday approved bringing the polls forward to July 22 from November.

AKP officials say they would like to rush the reform package through parliament, so that the first-round of popular presidential vote could be held simultaneously with the legislative elections.

Iran refuses to budge at nuclear meeting

AP, Vienna

Iran's refusal to budge on its objections to the agenda of a nuclear conference pushed the meeting closer to collapse Thursday, as diplomats said Tehran had set up hundreds more centrifuge machines to enrich uranium at an underground facility.

Iran has said it is determined to expand its disputed nuclear programme and further defy UN demands that it freeze all prepara-

tions for enrichment, a potential pathway to nuclear arms.

Diplomats familiar with Iran's nuclear programme said Tehran had recently set up more centrifuges at its underground uranium enrichment plant at Natanz, bringing the number of machines ready to spin uranium gas into enriched form to more than 1,600.

The diplomats spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to comment on internal conference matters to the media.