

Tehran hopes for accord with IAEA

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday was hoping an agreement with the UN atomic agency to clarify its contested nuclear programme would save it from further sanctions, but the United States warned the deal was insufficient.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Iran announced on Tuesday they had agreed a precise timetable for Tehran to come up with answers over its atomic drive, which Washington claims is aimed at making a nuclear bomb.

Iranian officials have said its cooperation with the agency should persuade Western countries to drop moves to impose a third UN sanctions resolution against Tehran for its failure to suspend sensitive nuclear activities.

But US ambassador to the IAEA Gregory Schulte was unimpressed, saying the plan envisaged no additional inspections of Iranian nuclear sites, nor did it show any sign that Iran would suspend sensitive uranium enrichment work.

"We understand there are real limitations with the plan," he told reporters in Vienna.

Militants kill 3 soldiers in Pakistan

Three Pakistani soldiers were killed in a rocket attack overnight on a camp in northwest Pakistan, police said yesterday.

Several rockets struck the camp at Bannu, close to the restive tribal Waziristan region where Pakistani forces are battling al-Qaeda and Taliban militants hiding in the rugged region.

Militants also exchange gunfire with security forces overnight in the North Waziristan tribal district but there were no immediate reports of casualties, security officials said.

Security across the country has deteriorated in recent months as extremists sympathetic to al-Qaeda have launched attacks on troops in the tribal regions and suicide bombings in major cities.

The spike in violence came in the aftermath of a bloody operation to take back the Red Mosque in the capital Islamabad from the hands of armed religious extremists.

Nationwide violence since that July siege -- including 13 suicide attacks mainly in northwest Pakistan -- has left around 300 people dead.

Hurricane Dean batters oil installations in Mexico

AP, Tecolutta

Hurricane Dean took aim at the Mexican mainland on Wednesday as the weakened storm battered evacuated oil rigs on the rolling waters of the Bay of Campeche in the heart of Mexico's energy industry.

Dean swept across the Yucatan peninsula Tuesday after making landfall as a ferocious Category 5 hurricane, toppling trees, power lines and houses but sparing glitzy resorts on the Mayan Riviera.

Driving rain, poor communications and impassable roads made it difficult to determine how isolated Mayan communities fared in the sparsely populated jungle where Dean made landfall after killing 13 people in the Caribbean.

Greatly weakened from its overland journey, Dean moved over the Bay of Campeche, home to more than 100 oil platforms, three major oil exporting ports and the Cantarell oil field, Mexico's most productive.

Laden still alive, says Taliban commander

AFP, Washington

A top Taliban commander said al-Qaeda mastermind Osama bin Laden is alive and well, according to US-based analysts monitoring extremist publications.

"All praise be to Allah, he is extremely healthy and active," the commander Mansour Dadullah said in a video interview, according to a transcript of the video's English subtitled translation, released Tuesday by the analyst IntelCenter.

Dadullah, whose brother Mullah Dadullah was also a top commander in the Afghanistan-based militants and was killed this year, said he had been contacted by Bin Laden, the man blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.



PHOTO: AFP

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (L) listens to Indian President Pratibha Patil (R) during a meeting in New Delhi, yesterday. Abe is in New Delhi on a state visit to firm up billions of dollars of investment projects, expand trade ties and discuss India's controversial nuclear cooperation deal.

Japanese PM calls for 'arc of freedom' spanning Pacific

AFP, New Delhi

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for a new four-way "arc of freedom and prosperity" with India, Australia and the United States yesterday in a speech to the Indian parliament.

"A new broader Asia that broke away from geographical boundaries is now beginning to take on a distinct form," said Abe, who began a three-day visit to India on Tuesday.

Japan is working to ensure that "a region called the 'arc of freedom and prosperity' will be formed along the outer rim of the Eurasian continent," Abe told Indian lawmakers.

"The strategic global partnership of Japan and India is pivotal for such pursuits to be successful," he added.

"By Japan and India coming together in this way, this 'broader Asia' will evolve into an immense network spanning the entirety of the Pacific Ocean incorporating the United States of America and

Australia," he said.

