

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 to 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 checkpoint attack

AFP, Miranshah

A suicide bomber killed four people at a checkpoint 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 checkpoint 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 after the collapse on Sunday of a 10-month-old peace accord with the

government.

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 Kariwa village.

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

Israeli-Palestinian scepticism greets Bush peace call

AFP, Jerusalem

US President George W Bush's plan to relaunch the Middle East peace process with an international conference was greeted yesterday with scepticism on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide as yet another initiative doomed to failure.

While welcomed by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas it was rejected by Hamas, further widening the factional rift after the Islamists' bloody takeover of the Gaza Strip last month.

Elected officials welcomed the move, but Israeli and Palestinian commentators were wary of the initiative, the latest in a series of international efforts to solve the decades-old conflict.

"The call by Bush could or could not be a transformation, as we are used to hearing talk of initiatives,

proposals of conferences that most of the time achieve nothing," wrote the main Palestinian daily Al-Quds.

"We have yet to see if this time is different or if it is a scenario that we have already seen," it said.

Israeli observers were even harsher.

"The old-new presidential vision which was outlined yesterday will end just like its predecessors," wrote the Maariv tabloid, Israel's second-largest daily. "Forceful declarations, high hopes, a grandiose plan and in the end it all comes to nothing but shattered hopes and despair."

The top-selling Yediot Aharonot said a comparison of Bush's speech on Monday and the first major one he gave on the conflict five years ago showed that "peace in the Middle East is like the horizon -- the nearer you get, the further away it is."

'Terror threat against US serious'

AP, Washington

The terrorist network al-Qaeda will likely leverage its contacts and capabilities in Iraq to mount an attack on US soil, according to a new National Intelligence Estimate on threats to the American homeland.

The declassified key findings, to be released publicly on Tuesday, were obtained in advance by The Associated Press.

The report lays out a range of dangers from al-Qaeda to Lebanese Hezbollah to non-Muslim radical groups that pose a "persistent and evolving threat" to the country over the next three years. As expected, however, the findings focus most of their attention on the gravest terror problem: Osama bin

Laden's al-Qaeda network.

The report makes clear that al-Qaeda in Iraq, which has not yet posed a direct threat to US soil, could become a problem here.

"Of note," the analysts said, "we assess that al-Qaeda will probably seek to leverage the contacts and capabilities of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), its most visible and capable affiliate and the only one known to have expressed a desire to attack the homeland."

The analysts also found that al-Qaeda's association with its Iraqi affiliate helps the group to energise the broader Sunni Muslim extremist community, raise resources and recruit and indoctrinate operatives "including for homeland attacks."

3 soldiers, 7 Taliban killed in clashes

AFP, Kandahar

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.

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 Andiwai.

Four soldiers killed in Lanka clashes

AFP, Colombo

Four Sri Lankan soldiers were killed and six others wounded in fighting with Tamil Tiger rebels in the north of the island, the guerrillas said Tuesday, claiming they lost one fighter in the battle.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they found the corpse of one soldier following the clash in Vavuniya district on Monday, and would make arrangements to hand over the body through the Red Cross on Tuesday.

There was no immediate comment from the military. The clash came five days after security forces captured a key Tamil rebel base in eastern Sri Lanka.

The LTTE have been fighting for a separate state for minority Tamils for 35 years -- a conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

Meanwhile, unidentified gun-

men shot dead a top civil servant in north-eastern Sri Lanka Monday as the government moved to celebrate the dismantling of a key Tamil rebel base in the region, officials said.

Gunmen killed Harry Abeyweera, the top civil administrator in the district of Trincomalee, as he worked at his office, police said. Gunmen escaped and an investigation was under way.

The assassination came hours after the government announced it will mark the wresting of the Eastern Province from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) after dismantling a rebel base in the district of Batticaloa.

President Mahinda Rajapakse condemned the killing and said it was a blow to restore democracy.

"This comes at a time when we are trying to restore democracy in the Eastern Province," a spokesman for the president said.