

US tightens financial squeeze on Iran

AFP, Washington

The US government is escalating financial sanctions against Iran and ratcheting up pressure on Iranian companies suspected of supporting Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

US-Iranian relations deteriorated after the 1979 Islamic revolution, but have worsened since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and following the election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad two years ago.

US President George W. Bush claims Iran is racing to develop nuclear weapons, something that Tehran, which has signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, denies.

Iran says its nuclear programme is peaceful, although Ahmadinejad has predicted Israel's destruction.

As tensions have flared, the world's superpower has brought its

financial and economic firepower to bear on Iran, moving in part to cut off Tehran's access to the global financial system.

The US Treasury and other government agencies have black-listed and applied asset freezes against at least 15 Iranian entities so far this year.

"We believe that there is a real potential that these sanctions will have the effect of changing the government of Iran's mind about the defiant policy it is currently pursuing," Stuart Levey, the Treasury's undersecretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, told AFP.

The United Nations has also invoked sanctions against Iran over its refusal to halt uranium enrichment, which can be used to construct a nuclear bomb.

American companies and

individuals are barred from doing business with blacklisted Iranian firms and Washington hopes other countries will step up such actions.

Most of the Iranian entities targeted by the US this year, including the Atomic Energy Organisation and the Mesbah Energy Company, operate in the nuclear, energy and industrial industries.

But Iran's banking sector is also in Washington's sights, as well as Iranian groups it says fund "terrorist" organisations such as Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based Shia political and militant group.

The Treasury blacklisted Iran's fifth-largest state-owned bank, Bank Sepah, in January, claiming it had funded weapons proliferation, including a Chinese firm's sale of "missile-related items" to Iran in 2005.

German hostage sick and forgotten, say Taliban

AFP, Kandahar

An ailing German engineer held by the Taliban in Afghanistan for nearly two weeks is "not doing very well" and there are no talks under way for his release, the Islamic militia said yesterday.

The engineer was kidnapped on July 18 with a German colleague, who has since died, and five Afghans, one of whom managed to escape.

Twenty-three South Koreans were captured the following day. The Taliban shot dead their leader last week, and negotiations have continued ever since for the release of the 22 remaining Koreans, all Christian aid workers.

"The German hostage is not doing very well," Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi told AFP by telephone from an undisclosed location.

"He is sick and forgotten and there are no negotiations ongoing about him at all."



PHOTO: AFP

A man with his family casts a vote for the upper house election at a polling station in Tokyo yesterday. Japan voted in an election predicted to deliver a stern rebuke to outspoken conservative Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and put pressure on him to quit.

Hezbollah rejects US vision of ME

AP, Beirut

Hezbollah's leader said Saturday that the militant Islamic group's war last summer with Israel has left the US vision of a "new Middle East" in shambles and claimed the guerrilla group was ready to strike Israel again at any time.

During the 34-day war in southern Lebanon, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called for a new era of democracy and peace in the region, "a new Middle East."

But Hezbollah, backed by Syria and Iran, said the US vision aimed at reinforcing Israel.

"There is no new Middle East," Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah told a mass rally in the southern town of Bint Jbeil, one of the towns hardest hit by the war. "It's gone with the wind."

Nasrallah did not personally attend the rally to mark the first anniversary of the war, which Hezbollah calls "a divine victory. His speech was relayed to the crowd on a giant screen set up in the main square of Bint Jbeil.

Cargo plane crash kills 8 in Russia

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Moscow

A Russian cargo plane crashed early on Sunday, killing at least eight people onboard.

The plane hit the ground just after it took off from southeastern Moscow's Domodedovo Airport at 04.16 (0016 GMT), Itar-Tass news agency said, quoting a spokesperson of the Emergencies Ministry.

The An-12 cargo plane of the Atran Company, with five crewmen and three passengers onboard, crashed four km away from the runway and caught fire, said spokesperson Viktor Beltsov.

The Domodedovo Airport was operating normally after the crash. All planes took off and landed according to schedule.

US-led forces assault al-Qaeda across central Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

US-led forces killed eight alleged al-Qaeda militants and captured another 22 suspects in raids across central Iraq yesterday, the military said.

