

US, allies to toughen Iran sanctions: Bush

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush said Thursday that he would work with European allies, Russia, and China to toughen sanctions on Iran for its defiance of UN demands to rein in its suspect nuclear programme.

"We need to strengthen our sanction regime," Bush said one day after the UN nuclear watchdog agency warned that Tehran had accelerated its uranium enrichment efforts, which can be a key step in atomic bomb-making.

Bush said he and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had discussed plans to beef up existing punitive measures on the Islamic republic and "we will work with our European partners to develop further sanctions."

The embattled US president, weighed down by the unpopular Iraq war, said he would personally try to overcome anticipated resistance to such a step from Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Hu Jintao.

"These leaders have got to understand that an Iran with a nuclear weapon would be incredibly destabilizing for the world. It's in their interests that we work collaboratively to continue to isolate that regime," said Bush.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) warned Wednesday that Iran was not just ignoring UN demands to freeze uranium enrichment but was expanding such work, which can also yield fuel for civilian reactors to generate energy.

"The world has spoken and said, you know, 'no nuclear weapons programmes.' And yet they're constantly ignoring the demands," Bush said at a White House press conference. Tehran denies seeking an atomic arsenal.

The United States has backed Europe-led diplomacy with Iran, specifically talks with Britain, France, and Germany, while the UN Security Council has twice imposed sanctions on Tehran over its nuclear programme.

Asked whether any new sanctions would target Iran's oil industry, a US State Department official who requested anonymity replied: "I certainly would steer you away from the idea that anyone is going to try and put in place some kind of energy sector sanctions. I do not think that anybody is talking about that."

Putin, on a visit to Luxembourg, said he wanted the situation to be "decided by political and diplomatic means, and not to lead the situation into a dead end." Washington has refused to take the military option off the table.

The UN report came as the United States ratcheted up tensions with the biggest display of naval power in the Gulf in years, even as Iran further soured ties with Washington by detaining another US-Iranian national.

"To the extent that these people

are picking up innocent Americans, it's unacceptable. And we've made it very clear to the Iranian government that the detention of good, decent American souls who are there to, you know, be beneficial citizens is not acceptable behaviour," Bush declared Thursday.

His comments came as US and Iranian diplomats prepared for historic talks on Iraqi security in Baghdad on Monday.

Ahead of those talks, the United States said Iran was escalating a proxy war against US forces in Iraq as the two nations sparred verbally over a number of their nationals being detained by each other.

Iran has repeatedly demanded that the United States release five Iranians arrested by US forces in Iraq, while Washington has expressed outrage over the detentions of at least two Iranian-Americans in recent weeks.

At the press conference, Bush said he was pleased with new emergency Iraq war funding legislation, but warned that fighting there could sharply worsen ahead of a September assessment of the months-old US security crackdown, and cautioned leaders in Baghdad that they must show political progress.

"As it provides vital funds for our troops, this bill also reflects a consensus that the Iraqi government needs to show real progress in return for America's continued support and sacrifice," he said.

"This summer is going to be a critical time for the new strategy," said Bush. "We're going to expect heavy fighting in the (coming) weeks and months."

800 vehicles

FROM PAGE 1

region, he said.

The number of stranded vehicles on both sides of the ferry ghat might increase during the night, adding to the sufferings of the travellers, sources said.

Court asks

FROM PAGE 16

would be given to him, said advocate Abu Bakar.

The judge's comment drew instant flak from lawyers and the judge replied, "I am not going to hear any word against Galib."

Meanwhile, intelligence agencies in 2005 found evidence that Galib channelled huge Middle Eastern funds to the militants using Tawhid Trust and its properties.

The court heard seven witnesses for Galib. Two of them -- Abubakar second-in-command Abdus Samad Salati and Organising Secretary ASM Azizuddin -- were held along with Galib, but they were released sometime before the end of BNP-Jamaat rule.

"To the extent that these people

were killed, the two leading Democratic presidential hopefuls voted against the bill.

Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are battling for the support of their party's anti-war grassroots in upcoming primaries to select a Democratic candidate and are seeking to capitalise on growing public disenchantment.

"With my vote today, I am saying to the president that enough is enough," Obama said, while Clinton declared: "I believe that the president should begin a phased redeployment of our troops out of Iraq and abandon this escalation."

Despite recent setbacks, Bush is determined to push on with his so-called "surge strategy", under which the number of US troops in Iraq will increase to more than 160,000 in a bid to quell sectarian fighting around Baghdad.

The deployment of four additional combat brigades -- a fifth is due by next month -- has helped reduce death squad killings, but Al-Qaeda bombers continue their deadly campaign and fighting has worsened north and west of the city.

Two weeks ago, insurgents ambushed and wiped out a small US patrol manning an observation post south of Baghdad. They destroyed two Humvees, killed four soldiers and an interpreter and dragged off three American troops.

One of the three, Private First Class Joseph Anzack, was found on Wednesday floating in the Euphrates in Mussyabi, 55 kilometres (34 miles) south of Baghdad. Iraqi police said he had been shot in the back of the head.

Thousands of troops are still searching for his missing comrades -- Private Byron Fouty and Specialist Alex Jiminez -- and May remains on track to be one of the deadliest months for US soldiers since the invasion.

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6 more GIs killed

FROM PAGE 1

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