

US report confirms Iran 'no imminent danger'

Says IAEA official; US for keeping up pressure on Tehran

AFP, Vienna/Washington

A US intelligence report saying Iran halted its nuclear weapons programme four years ago confirms the UN atomic watchdog's assessment that Tehran represents "no imminent danger", a senior IAEA official said Tuesday.

The report "validates the (International Atomic Energy Agency's) statements over the last years that inspectors have found no concrete evidence of an undeclared nuclear weapons programme in Iran," said the official, who declined to be identified.

He said it also confirmed IAEA head Mohamed ElBaradei's assessment "that he has not seen an imminent danger and that there is

ample time for negotiations".

At the same time, the IAEA official stressed that Iran still needed to "clarify some important aspects" of its nuclear programme, and work actively with the UN watchdog.

The US National Intelligence Council said in a new report published Monday that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons drive in 2003.

In his own report on Iran's nuclear activities released last month, ElBaradei pointed to increased Iranian cooperation in answering questions about past nuclear activities.

But the Egyptian-born diplomat complained that the agency's knowledge of Tehran's current nuclear programme had "diminished" since 2006.

Earlier the White House and its allies insisted pressure must be kept up on Iran despite a US intelligence report that said Tehran's alleged drive to make a nuclear bomb had been overblown.

The US intelligence community said in a new report Monday that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons drive in 2003.

The National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) raised fresh questions about the White House's battered credibility on a major international security issue, five years after the US-led invasion of Iraq based on false, warnings.

The document sparked new international talks among the major powers. China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi held telephone

talks with EU and US counterparts, his ministry said Tuesday. "The Chinese side is willing to continue to make efforts to appropriately resolve the Iranian nuclear issue," a statement quoted Yang as saying.

While President George W. Bush's administration and its European allies defended their Iran strategy, opposition Democrats called for a policy rethink.

US national security adviser Stephen Hadley said he hoped that Russia and China would not stiffen their opposition to further sanctions on Iran.

"There's going to be a tendency of a lot of people to say: 'The problem's less bad than we thought, let's relax,'" said Hadley. "Our view is that would be a mistake."

Poor countries appeal for help in fighting climate change

AFP, Nusa Dua

Representatives from some of the world's poorest nations yesterday appealed for help in dealing with crippling floods, droughts and other extreme weather caused by climate change.

As nearly 190 countries gathered on Indonesia's resort island of Bali to try and hammer out a roadmap for creating a fresh pact to combat global warming, poor countries said any new deal must give them more money.

"Financially we do not have enough to adapt to the impact," said Thy Sum, a conference delegate from Cambodia's Climate

Change Office.

"We need to call on the rich countries to provide meaningful financial and technical support to cope with climate change."

A landmark paper by the Nobel-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) said earlier this year that while industrialised countries are largely to blame for global warming, least developed nations will suffer most.

The group of scientists warned that damage to the Earth's weather systems this century will doom poor countries to worse hunger, water stress and damage from violent storms, droughts and floods.

Activists denounce mass arrests of Tamils in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan rights groups Tuesday slammed the government arrest of nearly 2,200 minority ethnic Tamils after Tamil Tiger rebels were held responsible for two bomb attacks last week.

The Free Media Movement, a press rights group, and the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), a private think-tank, said they were considering legal action against the authorities for the weekend mass arrests.

"The CPA will seek court intervention on behalf of the people who were subjected to cruel and

degrading treatment," a CPA spokesman said.

The government launched a major search operation in the capital over the weekend following last week's two bomb attacks that left 21 people dead and more than 40 wounded.

A senior government minister, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle, said nearly 2,200 people were arrested, but 1,800 of them had already been freed.

However, the Free Media Movement said Tamil civilians -- with all necessary identification and documentation -- were still in detention.

"I'm just an ordinary middle-aged primary school teacher. I went out there to have an adventure, and got a bit more than I bargained for," Gibbons said at a brief news conference.

Hannah Nicole Camarata (L), an activist from the Tropical Forest Group, is seen inside an inflated plastic tree during a demonstration at the entrance of the UN Climate Change Conference 2007 venue at Nusa Dua in Bali yesterday.

Myanmar frees over 8,500 prisoners

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has granted amnesty to 8,585 prisoners as a gesture to the United Nations and to celebrate progress on its long-awaited constitution, state media said Tuesday.

It was unclear, however, if any of the prisoners released were among those detained when the junta cracked down on anti-government protests in September, sparking global outrage and a flurry of visits by UN officials.

A dozen political prisoners were among those released, but none of them was detained in connection with the recent protests, said Nyan Win, a spokesman for the opposition National League for Democracy.

The junta traditionally frees prisoners on holidays such as

Independence Day in January and to mark other occasions.

The amnesties were handed out to show "cooperation with the United Nations and the international community" and to hail recent progress in composing a constitution, the Myanma Ahlin newspaper reported.

The newspaper said 33 Thai rebels were among those released but did not give any other details. Past government amnesties have tended to free people convicted of common crimes.

On Monday, a constitution drafting committee began the work of writing a new charter based on guidelines laid out by a national convention, which began in 1993 and wrapped up in August. Delegates to the convention were almost all hand-picked by the military.



