



Activists gather for an immigration rally outside the US Capitol Saturday in Washington, DC. The immigration reform introduced in the US Senate could eventually allow most of the estimated 12 million undocumented workers in the US to gain legal status, in the most sweeping immigration law reform in 21 years.

## US can forget about winning in Iraq

Says retired American Gen Sanchez

AFP, San Antonio

The man who led coalition forces in Iraq during the first year of the occupation says the United States can forget about winning the war.

"I think if we do the right things politically and economically with the right Iraqi leadership we could still salvage at least a stalemate, if you will -- not a stalemate but at least stave off defeat," retired Army Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez said in an interview.

Sanchez, in his first interview since he retired last year, is the highest-ranking former military leader yet to suggest the Bush administration fell short in Iraq.

"I am absolutely convinced that America has a crisis in leadership at this time," Sanchez told AFP after a recent speech in San Antonio, Texas.

"We've got to do whatever we can to help the next generation of leaders do better than we have done over the past five years, better than what this cohort of political and military leaders have done," adding that he was "referring to our national political leadership in its entirety" - not just President George W. Bush.

Sanchez called the situation in Iraq bleak and blamed it on "the abysmal performance in the early stages and the transition of sovereignty."

He included himself among those who erred in Iraq's crucial first year after Saddam.

Sanchez took command in the summer of 2003 and oversaw the occupation force amid an insurgency that has sparked a low-grade civil war in Iraq.

He was in the middle of some of the most momentous events of the

war, among them the dissolution of the Iraqi army and barring millions of Baath Party members from government jobs: two actions seen as triggering the rebellion among Sunnis Moslems, who fell from power with Saddam Hussein.

Sanchez is also most closely identified with the Abu Ghraib scandal, which occurred on his watch.

Though he was cleared of wrongdoing by an Army probe, Abu Ghraib's searing images of naked prisoners humiliated by a rogue torture squad cost Sanchez an almost certain fourth star in the Senate, which approves general officer promotions.

Sanchez, 56, declined to talk about Abu Ghraib or other key events of the war, or say who was to blame for what went wrong.

On Saturday night, at least 6,000 people gathered in the plaza, apparently spurred on by a court ruling

## Deal on Iran's nukes possible: Tehran

Clock ticking to Israel's 'destruction', says Ahmadinejad

AP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said disputes over its nuclear programme could be settled in the coming weeks if the UN Security Council dropped preparations to debate another round of sanctions against the country and turn over its case to the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The announcement by Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini comes after an official in Spain said Iran had pledged to end years of stonewalling and provide answers about past suspicious nuclear activities to the IAEA, the UN nuclear monitoring agency.

"If reviewing of Iran's nuclear issue returns to the agency, the Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to reach an agreement over settling a few remaining problems with the

agency in the short term," Hosseini told reporters in his weekly news conference in Tehran.

But Hosseini's comments and the offer, which Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani made to the EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, during talks in Spain last week, appeared to fall short of Security Council demands that Iran suspend uranium enrichment.

Hosseini said during Larijani's talks on Thursday with Solana in Madrid that Iran did not discuss halting enrichment. Iran has refused to freeze enrichment, which can produce both reactor fuel and at higher levels weapons-grade material.

"Such a thing was not discussed in the talks," he said when he was asked if the suspension was debated in the talks. "No change

has applied in Iran's stance as a consequence of the talks."

The Security Council first imposed sanctions on Iran in December and modestly increased them in March over Iran's refusal to suspend enrichment. The council is now preparing to debate on a third round of punitive measures.

"All should know that the possible third resolution on sanctions and more restrictions on Iran will not dissuade us from our way," Hosseini said.

An IAEA report in May provided the potential trigger for another round of sanctions by saying Tehran continued to defy the Security Council ban on enrichment and instead was expanding its activities.

Meanwhile, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday launched a new verbal attack on

Israel, saying a "countdown" has begun that will end with Lebanese and Palestinian militants destroying the Jewish state.

In a speech to mark the 18th anniversary of the death of revolutionary founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the president said last summer's war between Israel and Lebanese militant group Hezbollah started the process.

"In Lebanon, the corrupt, arrogant powers and the Zionist regime did all they could in an unfair 33-day war. But after 60 years its (Israel's) greatness fell apart," Iranian media quoted Ahmadinejad as saying.

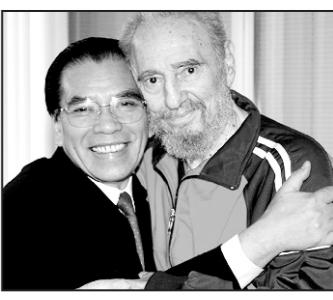


PHOTO: AFP

Cuban President Fidel Castro (R) embraces visiting head of Vietnam's Communist Party, Nong Duc Manh, in Havana on Saturday.

## Castro meets Vietnamese official

AP, Havana

Convalescing leader Fidel Castro received visiting Vietnamese Communist Party chief Nong Duc Manh, Cuban television reported Saturday.

"It was a meeting that ratified the warm ties that unite our nations," said an official statement read on the evening news broadcast.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai-Muslim protesters shout slogans while demonstrating down a street in Pattani province, one of three insurgency-torn Thai provinces bordering Malaysia, yesterday.

## Hundreds protest against Thai junta

AFP, Bangkok

At least 1,400 anti-coup demonstrators descended on Bangkok yesterday to urge a return to democracy, police and organisers said, a day after a similar rally drew record numbers.

The protesters, sporting yellow banners around their heads reading "junta get out" and waving flags bearing similar slogans, gathered in a rainy Sanam Luang plaza in central Bangkok to demand an end to the military government.

