

## Assad calls on Israel to respond to peace plea

AFP, Damascus

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called on Israel to respond to peace overtures from Damascus after he was sworn in for a second seven-year term yesterday.

The 41-year-old, who secured 97 percent of the vote in a May referendum in which he was the only candidate, also vowed to pursue economic reform and a crackdown on corruption he said had spread to the highest levels.

Assad was seen as a reformer when he took office on the death of his father Hafez al-Assad in 2000 but is now under US pressure over its alleged role in the Lebanon and Iraq crises and a crackdown on political opponents.

"We do not want secret talks. We ask Israel's leaders to state in a clear and official manner their desire for peace," Assad said in a speech to parliament.

"We want Israel's leaders to give guarantees that all of our land will be returned. We cannot enter into negotiations without knowing" what

is being discussed, he added. Direct peace talks with Israel have been frozen since January 2000. Damascus is demanding the return of the occupied Golan Heights, captured by Israel in the 1967 Six Day War and annexed in 1981.

Most of Assad's speech centred on domestic issues.

He said his goal was "to strengthen the state... a strong state means development and stability" and develop a "social market economy" allowing for private initiative while safeguarding the rights of the poor.

Assad said hundreds of decrees and laws had been introduced in order to bring about reforms in monetary and fiscal policy, as well as boosting investment, opening private banking operations and creating a stock exchange.

The president hailed an economic growth rate of what he said was at least five per cent in 2006 "despite difficult regional conditions."

## New suicide attack raises tension in Pak tribal zone

Three soldiers, one civilian killed in checkpost attack

AFP, Miranshah

A suicide bomber killed four people at a checkpost in Pakistan's tribal zone yesterday, fuelling tensions after pro-Taliban rebels rejected government efforts to save a peace deal.

The attack was the fourth in as many days in Pakistan, following triple weekend suicide blasts that left more than 70 people dead – all in apparent revenge for last week's bloody government raid on Islamabad's Red Mosque.

The bomber attacked a joint army and paramilitary checkpost near Mir Ali, one of the biggest towns in the lawless tribal zone of North Waziristan, which borders insurgency-hit Afghanistan, security officials said.

"Security forces ordered a truck to stop. A man got down from the vehicle then walked up to the post and blew himself up," chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

Three soldiers and a civilian were killed by the blast, while two people were injured, Arshad said.

Suspected Islamist rebels also blew up two security checkpoints in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, but caused no casualties, security officials said.

Meanwhile, attackers slit the throat of an Afghan national and dumped his body near the main town in Bajaur, another tribal district, along with a note accusing him of spying for US-led forces in Afghanistan.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for any of the attacks.

But militants handed out pamphlets from a car overnight in North Waziristan warning security forces and tribal elders of violence if not "otherwise they are also our targets."

It also asked tribal elders and others "not to have jirgas (meetings) with the government; if not, then they will be held responsible."

The rebels said they had torn up the deal – which was heavily criticised by Washington and Kabul – because the government had set up new checkpoints and failed to pay compensation for tribesmen's deaths in army operations.

"We agreed on the peace deal with the government for the protection of the people. Now we are breaking the peace agreement again in favour of the people," said the leaflet, a copy of which was obtained by AFP.

The statement, signed by the Taliban Shura (council), warned tribal paramilitary forces and traders supplying the army not to cooperate with government forces or "otherwise they are also our targets."

It also asked tribal elders and others "not to have jirgas (meetings) with the government; if not, then they will be held responsible."



PHOTO: AFP  
Pakistani tribesmen gather around a destroyed paramilitary check post yesterday after a blast in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan. On July 16 a paramilitary check post was destroyed by a blast in the central bazaar of Miranshah and hours later another was blown up near a government building.



PHOTO: AFP  
Railway workers check a derailed train at Kashiwazaki station at Kashiwazaki city in Niigata prefecture, 250km north of Tokyo yesterday. The official death toll from a powerful earthquake that struck central Japan on July 16 has risen to nine.

## Fears rise over nuclear plant after Japan quake

AFP, Tokyo

Authorities in Japan yesterday were investigating a second nuclear scare following a deadly earthquake, as relief workers struggled to feed and shelter thousands of shaken survivors.

About 100 sealed barrels filled with contaminated clothes and gloves tipped over at the massive Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant in Monday's 6.8-magnitude quake, which killed nine people and injured more than 1,000 more.

The lids of several barrels opened up inside the plant, said to be the world's largest, said Shoji Iida, a spokesman for Karuwa village.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe chided the plant's operators, Tokyo Electric Power Co. Inc., saying its reports to authorities were "not quick enough."

The three Afghan troops were killed when an explosive hit their vehicle, also wounding two soldiers, during a patrol of Gerishk district in Helmand province late Monday, said provincial police chief Mohammad Hussain Andiwal.

A roadside bomb killed three Afghan soldiers and a clash involving Nato forces left seven militants dead in insurgency-wracked southern Afghanistan, police said yesterday.

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