

Iran to retaliate severely to any US military action

AFP, Abu Dhabi

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad warned yesterday that Iran would retaliate severely to any possible attack by the United States over Tehran's controversial nuclear programme.

"They (the Americans) understand that if they should make this mistake, the retaliation of the Iranian people will be severe and they will repent," he told reporters at the end of a landmark visit to the United Arab Emirates.

Ahmadinejad, who was speaking three days after US Vice President Dick Cheney warned that the United States would not

allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons, said the era when a state could come from "thousands of miles away" to strike another country had gone.

"They cannot strike Iran. The Iranian people are able to retaliate. They are able to protect and defend themselves well," he said in Farsi through an interpreter.

Ahmadinejad repeated Tehran's assertions that its nuclear programme, which the United States suspects is a cover for developing atomic weapons, was being pursued "within the context of the law" in keeping with its "right to acquire this energy."

He dismissed Cheney's warn-

ings made from the hangar deck of a US aircraft carrier in the Gulf on Friday, saying: "The message did not contain anything new."

Ahmadinejad arrived in the UAE on Sunday hot on the heels of Cheney, who has been touring Arab allies to rally support as Washington grapples with mounting violence in Iraq while not ruling out the use of force against Iran.

The Iranian leader said landmark talks on Iraq between US and Iranian delegates, announced by both sides on Sunday, would take place in Baghdad, but the date has not been decided.

The United States "requested to talk with Iran" in order to solve

security issues in Iraq, he said. "In order to support the Iraqi people, we declared that we are ready."

US officials said the talks would take place in the next few weeks.

Ahmadinejad, whose country has a longstanding dispute with the UAE over three strategic Gulf islands, said his visit, the first by an Iranian head of state, had "turned a new page in the bilateral relationship between the two countries."

He played down the row over the islands of Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa, which were annexed by Iran's pro-Western Shah in 1971 and are claimed by Abu Dhabi.

10 killed in Russian cafe blast

AFP, Moscow

Ten people died overnight in an explosion and fire at a cafe in a market in Russia's southern Orenburg region overnight, Russian news agencies reported yesterday.

Investigators suspected "premeditated murder through arson," ITAR-TASS quoted Galina Maiorova, an aide to the regional prosecutor, as saying.

"Currently all possible versions are being considered. Witnesses are being found and questioned," she said.

Footage on state television showed law enforcement officials removing corpses in bodybags from the "Yantarny" cafe, a blackened and badly damaged one-storey corrugated iron structure.

All 10 victims, apparently including the cafe's owners, were found in one corner of the bar.

According to the independent Gazeta.ru news website the dead comprised five women and five men.

Chang named Taiwan's new premier

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian yesterday appointed the island's top China negotiator as the new premier, urging him to be firm in his dealings with Beijing.

Chang Chun-hsiung, a former premier and current chairman of the quasi-official Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), which handles affairs with China, replaces Su Tseng-chang, who resigned on Saturday.

In a letter dated May 14 and addressed to the head of the Myanmar junta General Than Shwe, the 57 signatories called "for the immediate release of the world's only imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi", the Oslo Center for Peace and Human rights said.