"We plan daily demonstrations until at least the 24th of June," said Nattawut Saikua, a rally organiser and supporter of ex-premier Thaksin Shinawatra, who was ousted in the coup last September.

Organisers at Sunday's rally claimed that 2,000 people turned out to demonstrate in a water-logged Sanam Luang, while police estimated a crowd of about 1,400.

On Saturday night, at least 6,000 people gathered in the plaza, apparently spurred on by a court ruling

Wednesday that dissolved Thai Rak Thai (TRT), the twice-elected political party formed by Thaksin.

It was biggest display of defiance against the junta since last year's coup, and Nattawut said it had prompted the rally organisers to change their name from "People's Television" to the "Democracy Alliance to Expel Dictatorship."

"It was the first time we opened it up for the general public who are against the dictatorship, and there was a good response," said Nattawut, who claimed that 10,000 people joined Saturday's rally.

"They filled half of Sanam Luang -- when we fill Sanam Luang, we will move to seek an answer from the junta leaders," he declared.

On Wednesday, Thailand's Constitutional Tribunal disbanded TRT and barred the ousted premier and 110 senior party leaders from politics for five years after it found the party guilty of election law violations.

## Israel vows to keep up Gaza strikes

AFP, Jerusalem

"In view of what appears to be a drop in Qassam fire, I would like to make it clear that we are not negotiating," Olmert said at the weekly cabinet meeting, referring to the homemade rockets.

"We are not committing ourselves to changing the patterns of our operations," he said. "We will continue to take action against terrorist elements... in the Gaza region and the West Bank without letting up."

"These activities are yielding results and will continue as they contribute to protecting Israeli citizens."

The violence around Gaza, which has also included deadly factional clashes between rival Fatah and Hamas factions, has sparked international concern and has threatened to torpedo efforts to revive the moribund Middle East peace talks.

## Gates warns Turkey not to invade Iraq

AP, Singapore

Defence Secretary Robert Gates yesterday cautioned Turkey against sending troops into northern Iraq, as it has threatened, to hunt down Kurdish rebels it accuses of carrying out terrorist raids inside Turkey.

"We hope there would not be a unilateral military action across the border into Iraq," Gates told a news conference after meetings here with Asian government officials. Turkey and Iraq were not represented.

Gates said he sympathised with the Turks' concern about cross-border raids by Kurdish rebels.

"The Turks have a genuine concern with Kurdish terrorism that takes place on Turkish soil," he said. "So one can understand their frustration and unhappiness over this. Several hundred Turks lose their lives each year, and we have been working with the Turks to try to help them get control of this problem on Turkish soil."

Tensions have heightened in recent weeks in northern Iraq as Turkey has built up its military forces on Iraq's border, a move clearly meant

to pressure Iraq to rein in the rebels of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, separatists who launch raids into southeast Turkey's Kurdish region from hideouts in Iraq.

Turkey's political and military leaders have been debating whether to try to root out those bases, and perhaps set up a buffer zone across the frontier as the Turkish army has done in the past. Turkey's military chief said Thursday the army was ready and only awaiting orders for a cross-border offensive.

Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki on Saturday urged Turkey not to stage a new incursion, saying his government will not allow the relatively peaceful area of northern Iraq to be turned into a battleground.

Turks accuse Iraqi Kurds, who once fought alongside the Turkish soldiers against the PKK in Iraq, of

supporting the separatist rebels and worry that the war in Iraq could lead to the country's disintegration and the creation of a Kurdish state in the north.

At the Singapore news conference Gates was asked about a reported US naval bombardment on Friday of terrorist targets in northern Somalia.

"That's possibly an ongoing operation," he said, adding that as a result he would not comment on it.

Gates was in Singapore to attend an international security conference known as the Shangri-la Dialogue, where he reassured Asian nations that the United States remains committed to being a Pacific power and is not distracted by the Iraq war.

In Gaza City, the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, the senior partner in the Palestinian unity cabinet, claimed responsibility for the fire, which also struck a kibbutz without causing injuries.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed the army would continue its strikes on gunmen despite a drop in projectiles fired by militants at the weekend.

## Unprecedented poverty for Palestinians after 40 yrs occupation: Amnesty

AFP, London

Israel has plunged the Palestinians into unprecedented levels of poverty and despair through 40 years of occupation, yet failed to ensure its own security, Amnesty International said today.

While acknowledging Israel's "legitimate security concerns," the London-based human rights group said the Jewish state could not justify building its security barrier inside parts of the West Bank and condemned its settlement policies.

If Israel just wanted to keep out suicide bombers, Amnesty added, it would have only built the barrier along the Green Line that marked its boundary with the West Bank until Israeli forces invaded in the June 1967 war.

"Yet, the reality is that most of it is being built on Palestinian land," Amnesty's Middle East and North Africa Programme director Malcolm Smart said in a statement.

He said the Israeli barrier defies the International Court of Justice and separates Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank.

His organisation said

Palestinians are also restricted by more than 500 checkpoints and blockades as well as a network of roads reserved solely for settlers and linking settlements with Israel proper.

The policies are aimed at benefiting "continuously expanding but unlawful Israeli settlements" while causing the "virtual collapse of the Palestinian economy," the human rights group charged.

They are also "exacerbating the increasingly fragile conditions in which Palestinians live and work -- resulting in levels of despair, poverty and food insecurity never before seen in the territories," he said.

"Most Palestinians are now relying on aid for subsistence, with families reducing the quality and quantity of the food they consume and selling assets essential for their livelihoods," he added.

Israeli actions, Amnesty said, have "resulted in widespread human rights abuses and have also failed to bring security to the Israeli and Palestinian civilian populations."