Leaders of Myanmar's National League for Democracy attend a ceremony to mark the country's 87th National Day at the party's headquarters in Yangon yesterday. Opposition NLD called on the country's ruling junta to release its leader Aung San Suu Kyi as well as more than 1,800 other political prisoners believed to be behind bars.

JOB VACANCY

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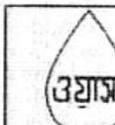
The incumbent in this position is responsible for: (1) Monitoring of financial and admin systems of IAs supported by FHI Bangladesh and provide technical assistance in this area; (2) Ensuring all disbursements/reimbursements are made in compliance with FHI policy and applicable to USAID rules and regulations; (3) Assist to develop IAs budget, coordinate with external auditors (if any) and follow up with the IAs in order to close the findings/ recommendations of auditors.

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ওয়াসা-জুড়তঃ ৪৯/২০০৭

US envoy visits North Korean reactor

AP, Seoul

The top US nuclear negotiator for North Korea visited its reactor, becoming the highest-level American official to go there, an official said Tuesday, amid progress in efforts to end the communist nation's decades-old pursuit of atomic weapons.

Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill inspected work at the Yongbyon complex, north of Pyongyang, Monday afternoon, said Max Kwak, a spokesman for the US Embassy in Seoul.

He gave no more details, including Hill's reaction to the ongoing work to disable the plutonium-producing reactor being conducted under a six-nation agreement.

Iran expels Canada's ambassador

AP, Toronto

Iran has ordered Canada's ambassador to leave the country, the Canadian foreign minister said late Monday, calling the move unjustifiable.

Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier suggested the expulsion of Ambassador John Mundy, who was recently appointed but has not yet had his credentials accepted, was a tit-for-tat move by the government in Tehran.

Canada and Iran have tried to come to an agreement on an exchange of ambassadors for some time.

"Unfortunately, we have as yet been unable to accept the candidates Tehran has submitted," Bernier said in a statement. "We believe that the expulsion of our ambassador is an unfortunate and unjustified consequence of this situation. As always, Canada remains prepared to receive an Iranian ambassador provided a suitable candidate is presented," he said.

British teacher arrives home from Sudan

AP, London

A British teacher jailed in Sudan for letting her students name a teddy bear Muhammad as part of a writing project arrived home Tuesday after being pardoned, ending a case that set off an international outcry and angered many moderate Muslims.

Gillian Gibbons' flight arrived at London's Heathrow Airport shortly after 7 am (2 am EST), and she told reporters she was looking forward to seeing her family and friends.

"I'm just an ordinary middle-aged primary school teacher. I went out there to have an adventure, and got a bit more than I bargained for," Gibbons said at a brief news conference.



Pakistani former prime minister Benazir Bhutto (L) speaks during a press conference at her residence with former premier Nawaz Sharif (R) in Islamabad Monday. Sharif and Benazir said Monday they would issue a list of demands for the government to meet or else face a boycott of Jan 8 elections.

'US report on Iran's nuke undermines war cry'

AFP, Washington

Council on Foreign Relations analysis

"Those that oppose it will maintain their stance too," Levi, the author of "On Nuclear Terrorism,"

said.

The National Intelligence Estimate by all 16 US spy agencies cited "high confidence" that Tehran had halted its nuclear weapons programme in late 2003 and "moderate confidence" that the programme had not restarted as of mid-2007.

The surprise finding undermined US administration claims surrounding Iran's nuclear ambitions, but the NIE cautioned that

Iran was keeping its options open and could be able to make a nuclear weapon sometime between 2010 and 2015.

"This doesn't tell us that we don't have an urgent problem here because Iran's growing capability to make nuclear material is still dangerous," Levi said. "We certainly should not think that Iran has no (weapons) ambitions."

Washington and its key European allies -- France, Britain and Germany -- are pressing for new UN sanctions on Iran, but Russia and China will likely seize on the report to defend their resistance to more punitive measures.

Israel vows to keep hitting Gaza militants

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel vowed to keep targeting militants in Hamas-run Gaza on Tuesday as it mulled whether to launch a widespread offensive against the territory, amid revived peace talks with the Palestinians.

"For the moment, what's important is to kill all those who want to fire Qassam (rockets) against Israel," Defence Minister Ehud Barak told army radio.

Barak has recently authorised the army to fire on manned Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip, instead of targeting only rocket-launching cells and infrastructure as previously.

The attacks have killed some two dozen Palestinians, nearly all of them militants, in the past 10 days. Three members of Hamas' military wing killed in an air strike overnight, medics said Tuesday.

Barak vowed to continue with the deadly raids and renewed warnings that Israel would eventually launch a widespread offensive in the territory where Hamas

violently seized power in mid-June.

"The Israeli army will continue the extremely effective operations of its special forces in the Gaza Strip," he said. "Each day that passes brings us closer to a vigorous military operation."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has been under increasing pressure to launch a major operation against Gaza, ruled by a group pledged to Israel's destruction and a base for militants firing rockets and mortars at it on a daily basis.

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