

Iran invites IAEA nuke inspectors to Tehran

AP, Vienna

Iran has invited an International Atomic Energy Agency team to Tehran to work on a plan for clearing up suspicions about its nuclear programme, an IAEA spokeswoman said yesterday.

Apparently calculated to blunt the threat of new UN sanctions, the move could increase pressure on the United States and its closest allies to reconsider their insistence that Iran fully freeze all uranium enrichment activities.

Such a freeze is being called for by the Security Council along with other demands, including a requirement that Iran stop stonewalling the Vienna-based nuclear

watchdog agency and answer questions about activities that could be linked to a weapons programme.

Iran's refusal to meet agency requests for answers originally prompted the council call for a stop to all enrichment activities. Since December, the council has imposed two sets of sanctions and has begun informal consultations on new penalties because of Iran's nuclear defiance.

Iran says it wants to develop a full enrichment programme only to generate power and says it has the right to do so under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. But its refusal to come up with the answers to IAEA questions has

heightened suspicions its real plan is to enrich uranium to weapons grade, for use as the fissile core of warheads.

The offer came Sunday during a meeting with IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei, when Ali Larijani, Tehran's chief nuclear negotiator, "invited the IAEA to send a team to Tehran to develop an action plan for resolving outstanding issues related to Iran's past nuclear programme," said agency spokeswoman Melissa Fleming.

"The IAEA intends to send a team as early as practicable," she said in a statement.

The talks Sunday were apparently agreed upon on short notice and came just a day after Larijani

met with top EU foreign policy envoy Javier Solana for talks believed to have focused on Tehran's recent offer to deal with outstanding questions.

Larijani and ElBaradei had already met Friday and the IAEA chief said afterward that the Islamic republic was ready to follow up on that offer by working out a concrete timetable with his agency's experts on coming up with the answers sought by the UN nuclear agency.

Iran has said before that it was ready to cooperate with the IAEA on the issue of unexplained past activities that could be linked to a nuclear weapons program but has yet to deliver.

Prachanda wants to be Nepali president

PTI, Kathmandu

Hoping to be the president of Nepal after the next elections, Maoist chief Prachanda has favoured special relations with India.

Talking about his political future, 53-year-old Prachanda told an Indian TV channel that he hoped to be the president with executive powers as he expected his party to get majority in next election.

The communist leader, however, said that he would not become president for life, but only for a single five-year term.

Demanding immediate abolition of monarchy as the king "is already hatching a conspiracy", Prachanda accused prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala of trying to save the monarchy.



Pakistani residents remove the debris of a collapsed wall from a damaged car after heavy rain and thunderstorms in Karachi yesterday that killed more than 228 people.

PHOTO: AFP

Karachi gets aid after storm deaths

AFP, Karachi

Trucks carrying aid rolled into Karachi yesterday after the death toll from violent storms and flooding along Pakistan's Arabian Sea coast rose to at least 235 people, officials said.

Authorities have launched a major relief operation in affected areas of the sprawling port city of 12 million people following Saturday's devastating rain and strong winds, Karachi mayor Mustafa Kamal said.

Workers were also clearing fallen trees and the wreckage of nearly 50 huge iron advertising billboards that collapsed during the thunderstorms, causing several of the casualties.

President Pervez Musharraf expressed grief over the deaths and ordered provincial and city authorities to take "immediate steps to tackle the situation," state media reported.



The opposition National Democratic Alliance (NDA) backed Independent candidate in the presidential elections and Indian Vice President Bhairon Singh Shekhawat (R), former prime minister and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) senior leader Atal Behari Vajpayee (2L), leader of the opposition and BJP leader LK Advani (L) and senior BJP leader Sushma Swaraj come out after filing nomination papers at the Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

N Korea vows to honour nuclear pledge

AFP, Seoul

North Korea vowed yesterday to honour its pledge to disable the reactor at the heart of its nuclear weapons programme, saying a financial dispute that had held up progress for months was over at last.