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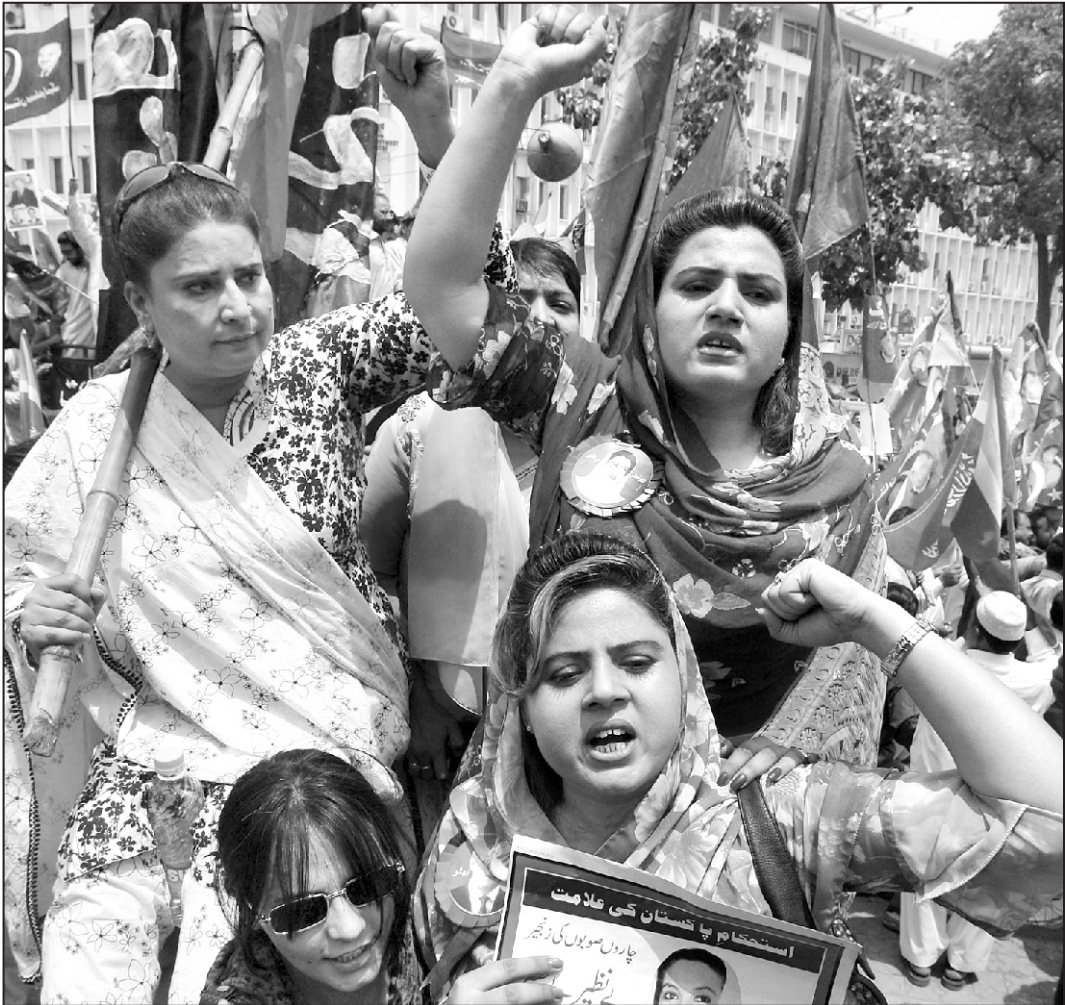
Bombing kills 2 in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Two people were killed and 10 injured yesterday in a bomb attack at a crowded marketplace in India's insurgency-wracked north-eastern state of Assam, police said.

Police said the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), a rebel group fighting for an independent Assamese homeland since 1979, was behind the attack in Guwahati.

"The impact of the blast was so powerful that it ripped apart four motorcycles parked in the area," a senior police official told AFP, saying the bomb was planted on a parked motorcycle.



Women activists of Pakistani opposition parties demonstrate in Lahore yesterday. Strikes brought Karachi and other cities to a standstill as gunmen killed a top court official in further violence over the suspension of Pakistan's top judge.

Free Suu Kyi, 57 ex-world leaders urge Myanmar

AFP, Oslo

US ex-president Bill Clinton and 56 other former world leaders have appealed to Myanmar's military regime to free opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a Norwegian peace institute said yesterday.

Suu Kyi, 61, has been under house arrest at her home in Yangon for 11 of the past 17 years without charge or trial.

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League for Democracy (Suu Kyi's party), and Burma's ethnic groups," the letters said.

Initiated by Norway's former prime minister Kjell Magne Bondevik, it was also signed by Clinton and former leaders Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, Brian Mulroney of Canada, Junichiro Koizumi of Japan, former US president Jimmy Carter and ex-European Commission president Jacques Delors.

Others included ex-presidents George Bush, Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic, Fidel Ramos of the Philippines, Ricardo Lagos of Chile and Kim Dae-jung of South Korea.

