

IAEA board divided over Iran nuclear dossier

Ahmadinejad rejects talks outside UN watchdog

AFP, Vienna, Tehran.

Divisions persisted within the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) watchdog over the Iran nuclear dossier Wednesday, a day after a Western push for an anti-Iran resolution was scuppered by Russia, China and developing countries.

The board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) debated Iran on the third day of its regular March meeting as the last major topic on the agenda.

On Tuesday, European countries had drafted an anti-Iran resolution which they wanted to put to the IAEA board.

But the text was finally ditched after its opponents argued it was superfluous following Monday's UN Security Council decision to step up sanctions against Tehran.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Wednesday rejected holding talks outside the UN atomic watchdog over Iran's nuclear programme, after the Security Council tightened sanc-

tions against Tehran.

His comments came after six world powers on Monday urged EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana to resume talks with Iran's nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili to break the deadlock in the four-year nuclear standoff with the West.

"Iran will not negotiate with anyone with regard to its nuclear issue," Ahmadinejad said after a cabinet meeting, according to state news agency IRNA.

"From now on, the nuclear issue of Iran will be only in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and in the framework of mutual commitments and nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT)," he added.

Ahmadinejad, in his first reaction to the third set of UN Security Council sanctions against Tehran, described the measures as "invalid" and vowed that Iran would press on with its contested nuclear drive.

While the European Union and the United States expressed concern over Tehran's refusal to heed UN

resolutions and suspend sensitive nuclear work, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) hailed Iran's progress in clearing up key questions about its disputed atomic drive.

"The EU remains seriously concerned that despite more than four years of intense efforts, the IAEA is still not in a position to determine the full nature of Iran's nuclear programme," said the Slovenian envoy Ernest Petric.

US Ambassador Gregory Schulte agreed.

"Iran's leaders say that they do not have a nuclear weapons programme. To give the world confidence that this is true, we call on them to fully disclose past and present activities."

"Until then, Iran's nuclear file remains open."

The so-called work plan agreed between the IAEA and Iran last autumn was a timetable for resolving all outstanding questions on Tehran's disputed nuclear activities.

In a recent report, IAEA chief Mohammed ElBaradei

asserted that most of the issues were indeed "no longer outstanding". Nevertheless, Iran still had to address allegations it was involved in covert nuclear weapons work.

And until it did so, the agency could not determine once and for all the peaceful nature of Iran's atomic activities, ElBaradei said.

The idea of a separate IAEA resolution had been to turn up the pressure on Iran to clear up allegations of purported nuclear weapons work.

The UN resolution passed in New York gives Iran three months to comply with UN and IAEA demands to suspend uranium enrichment and reprocessing to help restore international confidence in the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme or face new sanctions.

It includes an outright ban on travel by officials involved in Tehran's nuclear and missile programs, and broadens a list of individuals and entities subject to an assets freeze.



US soldiers with A company 4th Battalion 9th Infantry Regiment 4th Stryker Brigade Combat Team guard an Iraqi prisoner Wednesday after guns, hoods and crush wires and dozens of IDs were found hidden in his house. The A company detained several people during a raid dubbed operation "Able Fortress" in the old city of Baquba. PHOTO: AFP

US-Iran talks on Iraq today

AFP, Tehran

Iranian and US officials will hold their fourth round of talks on security in Iraq in Baghdad today, the ISNA news agency quoted the head of Iran's delegation Reza Amiri Moughdamm as saying.

"Based on an agreement with the Iraqi government, the fourth round of tripartite negotiations on Iraqi security will be held on Thursday with delegations from Iran, Iraq and the United States," the agency quoted him as saying.

ISNA said the Iranian delegation arrived in Baghdad on Wednesday, adding that the talks will be at the level of "experts" -- meaning the discussions would not involve the two foes' ambassadors.

The announcement comes after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad held talks with Iraqi leaders earlier this week in a historic trip that was the first by an Iranian president to the country.

Iran and the United States held three rounds of talks about Iraq last year despite mounting tensions over the Iranian nuclear programme. The two foes have had no diplomatic relations since 1980.

The fact that such talks took place at all, given the acrimonious history between the two, was hailed as a landmark event.

Comeback kid John McCain captures Republican crown

AFP, Dallas

John McCain capped one of the greatest comebacks in US political history to clinch the Republican presidential nomination, and come out firing against his eventual Democratic rival.

McCain swept the four states contested by the Republicans Tuesday -- Ohio, Texas, Rhode Island and Vermont -- to move past the 1,191 delegates needed for the nomination and force his rival Mike Huckabee out of the race.

"I am very pleased to note that tonight, my friends, we have won enough delegates to claim with confidence, humility and a sense of great responsibility that I will be the Republican nominee for president of the United States," McCain

told a victory rally in Dallas late Tuesday.

It ended months of uncertainty in the once muddled Republican race, which at one point had some eight candidates all chasing the nomination.

And it's another chapter in the larger-than-life story of the 71-year-old Vietnam war veteran who has more than once defied the odds.

