

US for tough diplomatic action against Iran's nuke programme

Western powers to discuss UNSC sanctions resolution tomorrow

AFP, Paris

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called yesterday for diplomatic action "with teeth" against Iran's nuclear programme but France insisted there is no military plan for war.

Western powers are to meet in Washington tomorrow to discuss a new UN Security Council sanctions resolution in the nuclear standoff and the US administration is frustrated at the lack of progress being made.

Amid a new diplomatic storm over a "war" warning made by French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, Rice said "We believe that the diplomatic track can work but it has to work both with a set of incentives and a set of teeth."

The United States and France want tougher sanctions against Iran, which has denied western allegations that it is covertly developing a nuclear weapon.

The United States is working on a new draft sanction resolution which will be discussed at tomorrow's meeting, State Department

spokesman Sean McCormack said Tuesday in Washington.

"What we're doing is working on the elements of a resolution ... We put down on paper some of those ideas, what it might -- what a resolution might look like," McCormack said.

He said the five UN Security Council permanent members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- with Germany would discuss the next moves on Friday.

Foreign ministers from the six are to meet in New York, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, on September 28, the spokesman added.

Rice, who spoke to reporters on a plane taking her on a Middle East tour, is to discuss Iran with counterparts from Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia in New York on September 28.

The UN Security Council has adopted three resolutions against Iran. Two include sanctions because of Iran's refusal to halt uranium enrichment, which it says is purely for civilian energy purposes.

"Someone asked me: what does it mean when you say you are expecting the worst? I replied: the worst would be war," said Kouchner who added that he favoured intense negotiations.

Iran has also criticised Kouchner for his "war" comments

saying that France was just carrying out US policy.

French Defence Minister Herve Morin said that speculation of a looming conflict was "fantasy".

"Nobody should think for a single instant that we are imagining and preparing military plans concerning Iran," Morin told Canal Plus television on Wednesday.

China and Russia criticised the war talk, calling for more negotiations.

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana have spoken by telephone about continuing talks on the dispute, Iran's state media reported.

A source in Larijani's supreme national security council told IRNA agency: "They talked about an appropriate time to hold discussions and the final time will be determined at the beginning of October."

Larijani and Solana held the last of several rounds of talks in Madrid in May. No progress has been reported.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) speaks with Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon during a meeting in Rawalpindi yesterday. McKinnon held talks with Musharraf on the Pakistani leader's vow to step down as army chief and on holding democratic elections.

Fresh anti-Taliban operation launched in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

About 2,500 NATO and Afghan troops launched a new operation yesterday to clear Taliban fighters from the country's opium-growing heartland in southern Helmand province, officials said.

The offensive targeting the al-Qaeda-linked movement that ruled Afghanistan until 2001 coincided with a suicide attack in the same province and violence elsewhere that left at least 10 people dead.

Troops backed by air power kicked off the operation in the early morning in Helmand's Upper Gereshk Valley, an area that has seen weeks of fighting between Taliban and soldiers, including troops from Britain.

"It is an operation to clear out Taliban insurgents in that particular area and help to restore governance to that area," said Major Charles Anthony, a spokesman for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

Anthony, speaking at a news conference in Kabul, gave few details of the operation, saying it was still in its early stages.

Large parts of Helmand are out of government control. The province also produces more than 50 percent of Afghanistan's illegal opium, with the drugs trade said to fund part of the insurgency.

ISAF and the separate US-led coalition force have several operations underway across Afghanistan in an effort to help the fragile government beat back the Taliban insurgency and establish its authority.

Meanwhile, a suicide bomber blew himself up near a police convoy in Helmand's Garmser district yesterday and wounded eight policemen in the latest in a string of such attacks over the past months, police said.

The Taliban pledged to intensify attacks, especially suicide blasts, during the holy month of Ramadan, which started last Thursday. The latest suicide bombing was the third in the past week.

Linked to the Taliban-led violence, a pro-government tribal elder was gunned down by militants overnight in Gereshk, the district where the NATO-led operation is taking place.

The outspoken elder, named

Mira Jan, supported the government in the Taliban-dominated region and Taliban rebels were likely behind the killing, provincial police chief Mohammad Hussein Andiwai told AFP.

In a separate incident Taliban rebels killed three Afghan security guards providing security for a road construction company in the neighbouring province of Zabul yesterday, local officials said.

Separately, an Afghan policeman and two Taliban fighters were killed after the rebels attacked a police convoy in the western province of Herat on Tuesday, a police commander said.

Afghan soldiers also killed three militants and wounded two others in a "clean-up" operation in the central province of Wardak on Tuesday, a defence ministry press statement said.

