

UN resolutions not worth a nickel coin

Says Iranian President

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday that Tehran does not consider threats of new UN sanctions against its nuclear programme to be worth a nickel coin.

"Nuclear energy belongs to the Iranian nation and the Iranian nation will defend this right with their fists in the air," Ahmadinejad told cheering crowds in his hometown province of Semnan at a rally broadcast live on television.

"If you want to take the same path and issue previous kinds of resolutions which had no effect on us again, the Iranian nation does not consider your resolutions to be worth a nickel coin," he said.

The UN Security Council has imposed two rounds of sanctions in a bid to get Iran to halt uranium enrichment, which can be used for nuclear reactor fuel but also for making atomic bombs.

The 35-nation board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), meeting in Vienna this week, was set yesterday to hear a report on Iran that could bring Tehran one step closer to a

third round of UN sanctions.

IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei was expected to present a report which states that Iran is expanding uranium enrichment work despite pressure from the international community for it to halt the programme.

Tehran vehemently denies US accusations that it seeks nuclear weapons, saying it wants only to generate electricity.

"The resistance of the world's arrogance and bullying front against the Iranian nation is nearing its end phase, they have brought everything they had in their power and gained no result," Ahmadinejad added amid the habitual slogan of "Nuclear Energy is our undeniable rights."

"They are collecting their power once again to pinch the Iranian nation again (with sanctions) but we will not retreat an iota," on our rights.

On Tuesday, a diplomat in Vienna told AFP that the UN atomic watchdog believes Tehran could have 8,000 centrifuges enriching uranium by December, a significant rise in nuclear capability.

The diplomat, who is close to the IAEA, said ElBaradei's estimate of

Iran obtaining 8,000 centrifuges was based on "the technical assessment of his inspectors" and so was sound.

The diplomat said ElBaradei has been telling political leaders in private conversations that Iran was making "steady progress" in uranium enrichment and shows no sign of slowing down.

But ElBaradei had said on the opening day Monday of this week's meeting that the "brewing confrontation" with Iran over its atomic ambitions "must be defused."

ElBaradei said "dialogue and diplomacy are ultimately the only way to achieve the negotiated solution foreseen in the relevant Security Council resolutions."

The IAEA has after more than four years of investigation failed to resolve key questions about Iran's nuclear programme.

Washington says it is looking for a diplomatic solution but has not ruled out military action.

ElBaradei has drawn US ire for saying that the West should accept that Iran has acquired the knowledge to enrich and so it is unrealistic to expect it to halt such work entirely.

Peres assured of presidency as rivals bow out

AFP, Jerusalem

Veteran statesman and Nobel peace laureate Shimon Peres was finally assured Israel's presidency yesterday after his rival contenders dramatically quit the race to elect a new head of state.

Just three votes shy of an outright majority in a first round vote, Peres looked assured of winning an election he lost seven years ago after former parliament speaker Reuven Rivlin and Colette Avital extended their support.

"I am withdrawing from the race and call on all lawmakers to vote unanimously for Shimon Peres," said Rivlin choking back tears before the second round of voting began with the 83-year-old statesman the sole candidate.

"Long live the president of Israel," cried Rivlin, a hugely popular former parliamentary speaker whose father also ran for but lost the vote for the presidency conducted in the 120-member Knesset.

Senior Labour party MP Yoram Marciano waded in to announce "the party's unanimous decision to support the candidacy of Mr Peres."

The first round handed Peres 58 votes, Rivlin from the right-wing Likud party 37 and Labour MP Avital 21 after deputies came forward one by one, dropped their secret ballot and marked it into a black box by the speaker's chair.