In the largest raid, US-led forces hunted for a "foreign terrorist facilitator and al-Qaeda in Iraq leader" in the restive town of Yusufiyah south of Baghdad, the military said in a statement.

As the troops neared the building, gunmen opened fire on them, prompting US forces to call in an air strike which killed five terrorists and sending others fleeing to an adjacent

building, where seven of them were then detained.

The military said a boy was injured in the operation and later treated at a military hospital.

During a separate operation north of Baghdad, gunmen opened fire on US aircraft patrolling the area. The aircraft returned fire, killing three militants and injuring a fourth, the statement said.

Soldiers detained three more militants following the battle and arrested another 11 alleged militants in separate operations south of Baghdad and in the central Salaheddin province, a Sunni insurgent hotbed.

Asean to sign charter in S'pore summit

THE NATION/ ANN, Manila

Asean charter drafters decided to defer their contentious issues of human rights to the decision of their foreign ministers who will meet formally on Monday.

According to highly placed sources attending drafting sessions, who asked not to be named because they are authorised to do, after marathon discussion over human rights ahead of the Asean annual meeting, the charter drafters headed by Filipino retired ambassador, Rosario Manalo, agreed to advance the proposed formulation to the Asean foreign ministers to determine whether to adopt a body, organ or commission "to promote and protect human rights of the people in Asean."

"The Asean foreign ministers

have to decide whatever instrument or name to be used," said one of the sources.

As it turned out the word "mechanism"—widely used in the press and among the civil society organisations—has been completely ignored. The taboo word often referred to the failed attempt of Asean to establish regional human rights mechanism agreed in 1993 in Bangkok. Little progress has been made since then except on issues and rights related women and child as well as migrant workers.

Core Asean members including Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand view a human rights commission as an important pillar in constructing an Asean community and also in compliance with the UN Human Rights Commission.



PHOTO: AFP

Local college students chant slogans during a demonstration on the streets to protest against Asean Regional Forum (ARF) in Manila yesterday. Some 40 college students demanded that the Philippine government should not allow US intervention in southeast Asia through Asean.

N Korea reaffirms nuke halt vow

AP, Manila

North Korea's new foreign minister reaffirmed his country's commitment to ending its nuclear weapons programme, an official said yesterday.

Pak Ui Chun, however, did not specify when North Korea would disable its nuclear facilities, Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs spokesman Claro Cristobal said.

Pak, who is making his first overseas trip since becoming foreign minister in May, is in Manila to attend the Asean Regional Forum, Asia's largest security organisation.

North Korea shut down its Yongbyon reactor earlier this month under a February agreement reached in six-nation talks on its nuclear programme, the first tangible progress after years of negotiations.

In return, it has begun receiving 50,000 tons of oil from South

Korea and is to eventually receive the equivalent of a total of 1 million tons for disabling all its nuclear facilities.

However, the latest round of nuclear talks ended earlier this month without any target date for disabling the facilities.

In a meeting Sunday with Philippine Foreign Secretary Alberto Romulo, Pak did not specify a date, but said his country "is committed to the agreement signed in February to move forward the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula," Cristobal said.

"The six-party talks have been producing good progress," he quoted Pak as saying.

Pak also reiterated his country's long-standing position that a principle of "action for action" should be followed for the successful implementation of the February accord, with each side taking steps in response to the other's, Cristobal said.

Israel cautious on US-Saudi arms deal

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel adopted a cautious stance on Sunday over a reported 20-billion-dollar US arms package to Saudi Arabia and other regional American allies intended to counter the perceived threat from Iran.

"We have no doubt that the United States would not do anything that could endanger the security of Israel," Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's spokeswoman Miri Eisin told AFP on Sunday.

She spoke after a senior US defence official said the United States is readying a major arms package for Saudi Arabia with an eye to countering the changing threat from Tehran, Israel's arch foe.

The Pentagon provided no details on the arms package, which will reportedly total 20 billion dollars over the next decade.

Anglo-US relationship could get even stronger: Brown

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown on Saturday gave the surest sign yet there will be no move to distance London from Washington under his watch, even suggesting ties could get stronger.

Ahead of his first meeting as prime minister with George W Bush, Brown gave no relief to critics in his centre-left Labour Party unhappy at the close ties his predecessor Tony Blair forged with the right-wing Republican president.