"The next president must lead an effort to restructure our military, our intelligence, our diplomacy and all relevant branches of government to combat Islamic extremism, encourage the vast majority of moderates to win the battle for the soul of Islam, and meet the many other rising challenges in this changing world," McCain said.

It capped a remarkable turn around in his political fortunes.

As McCain declared victory Tuesday, his supporters celebrated next to a huge board bearing the number of 1,191 -- the magic total of delegates needed to secure the nomination.

But he still has a hard battle ahead to convince conservative voters that he is the man to take over from Republican President George W. Bush.

McCain was due to meet with Bush at the White House on Wednesday. In an interview last month with Fox News, Bush said: "I think that if John is the nominee, he has got some convincing to do to convince people that he is a solid conservative, and I'll be glad to help him if he is the nominee."

Pakistani to die for attack on US consulate

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani court Wednesday sentenced an Islamic militant to death over a 2006 suicide bombing outside the US consulate in Karachi, which killed a US diplomat and three other people, lawyers said.

Anwarul Haq was convicted by an anti-terrorism court in the southern port city on four counts in connection with the attack on March 2, 2006 -- the eve of a visit to Pakistan by US President George W. Bush.

"The court found the suspect guilty in the incident and sentenced him to death on four counts," public prosecutor Naimat Ali Randhawa told AFP.

The court also sentenced Haq to 85 years imprisonment and fined him 1.5 million rupees (24,193 dollars) in connection with the 25 people who were wounded in the blast.

Another suspect, Usman Ghani, was cleared of all charges, Randhawa said, adding that the prosecution planned to appeal.

Several Taliban killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghan and international troops killed several Taliban militants and discovered three car bombs in rebel caves in southern Afghanistan, the US-led coalition said Wednesday.

The insurgents were slain after a failed attempt to ambush the Afghan and international forces at the weekend near Gereshk, a troubled region in the southern province of Helmand, the coalition said in a statement.

It did not say how many were killed.

The troops had been patrolling in the restive area when they came under attack from machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades. The soldiers cornered the rebels and used "precision munitions" to kill them, the coalition said.

Helmand is perhaps the most troubled region of Afghanistan. It also produces most of Afghanistan's opium, which in part funds the insurgency.

8 detained in Pakistan bomb probe

AP, Lahore

Police detained eight alleged Islamic militants after a suicide attack on a navy college, the latest in a wave of bombings to rattle Pakistan after elections, an official said Wednesday.

Members of outlawed Sunni Muslim militant organizations were detained in separate raids hours after Tuesday's bombing, said Chaudhry Masood Aziz, chief of the police anti-terrorism unit in the eastern city of Lahore.

The men have been picked up "in an attempt to find any clue to identify the bombers or people involved in the attack," Aziz said. None of them was a suspect, he said.

Police said two bombers rode on a motorcycle to the gate of the parking lot at the Pakistan Navy War College. The passenger dismounted and destroyed the gate, allowing his accomplice to ride inside and unleash a much more powerful blast.

Turkey strikes northern Iraq

AFP, Arbil

Turkish warplanes and artillery fired on targets inside the Kurdish region of northern Iraq on Wednesday, a spokesman for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) said.

If confirmed, it would be the first such strike by the Turkish military since it pulled out its troops from northern Iraq last Friday after a week-long incursion that came under fire from the government in Baghdad.

Turkish army chief Yasar Buyukanit had said on Monday that the military would launch further strikes on Kurdish rebels if need be, and rejected suggestions that last week's incursion was cut short by US pressure.

Hijacker shot in China after taking foreign hostages

AFP, Beijing

A hijacker armed with explosives took a group of Australian tourists and a translator hostage in China on Wednesday before police shot and killed him, an Australian embassy official and Chinese media reported.

Initially 10 Australians were taken hostage on a tourist bus in the city of Xi'an in northwest China but nine were released soon after, Janaline Oh, spokeswoman for the Australian Embassy in Beijing, told AFP.