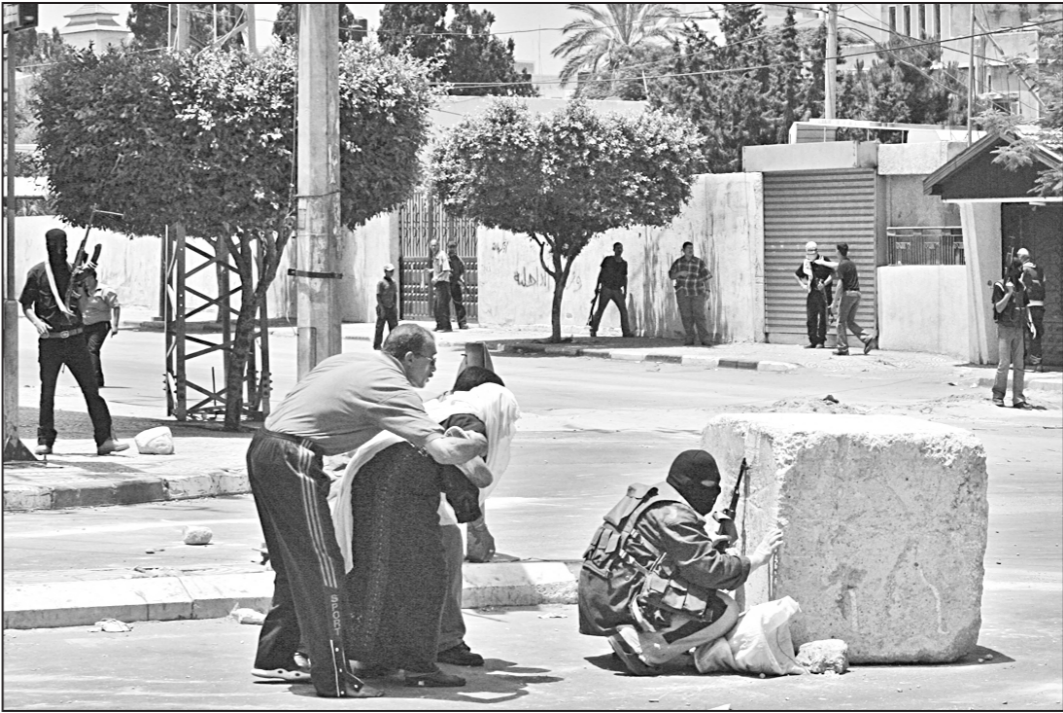


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian man helps an elderly woman (C) to take cover as security members clash with militants of Hamas in Gaza City yesterday. The armed wing of Hamas in the Gaza Strip served yesterday members of the Fatah security forces an ultimatum to surrender all weapons by Friday.

US lumps Mideast allies on human trafficking blacklist

AFP, Washington

US Middle East allies Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, as well as Malaysia were added Tuesday to a Washington blacklist of countries trafficking in people, the State Department said.

Algeria and Guinea were the other additions to the blacklist of the State Department's annual "Trafficking in Persons Report," which analyzed efforts in about 164 countries to combat trafficking for forced labor, prostitution, military service and other purposes.

The seven countries, all of whom were on a special watch list last year, join Myanmar, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Uzbekistan and Venezuela in the dreaded "Tier 3" list as the worst offenders of human trafficking.

Being on the blacklist, they could face sanctions, including the withholding by the United States of non-humanitarian, non-trade related foreign aid.

Countries that receive no such foreign assistance would be subject to withholding of funding for participation by government officials in

educational and cultural exchange programs.

Launching the 236-page report, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cited "disturbing evidence" that prosecution of human trafficking cases had levelled off across the globe.

In countries with major human trafficking problems, "only a couple" of traffickers were brought to justice, she said. "This cannot and must not be tolerated."

"Human traffickers prey on the most vulnerable members of society -- most often innocent women and children, exploiting and abusing them and profiting from their suffering," she said.

US government research shows 800,000 people are trafficked across national borders, about 80 percent of them women and girls and up to half minors, the State Department said.

The majority of transnational victims are females trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation, it said.

The wealthy Middle East nations added to the blacklist this year were largely accused of mistreating foreign workers, which they heavily rely on.

"It is especially disappointing that so many wealthy countries in the Near East that aren't lacking resources to make significant progress are on Tier 3, for example Saudi Arabia for the third consecutive year," said Mark Lagon, Rice's senior advisor on the human trafficking problem.

He said weak foreign workers' sponsorship laws in these countries made the guests "vulnerable" to abuse in both private homes and worksites. Some of the victims who reported their abuse were instead "held hostage," sometimes for years, in police centers.