A foreign ministry spokesman said officials would meet Tuesday with a team of UN inspectors who are flying in to discuss the shutdown and sealing of the Yongbyon atomic reactor.

He said Pyongyang had finally received 20 to 25 million dollars which had been frozen in a Macau bank since 2005 after US allegations of counterfeiting and money laundering.

The assets, he said in a statement, would be used "for improving the lives of our people and other humanitarian purposes as planned."

The statement -- Pyongyang's first official acknowledgement that the funds row was settled -- came as the four-strong team of inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) landed in Beijing en route for Pyongyang.

"We have to make sure that the

reactor should be shut down at Yongbyon," team leader Olli Heinonen said on what will be the watchdog's first mission to the communist regime since its inspectors were kicked out in late 2002.

"The facility should be shut down and sealed. So this is the next step on this long trip," he added.

The disarmament deal was struck in February with China, Japan, Russia, South Korea and the United States after the North last year tested a nuclear device for the first time, triggering worldwide condemnation and UN sanctions.

Under its terms, Pyongyang pledged to disable its nuclear programmes under UN supervision in exchange for up to one million tonnes of heavy fuel oil or equivalent energy aid as well as diplomatic concessions.

The US agreed in March to give the money back but could not get it quickly transferred due to a myriad of complications, until Russia finally stepped in to ease the flow.

The money has finally been wired through, "thus settling the controversial issue," the North's foreign ministry official said in remarks carried by the state news agency KCNA.

From Tuesday, North Korea will talk with the IAEA delegation "on the suspension of the operations of nuclear facilities, its verification and monitoring," he said.

He said the funds dispute became a sticking point not because of the amount, but because it was "a vivid manifestation of the hostile (US) policy toward the regime."

"Now that the issue of deferring the funds has been settled, the DPRK too will start implementing the February 13 agreement on the principle of action for action," he added, using the North's official name.

The IAEA team's five-day mission in North Korea follows a landmark visit to Pyongyang last week by chief US nuclear envoy Christopher Hill, the most senior US official to travel there in nearly five years.

Hill said later that he expected the reactor to be shut within three weeks and that foreign ministers from the six nations involved in the disarmament process would meet in July to discuss the next steps.

Afghan security forces have retaken a troubled southern district that was overrun and captured by Taliban militants almost a week ago, a provincial governor said.

Police last Tuesday made what Afghan authorities described as a tactical withdrawal from the remote Ghorak district of southern Kandahar province after insurgents stormed it that same day.

"Afghan forces recaptured Ghorak district from the Taliban on Sunday night," Kandahar governor Asadullah Khalid told reporters.

He said Afghan forces did not suffer any casualties and added that he had no information about whether any rebels were killed.

The Taliban also took the nearby district of Myanishen last weekend when a small police contingent fled. It was recaptured by government forces within days.

The Taliban, whose five-year Islamic regime was toppled by US-led forces in late 2001, have overrun several under-policed district centres in the south and west but have usually been pushed out after a few days.

Authorities play down the significance of these "captures", saying the targeted districts are remote and have weak security.

The militants however have held for months Musa Qala district in Helmand province, which adjoins Kandahar, and are said to control several others in the area.

Earlier Afghan and NATO forces killed 13 Taliban militants in a day-long battle in southern Afghanistan, in which three policemen also died, a provincial police chief said yesterday.

The Taliban fighters attacked a police post in Zehri district of Kandahar province early Sunday, killing three policemen and leaving two others wounded, Sayed Aqa Saqib told AFP.

A gunfight erupted and "13 Taliban were killed including a Taliban commander after Afghan and NATO forces went to support the police post under attack," said Saqib.

The fighting finished late Sunday, he said.

Kandahar, the birthplace of the hardline Taliban movement, has been among the areas hardest hit by a wave of militant attacks, which have killed thousands of people.

20 feared dead in Cambodian plane crash

AP, Phnom Penh

A chartered plane flying Monday between two popular tourist destinations in Cambodia has crashed, with at least 20 people on board feared dead, an aviation official said.