The letter pointed to numerous international appeals for Suu Kyi's release, including one by the United Nations General Assembly last year and one by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon on January 8 shortly after he took office.

Afghan warlord says Laden still alive

AFP, Dubai

Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is still alive but keeping a low profile, notorious Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar said in a video released on Arab television late Sunday.

"According to my information I think that Osama is still alive," Hekmatyar said in the video broadcast by Al-Arabiya television.

He said Bin Laden, wanted by the United States over the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, would be better off "not multiplying his appearances in the media or in publishing statements and videos."

Hekmatyar earlier this year claimed that his men had helped Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to escape US special forces searching for him in the eastern Afghan mountains at the start of 2002.

The Sunni warlord is a former Afghan prime minister who carries



a multi-million-dollar US bounty on his head.

His men have attacked coalition forces in Afghanistan but he conducts his business separately from the Taliban militia which sheltered bin Laden until it was ousted from power in a US-led invasion in late 2001.

Hekmatyar is believed to be hiding in eastern Afghanistan or Pakistan while leading his Hizb-i-Islami (Islamic Party) faction in attacks against foreign and government targets.

Indian IT minister quits after party feud

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's high-profile Communication and Information Technology Minister Dayanidhi Maran resigned from the cabinet late on Sunday night shortly after his party DMK, a constituent of Congress-led coalition government, sought his removal.

Maran's exit became inevitable when earlier in the day on Sunday, a key decision-making committee of DMK, which rules the southern state of Tamil Nadu, in an unanimous resolution, urged party chief and state Chief Minister M Karunanidhi to initiate action against Maran.

The committee wanted Maran's removal from the government because of his "recent approach and activities" which the committee felt was "violative" of party discipline and "tarnished" the party's image.

The committee also decided to serve a show-cause notice to Maran, a grand nephew of Karunanidhi,

and authorized the Chief Minister to consider his primary membership of the party after receiving his reply.

Armed by the committee's decision, Karunanidhi wrote a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging him to drop Dayanidhi Maran from the cabinet.

However, soon after the DMK committee meeting, Maran, who was holidaying in a famous hill resort of his home state, spoke to the Prime Minister and faxed his resignation to him.

In a statement, he rejected the charge that he had betrayed DMK or its chief Karunanidhi.

The action against Maran came four days after a feud in the DMK's first family burst into open when supporters of M K Azhagiri, elder son of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, attacked a vernacular newspaper owned by Dayanidhi Maran's elder brother Kalanidhi Maran, published a survey which favoured Azhagiri's younger brother M K Stalin to succeed Karunanidhi as his political heir.

Palestinian interior minister resigns

AFP, Gaza City

Interior minister Hani al-Qawasmeh resigned from the Palestinian unity government yesterday amid the deadliest factional fighting in two months in a major blow to the fledgling administration.

A ceasefire announced late

Sunday in a bid to stem the violence failed to take hold.

Two activists of president Mahmud Abbas's secular Fatah faction were killed in clashes with gunmen of prime minister Ismail Haniya's Islamist Hamas movement just hours after it was supposed to come into effect.

Qawasmeh, an independent

whose appointment was the subject of marathon talks between the two coalition partners, charged he had not been granted adequate authority and accused the government of not taking security seriously.

"I resigned from my position because I am not willing to be a purely decorative interior minister

without authority," he told a news conference.

He submitted his resignation late Sunday and prime minister Ismail Haniya accepted on Monday, but Qawasmeh denied that his decision was directly related to the faction fighting that killed six people in the Gaza Strip in 24 hours.

"I reached the conclusion the whole (security) situation is not being dealt with seriously... The combined force that has been agreed as opposing forces that are fighting as we speak," he said.

The Palestinian government took office on March 17 following a landmark power-sharing deal between Fatah and Hamas, and was created precisely to end similar infighting that killed 100 Palestinians in the two preceding months.

Haniya issued an appeal for calm yesterday and urged Palestinians to protect the power-sharing agreement reached in Saudi Arabia and stand by the unity administration as their best hope.