A key trend in trafficking cases, especially those linked to labor and sexual exploitation, is illegal debt, investigations show.

It is "increasingly used to keep people in servitude," Lagon said. "This debt is used by traffickers as an instrument of coercion."

He dismissed suggestions that politics played a part in categorizations facing trafficking problems, citing Zimbabwe, which has a blemished human rights record, as an example.

India to elect new president on July 19

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Members of Indian Parliament and legislative assemblies in the states will elect a new President for the country on July 19 in place of incumbent A P J Abdul Kalam on completion of his tenure.

The Election Commission yesterday announced the schedule for Presidential poll under which counting of votes will be held on July 21.

A contest for the top constitutional post appears on the card with the country's ruling coalition Congress-led UPA set to announce its candidate to be challenged most likely by Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, a senior BJP leader, who is expected to contest as an independent candidate backed by main opposition NDA.

The UPA Presidential candidate will be a senior Congress leader with Indian Home Minister Shivraj Patil, considered a staunch loyalist of party chief Sonia Gandhi, the front runner. Among other senior Congress leaders who are front-runners for the race are External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Karan Singh and Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde.

All allies of Congress in UPA have pledged their support to a Congress nominee for the post and so have the Left parties, which provide crucial outside support to the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

However, the Left have openly favoured Pranab Mukherjee as their choice for Presidential candidate but Congress is understood to be unwilling to spare him because of his importance in managing the ruling coalition.

The UPA is expected to come out with formal announcement of its candidate in a few days and NDA is likely to formally declare its stand on June 18 whether it will go for a consensus with the ruling alliance or support Shekhawat as an independent.

The Electoral College for Presidential poll comprises members of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, the two houses of Indian Parliament, and those of legislative assemblies in the states.

Smaller regional parties like Samajwadi Party, Telugu Desam Party and AIADMK, which are neither part of UPA nor of NDA, would announce their stand on Presidential choice on June 18.

US judge sues dry cleaners for \$54m over lost pants!

AFP, Washington

A US judge took the Korean immigrant owners of a dry cleaning business to court on Tuesday demanding 54 million dollars in compensation for losing his trousers, a court source told the wire service.

Roy Pearson alleges that Custom Cleaners, run by Korean immigrants Jin and Soo Chung and their son, lost his blue and red-striped grey trousers and misled him with a sign that read "satisfaction guaranteed," according to details cited in US media.

He calculated the 54 million dollar penalty under District of Columbia consumer protection laws, at 1,500 dollars for every day the cleaners left the sign up in their shop, ABC news said. The case has dragged on for two years.

Indonesia captures top terror suspect

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police said yesterday they had captured a leader of the Southeast Asian terror network blamed for the 2002 Bali bombings and a string of other devastating attacks in recent years.

The arrest of Abu Dujana, believed to head a special forces unit within Jemaah Islamiyah -- which has been linked to al-Qaeda -- is a major breakthrough for Indonesia's efforts to curb the activities of the group.

Dujana, 37, was among suspected militants detained in a series of weekend raids carried out by Indonesia's anti-terror unit, Detachment 88, police spokesman Siso Adiwino told a press briefing.

"The person that was arrested on Saturday, Yusron Mahmudi, has many aliases and one of them is Abu Dujana," Adiwino told, adding that he was known under at least six names.

Abu Dujana "is known to be more important than Noordin M. Top or Azahari Husin," he said, referring to two Malaysian members of JI.

Azahari was killed by Indonesian police in a raid in November 2005 while Noordin Muhammad Top, who has been described as Southeast Asia's most wanted man, remains on the run.

Police had originally said they believed Yusron was an aide to Dujana, believed to have been tasked with collecting weapons and explosives for JI.

Carter arrives in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Former US president Jimmy Carter arrived in Nepal yesterday for talks with political leaders and a key former rebel about crucial polls scheduled for late 2007.

Carter, 82, will meet Nepal Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala as well as Maoist leader Prachanda who ended a bloody rebellion last year and joined the government but whose party remains on a US list of terrorist organisations.

Carter was whisked from Kathmandu's airport after his arrival for the four-day visit, and did not comment to waiting journalists.