The plane, a Russian-made AN-24, was flying from Siem Reap where the popular Angkor Wat temple complex is located to Sihanoukville, a coastal city with access to beaches, said Hm Sare, Cabinet chief for the Secretariat of Civil Aviation.

An official at Siem Reap airport said 13 of the passengers were from South Korea, three were Czech, one was Russian and five were Cambodian. Their names were not available.

The official, who asked not to be named because he was not authorised to speak to the press, said the plane carried a crew of five Cambodians.

The plane belonged to a small Cambodian airline called PMT Air, which began flying from Siem Reap to Sihanoukville in January.

The airport official said contact with the plane was lost at 10:50 a.m., five minutes before it was due to land. Hm Sare said the crash site had not yet been located by rescue teams.



PHOTO: AFP

UN peacekeepers use a crane yesterday to lift a wrecked armoured vehicle from the site of a car bomb attack, between the southern Lebanese towns of Marjayoun and Khamis, that killed six UN soldiers the day before.

Sarkozy urges tough stance against Sudan over Darfur

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy urged world powers Monday to take a tough line with Sudan if it refuses to cooperate with international efforts to end bloodshed in Darfur.

"Silence kills," Sarkozy told ministers from some 20 nations taking part in a one-day meeting in Paris on efforts to end four years of fighting in Darfur.

"Now we know that the absence of a decision and the absence of a response is unacceptable," said Sarkozy. "Sudan must know that if it cooperates, we will help it greatly and that if it refuses, we will be firm."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said the international community had failed to do enough to end the violence that has left at least 200,000 dead and driven more than two million from their homes, according to UN figures.

"I do not think that the international community has really lived up to its responsibilities here," said Rice on Sunday.

Rice joined representatives from China, Sudan's top oil customer and arms supplier, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and officials from some 15 other nations including Egypt, Japan and Russia.

Neither Sudan nor the rebels were represented at the conference, held after President Omar al-Bashir bowed to months of pressure and agreed to a new peace force for Darfur under the United Nations and the African Union.

The African Union, which has brokered peace talks between Khartoum and Darfur rebels, is also not taking part in the meeting that it sees as duplicating its own efforts.

China's envoy for Sudan said threats and pressure on Khartoum would be "counterproductive" and argued that world must instead focus on reconstruction aid to alleviate poverty.

"To solve the issue of Darfur, the international community must try to send a positive and balanced signal," the envoy, Liu Guijin, told AFP on the sidelines of the conference.

Zawahiri voices support for Hamas

AFP, Dubai

ons, saying it was a "religious duty."

"Today we must support the Mujahideen (holy warriors) in Palestine, including the Hamas Mujahideen, despite all the mistakes made by their leadership," Zawahiri said on the Al-Hasbah site often used by al-Qaeda.

"Unite with all the Mujahideen of the world against an offensive being prepared... which the Egyptians and Saudis will join in," he said.

Zawahiri, who in the past spoke out vehemently against the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) for joining the political process in the Palestinian territories, urged the group to amend its policies.



Ascreen grab taken yesterday from Al-Qassam brigades Internet website, Hamas's military wing, shows a message from captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in Arabic.

Hamas releases audio message of Israeli soldier

AFP, Gaza City

The armed wing of Hamas on Monday released a first audio message from captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, who said his health was deteriorating and that he needed hospital treatment.

"I've been in prison one year. My situation is deteriorating. I need an extended period in hospital," said the voice in the audio clip posted on the website of Hamas's armed wing exactly one year after Shalit was taken.

"I am sorry that the Israeli government has not shown more interest. It should meet the demands of my kidnappers so I can be released," said the voice in Hebrew on the tape.

"I am Gilad Shalit. I've been arrested by Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades. Mother, father, sisters, brothers, my friends in the Israeli army, I send you from my jail my regards and I miss you," said a friend in Arabic on the website.

A video tape broadcast on Hamas's Al-Aqsa television station showed footage of Shalit apparently being captured by two fighters dressed in Israeli army uniforms pulling his T-shirt and running next to him.