The backbone of the four-way strategic and economic alliance would be the sharing of basic values such as freedom, democracy as well as economic clout, Abe said.

"Open and transparent, this network will allow people, goods, capital and knowledge to flow freely," the prime minister told Indian lawmakers.

Abe also called for the early conclusion of a "high-quality economic partnership" with India and forecast a more than doubling of trade between the two nations to 20 billion dollars in three years from eight billion currently.

His remarks came after top Japanese and Indian commerce officials at a business forum vowed to see the partnership pact realised by December.

"India and Japan need to jointly meet the challenges of the new economic architecture," Indian Commerce Minister Kamal Nath said, adding he would work to

ensure "this agreement by the end of the year."

Abe, who is accompanied by nearly 200 top Japanese executives, was slated to meet Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh later Wednesday to discuss a number of investment projects including a New Delhi-Mumbai industrial corridor.

Abe is due on Thursday to meet the son of the late Radhabinod Pal, the lone judge who dissented at the Allied tribunal that condemned to death war-time Japanese leaders.

"Justice Pal is highly respected even today by many Japanese for the noble spirit of courage he exhibited during the International Military Tribunal for the Far East," said Abe, whose grandfather was charged but never tried for war crimes.

Abe has dismissed suggestions that meeting Pal's son would anger other Asian nations resentful over Japan's war-time atrocities.

Taliban renews threats to kills hostages

10 killed in Afghan unrest

AFP, Ghazni

Taliban militants who have been holding 19 South Koreans for more than a month renewed a threat yesterday to kill them if their demands are not met.

A purported rebel spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahed, said some of the captives were sick and they were also suffering from lack of proper food.

"If the demands of the Taliban are not met the Korean hostages face death," Mujahed told AFP in a telephone call from an unknown location.

"Although we want this crisis to be solved through negotiations, it seems the US authorities are creating problems."

He did not, however, set any deadline and it was impossible to verify his comments independently.

The Korean aid workers were seized while travelling in insurgency-plagued southern Afghanistan on July 19, a day after a German engineer was kidnapped nearby.

The Islamic militant group has demanded the release of some of its jailed fighters in exchange for the hostages -- a demand the US-backed government in Kabul has so far rejected.

Mujahed said weather conditions and lack of "proper food" in the southern Ghazni province meant life for the hostages was increasingly harsh.

"Their health condition is not good. The weather conditions and a lack of proper food have made conditions for them very hard. Most of them are sick."

Negotiations between Taliban captors and a South Korean delegation to free the captives have failed. Mujahed, however, said telephone contacts between he two sides was continuing.

"We've been in phone contact with the Korean delegation. So far, there has not been any decision for face-to-face talks," he said.

A South Korean embassy official here, under cover of anonymity, confirmed contact was being maintained.

The spokesman said the Taliban wanted 10 of its prisoners freed in exchange for the German engineer, who was also sick, and four Afghan colleagues.

The kidnappings are among a series of incidents blamed on the Taliban, who are waging a bloody insurgency against the Kabul government and its coalition allies that has spiralled in intensity over the past year.

A female German aid worker was kidnapped in the capital at the weekend, but she was later freed in a police raid and authorities said her abduction was a criminal act motivated by money.

Meanwhile, two shepherd boys were killed in the cross-fire as police clashed with Taliban rebels in southern Afghanistan, police said Wednesday.

The children, from a nomadic tribe, died in fighting in the southern Afghan province of Ghazni where Taliban militants have been holding 19 South Koreans hostage for more than a month.



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar activists march during a protest on the northern outskirts of Yangon, yesterday. A pro-junta mob broke up a rare protest by about 150 pro-democracy activists amid mounting public anger over a massive fuel price hike.

Bush withholds support from Iraqi PM

AFP, Montebello

US President George W Bush on Tuesday withheld his support from embattled Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki and said Iraqi voters could decide to replace him.