"It is in the British national interest that the relationship with the United States is our single most important bilateral relationship," Brown said in a statement.

"It is a relationship that is founded on our common values of

liberty, opportunity and the dignity of the individual.

"And because of the values we share, the relationship with the United States is not only strong but can become stronger in the years ahead."

Brown and Bush hold talks at the US president's Camp David retreat Sunday and Monday, with US-British involvement in Iraq, the nuclear stand-off with Iran, the Middle East peace process and Darfur all up for discussion.

The prime minister then flies from the US head of state's Maryland bolthole to meet United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon in New York and address the UN assembly on Tuesday, a Downing Street spokeswoman said.

100 Palestinians stranded in Egypt head back home

AFP, AP, El-Arish, Egypt

Around 100 of thousands of Palestinians stranded for weeks in Egypt left for home in the Gaza Strip yesterday through Israeli territory, security sources said.

The Palestinians were taken by bus to the Al-Oja/Nizana cargo crossing, south of the Rafah border terminal between Egypt and the Gaza Strip, which has been closed since Hamas's violent takeover of the territory mid-June.

From there they were to be taken through Israeli territory to the Erez terminal in the northern Gaza Strip.

Egypt and Israel on Saturday agreed that 600 of the stranded Palestinians, who have been living in increasingly dire conditions, would be allowed back to the Gaza Strip, with 100 to cross on Sunday and 500 on Monday.

Some 6,000 Palestinians are estimated to be living in and around Rafah, often lacking food, medical care and basic amenities, since the local border terminal closed over 45 days ago. More than 10 travellers have died.

The Rafah terminal — Gaza's only door to the outside world that bypasses Israel — has been shut since deadly Palestinian infighting saw Hamas seize the Gaza Strip on June 15.

When open, Rafah is operated in close cooperation by Egypt, European Union monitors, Israel

and the Palestinians, and can be closed if any one party refuses to participate.

Hamas, which does not recognise Israel, has objected to the Jewish state being able to control who is allowed to travel from Egypt into the Gaza Strip.

There was no indication as to when the more than 5,000 Palestinians still stranded in Egypt might be allowed to return home.

Meanwhile, the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip will begin paying thousands of civil servants cut from the payroll of its moderate rival Fatah, officials said Saturday, further entrenching the divisions between the two Palestinian territories.

Hamas' takeover of Gaza, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' subsequent decision to dismiss the Hamas government, effectively set up two Palestinian administrations. Abbas has installed a Cabinet headed by US-backed Prime Minister Salam Fayyad that has control of the West Bank.

Hamas' payment of the salaries would further cement its rule over impoverished Gaza, where unemployment is about 40 per cent and most of the 1.4 million people receive foreign food handouts. The money will go to thousands of members of Hamas' Executive Force, a Hamas militia that polices Gaza, and those civil servants who refused an order from Fayyad not to cooperate with the Islamic group.

30 suspected insurgents rounded up in Thai south

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

The authorities in the deep south took 30 more suspects including five key militants into detention after a series of raid in southern-most Narathiwat province Sunday.

Military and police combined forces launched the operation at about 1 am Sunday to raid many locations simultaneously in Yi Ngor district's Ban Kuyi and Bacho district's Ban Sungaibatu after local residents' tipoff indicated some militants were hide in the two village, said army spokesman Col. Acra Tiroch.

Of 30 arrested suspects, five are key militants member of the Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK), 15 are operational cell members and the rest are supporters and sympathisers, he said.

The group is under leadership of Abdullahmae Pireesi and Makata Pireesi who are also under custody, Acra said.

The officials confiscated two M16 rifles believed to be stolen from the 4th Development Battalion in Narathiwat's Joh I Rong more than three years ago, he said.

"The operation to bring down the militants was conducted precisely as we got tip off from local residents and the information from interrogation of RKK members arrested previously," Acra said. "So that the reason why the operation was done without casualty on both sides," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Firemen work among the still smouldering debris where an Antonov cargo airplane crashed yesterday just outside Moscow. The aircraft crashed just after taking off from Moscow's Domodedovo airport early Sunday, and according to preliminary information all eight people on board were killed, officials said.