The Taliban were removed from government nearly six years ago but their anti-government campaign, which is supported by al-Qaeda, has grown in strength with militant attacks on a near-daily basis.

Top Khmer Rouge leader charged with war crimes

AFP, Phnom Penh

Top Khmer Rouge leader Nuon Chea was formally charged yesterday with war crimes and crimes against humanity, a spokesman for Cambodia's UN-backed genocide tribunal told the news agency.

"The co-investigating judges charged him with crimes against humanity and also with war crimes. The judges have put him in provisional detention" pending further investigation, spokesman Reach Sambath said.

Nuon Chea, now 82 and once the most trusted lieutenant of Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot, is the first of a small group of former top cadres living freely in Cambodia to be arrested by the new UN-backed tribunal.

Police and court officials took him from his remote home in the northwest and drove him to a waiting helicopter, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

He was brought to the capital Phnom Penh to be booked by the tribunal that will try him.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepal's Maoists begin door-to-door campaigning as part of their protest programme to disrupt the upcoming polls in Kathmandu yesterday.

UNGA session opens

AFP, United Nations

The UN General Assembly on Tuesday formally opened its 62nd session under the chairmanship of former Macedonian foreign minister Srgjan Kerim.

Kerim, who served as foreign minister from 2000 to 2001 and as Macedonia's UN ambassador from 2001 to 2003, succeeded Haya Rashed Al Khalifa of Bahrain, who closed the 192-member assembly's 61st session Monday.

But the high-level assembly debate, in which heads of state or government are to take part, will be held from next Tuesday until October 3, with climate change as the main theme.

It will be preceded later this week by a series of ministerial meetings here on various world issues, including Darfur, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East.

al-Qaeda fighters take control of Iraqi village

AFP, baquba, Iraq

al-Qaeda in Iraq militants have seized control of an village in the restive province of Diyala after a two-day battle with a rival Sunni insurgent group, police said yesterday.

Dozens of fighters from the Islamist extremist group arrived in boats on Monday and launched an attack on Al-Shuan village on the banks of the Diyala river, police Lieutenant Colonel Ibrahim al-Obeidi said.

Members of the rival Brigades of the 1920 Revolution fought back but the Sunni Arab village eventually fell to the al-Qaeda militants.

Obeidi said the village had been attacked after its 300 or so inhabitants refused to align with al-Qaeda

in its fight against Iraqi and US security forces.

"al-Qaeda militants attacked the village two days ago and took control of it (Tuesday)," said Obeidi.

Quoting villagers who escaped the assault, Obeidi said seven of the 30 houses in the village had been destroyed but he gave no casualty figures.

Many Sunni militants of the Brigades of the 1920 Revolution, an insurgent group formed to fight US forces in Iraq, have now joined with US and Iraqi troops to fight al-Qaeda in Sunni Arab areas of Iraq.

They also offer protection to vulnerable Sunni Arab villages under threat from al-Qaeda as it seeks recruits for its anti-American insurgency.

Hamas 'hostile entity' to US, says Rice

Israel makes similar declaration

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said yesterday that the Hamas movement ruling the Gaza Strip was a "hostile entity" for the United States, after Israel made a similar declaration.

"Hamas is indeed a hostile entity. It is a hostile entity to the US as well," Rice said at a joint press conference with Israeli counterpart Tzipi Livni.

Earlier, Israel's powerful security cabinet declared the Hamas-run Gaza Strip a "hostile entity," paving the way for the government to cut the supplies of electricity and fuel into the impoverished territory in revenge for rocket attacks.

"This is Israel's response to the ongoing Qassams," a senior government official told AFP, referring to the homemade rockets militants fired into Israel from the coastal strip.

The official said the cabinet did not take any immediate decisions to turn off the taps to the impoverished territory -- home to 1.5 million Palestinians -- but that the move

"clears the way for the government to do so."

Hamas, which seized power in Gaza three months ago and is shunned by Israel and the West as a terror group, blasted the move as "collective punishment."

The decision came as Rice was meeting senior Israeli officials ahead of a dinner with Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on her sixth visit to the region this year to revive peace talks and lay the ground for a US-sponsored conference.

On Thursday she heads to Ramallah for meetings with Abbas and prime minister Salam Fayyad before returning to Jerusalem for talks with Olmert.

Rice told journalists travelling with her that the peace conference, expected in November, "has to, in a substantive way, support the activities and the efforts of the parties to lay the foundations for the negotiation of a Palestinian state as soon as possible."

"I think everybody expects it to be serious and substantive. I think everybody expects it to address critical issues and we do not expect anything less."



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni (L) shakes hands with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in Jerusalem yesterday. Rice arrived in Israel on her latest peace mission to prepare for a "serious and substantive" Middle East conference later this year.