"There's a certain level of frustration with the leadership in general," Bush said after two senior US lawmakers suggested Iraq's parliament remove Maliki's government if it fails to make progress on national reconciliation.

While Bush acknowledged the Baghdad government was failing to live up to expectations, he planned to issue a stark warning on Wednesday that an early US withdrawal from Iraq could have traumatic consequences similar to the Vietnam war's bloody aftermath in Southeast Asia.

In excerpts from Bush's address released by the White House in advance on Tuesday, the president was to charge that an early exit from Iraq would "pull the rug out" from under US troops just as their efforts are paying off.

In his speech to be given Wednesday, Bush ties anti-war

forces in the Vietnam era to the hundreds of thousands of people killed in the aftermath of the US pull-out, and hints at a parallel disaster in Iraq if US forces leave too soon.

"Many argued that if we pulled out, there would be no consequences for the Vietnamese people," he was to say. "The world would learn just how costly these misimpressions would be."

"In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge began a murderous rule in which hundreds of thousands of Cambodians died by starvation, torture, or execution. In Vietnam, former American allies, government workers, intellectuals, and businessmen were sent off to prison camps, where tens of thousands perished."

"Hundreds of thousands more fled the country on rickety boats, many of them going to their graves in the South China Sea," said the text of the speech by Bush, who pleaded for patience with the US-led security crackdown in Iraq.

Bush was scheduled to deliver his speech to the Veterans of Foreign Wars group, which claims 2.3 million members, on

Wednesday in Kansas City, Missouri, for their annual convention.

The US president previously drew a parallel between Vietnam and Iraq in November during a visit to Vietnam.

Bush had said one lesson from the US debacle in Vietnam was that the United States must be patient in Iraq. "We'll succeed unless we quit," Bush said.

Critics of Bush's handling of the Iraq war have also invoked the US experience in Vietnam but drawn different lessons, saying escalating the US military presence in Iraq will only make matters worse.

At the end of a North American summit on Tuesday, Bush was asked whether Maliki had lost credibility because of his inability to forge unity among rival factions. Bush said that the Iraqi people, not their government, deserved credit for "noticeable and tangible and real" reconciliation efforts.

"If the government doesn't respond to the demands of the people, they will replace the government. That's up to the Iraqis to make that decision, not American politi-

cians," he said in Montebello, Canada.

Bush said it was difficult to manage the transition from executed dictator Saddam Hussein's brutal regime to democracy, but did not repeat his past assertions of confidence in Iraq's struggling prime minister.

His comments came after the US ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, called Iraqi political progress "extremely disappointing" and warned that US support for Maliki's government was not open-ended.

Crocker and General David Petraeus, the top US commander in Iraq, are expected to report to the US Congress by mid-September on the progress of their efforts to halt sectarian violence and return Iraq to viable self-governance.

Bush's remarks came one day after Senators Carl Levin, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and John Warner, the panel's top Republican, said after a visit to Iraq that they were not optimistic about the prospects for compromise.

Trial of Saddam aides resumes

AFP, Baghdad

The trial of 15 former aides of executed Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity over their alleged role in the crushing of a 1991 Shia rebellion resumed in Baghdad yesterday.

All 15 defendants -- including Ali Hassan al-Majid, widely known as "Chemical Ali" -- returned to the dock to hear more testimony from Shias whose relatives were allegedly beaten and murdered by Saddam's forces during the rebellion in southern Iraq.

The 1991 Intifada (Uprising) Trial is the third to be held by the Iraqi High Tribunal, the court set up with US help to probe crimes committed by Saddam's former regime.

Prosecutors charge up to 100,000 Shias were killed when Saddam loyalists put down the uprising by Iraq's majority community after his troops were defeated by US-led forces in Kuwait in the first Gulf War.

The trial began on Tuesday with testimony from two Shias who accused the defendants, mostly military men, of overseeing the demolition of their houses and the killing of their relatives during the days of the rebellion.

No military solution in Iraq, says Obama

AP, Kansas City

Democrat Barack Obama said Tuesday the recent increase in American troops in Iraq may well have helped tamp down violence, but he insisted there is no military solution to the country's problems and US forces should be redeployed soon.