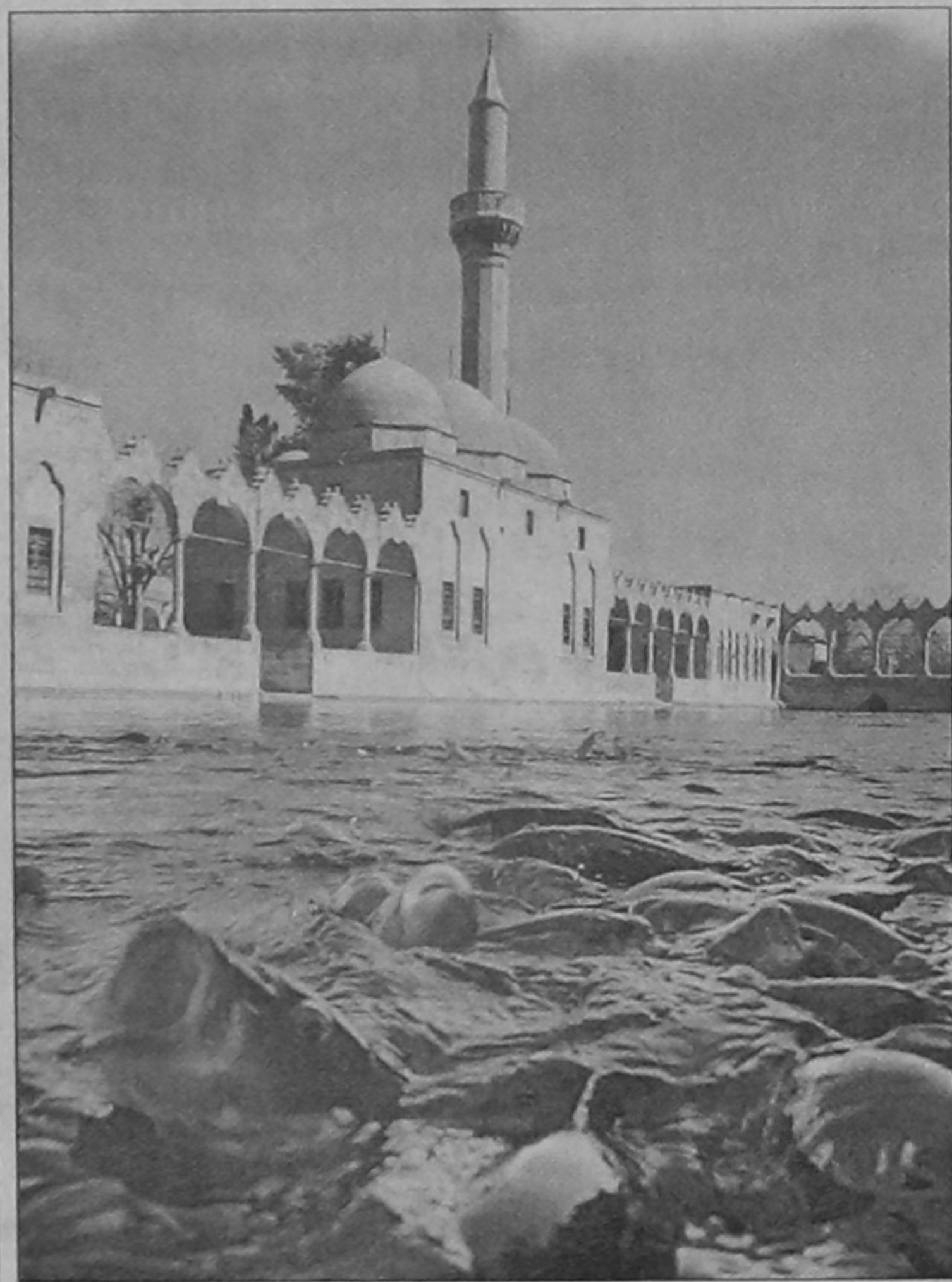
2 killed, 5 hurt in Kashmir grenade blast

AFP, Srinagar

Two people, one a woman, were killed in a grenade explosion inside their house in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, a police spokesman said Wednesday.

The blast took place late Tuesday in Reshinar area, 50 kilometres south of the summer capital Srinagar, the spokesman said, adding five other people were seriously hurt.

"It is being ascertained whether the grenade was hurled from outside or if those inside were fiddling with it," he said.



Fish cluster, waiting for people to feed them Wednesday in Turkey's southeastern city of Saniurfa. According to both the Holy Quran and the Bible it is the alleged birthplace of Abraham before his migration to Canaan, now Palestine. The local Muslim legend differs in that it includes the intervention of a cruel King, Nimrod, who had Abraham launched from a catapult from the city's citadel into a pile of burning wood. However, "Almighty intervened", and turned the fire to water and the faggots to fish. Today, visitors can visit the mosque complex surrounding Abraham's Cave and The Pool of Sacred Fish (Balikgölü) around it.

Malaysian polls will be 'dirtiest ever,' warn activists

AFP, AP, Kuala Lumpur

An international human rights group said Wednesday it fears Malaysians will not get a fair vote in this week's general elections because of an uneven playing field favoring the ruling National Front coalition.

New York-based Human Rights Watch urged Malaysia to eradicate bias from the electoral process. Opposition and activist groups say the process is rife with irregularities including government control of the media, restraint on opposition rallies and names of dead people on voting registration lists.

"Once again, elections in Malaysia are grossly unfair to the opposition," Elaine Pearson, the group's deputy Asia director, said in a statement. "Malaysia's ruling coalition is too comfortable with the status quo to allow reforms that would level the playing field."

Malaysian Law Minister Nazri Abdul Aziz denied the allegations, accusing Human Rights Watch of trying to discredit the elections because "they know the National Front will win."

"To me, Human Rights Watch is biased. They are not important at all. It's only their opinion," Nazri told The Associated Press.