Obama spoke a day after his main Democratic presidential rival, Hillary Rodham Clinton, made similar comments. She said the tactics of the short-term troop increase were working but political progress did not seem to be in sight and the US should begin bringing some troops home.

Obama said in a telephone briefing, "If we put 30,000 additional troops into Baghdad, it will quell some of the violence short term. I don't think there is any doubt about that."

CIA missed chances to tackle al-Qaeda

AP, Washington

The CIA's top leaders failed to use their available powers, never developed a comprehensive plan to stop al-Qaeda and missed crucial opportunities to thwart two hijackers in the run-up to Sept. 11, the agency's own watchdog concluded in a bruising report released Tuesday.

Completed in June 2005 and kept classified until now, the 19-page executive summary finds extensive fault with the actions of senior CIA leaders and others beneath them. "The agency and its officers did not discharge their responsibilities in a satisfactory manner," the CIA inspector general found.

"They did not always work effectively and cooperatively," the report stated.

Yet the review team led by Inspector General John Helgerson found neither a "single point of failure nor a silver bullet" that would have stopped the attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people.



PHOTO: AFP

Former South African president and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nelson Mandela (R) receives Sonia Gandhi (L), the president of the Indian National Congress and the leader of the ruling Indian Congress Alliance at the Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg yesterday. Sonia presented Mandela with a book entitled 'Gandhi's Way' which celebrated a centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of peace and humanity.

Strike paralyses Nepali capital

AFP, Kathmandu

A strike called by local groups demanding greater rights closed businesses and schools and left the streets of Nepal's capital deserted yesterday.

"Kathmandu is shut down. But so far there have not been any reports from the field on any destruction, casualties or damage," Kathmandu police superintendent Sarbindra Khanal told AFP.

The protest was called by a Maoist-affiliated ethnic rights group -- the Tamang Rastriya Mukti Morcha or national liberation front -- and an association representing members of the "untouchable" caste known as Dalits.

"Today's strike has been announced as the government has not been serious in meeting our demands," said Tilak Pariyar, chair-

man of the Dalit Joint Republican Front.

At the bottom of Nepal's caste hierarchy, and making up around five million of Nepal's 27 million people, the Dalits are demanding that 20 per cent of all government department jobs be reserved for them.

The two million-strong Tamang ethnic minority want greater representation and also want Nepal to be declared a republic ahead of elections planned for November.

"We wrote a letter to the prime minister with 16 demands but the government did not respond," said Tamang front leader Talak Ghising.

The November vote is for a body to rewrite the country's constitution and decide the Himalayan nation's political future after a Maoist uprising ended with a peace deal late last year.

Ex-Indian minister Soren acquitted of murder charge

AFP, New Delhi

A former Indian cabinet minister who was jailed for life in December for conspiracy in the abduction and murder of an aide was acquitted on appeal yesterday.

Shibu Soren, who was coal minister until his conviction, was the first Indian cabinet member to be charged in a murder case.

Yesterday, the Delhi high court found that India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) had "misserably failed" to prove its case and set aside the guilty verdict.

The court also concluded that the federal agency was not able to prove the body it had exhumed and used to make its case actually belonged to Soren's former private secretary, Shashi Nath Jha.

According to the CBI, Jha, who went missing 15 years ago, was kidnapped and subsequently murdered for allegedly blackmailing the minister over a corruption scandal.

Israeli air raid kills Hamas militant in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

A Hamas militant was killed in an Israeli air raid in Gaza City early yesterday, taking to 12 the number of Palestinians killed in such operations in the past three days, medics said.

Two other members of the Islamist movement ruling Gaza were wounded in the attack east of Gaza City, they added.

An Israeli army spokesman said that the military carried out an air raid near the Nahal Oz border crossing between Israel and Gaza against "a group of terrorists, several of whom were hit."

The death brings to 5,833 the number of people killed since the start of the second Palestinian uprising in September 2000, the vast majority of them Palestinians, according to an AFP tally.