

UN reaffirms previous sanctions on Iran

AP, United Nations

The UN Security Council unanimously approved a new resolution Saturday reaffirming previous sanctions on Iran for refusing to halt its uranium enrichment programme and offering Tehran incentives to do so.

The speedy vote followed a compromise between the United States and Russia to lead a new nuclear effort to condemn Iran's nuclear programme, without introducing any new sanctions.

The brief resolution reaffirmed the three earlier Security Council sanctions resolutions, which imposed progressively tougher sanctions on Iran for refusing to halt its uranium enrichment programme.

US Ambassador Zalmay

Khalilzad said the council had restated its call for Iran to comply with the resolutions and cooperate with the UN nuclear watchdog agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"It is unacceptable for Iran to defy the security council resolutions," Khalilzad said.

Iran's mission to the United Nations immediately condemned the resolution as "unwarranted and unconstructive," and said Iran remained determined to exercise "its inalienable right for peaceful uses of nuclear technology."

Council members met behind closed doors earlier Saturday to hammer out the draft resolution.

The resolution was designed to send a signal that "our resolve has not weakened on this issue, that the discussions among our political

directors about the next steps remain very much there," British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said.

Even envoys from countries that abstained in votes on the past resolutions said they supported the measure.

"Once a resolution is adopted by the Security Council, it is incumbent upon member states to comply with it," said Indonesia's UN Ambassador Marty Natalegawa.

He said Indonesia would reaffirm the need to comply with past measures against Iran, although Jakarta did not support them at the time and abstained on the last sanctions resolution adopted on March 3.

Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin noted that the new resolution restated that the dispute with Iran should be solved through diplomacy. He said earlier resolutions

were carefully crafted to "avoid any military solution to the problem."

Existing sanctions include an asset freeze on 65 companies and individuals linked to Iran's nuclear programme, and a travel ban on five people associated with Tehran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The sanctions also include bans on Iranian arms exports, supplying Iran with materials and technology that could contribute to its nuclear and missile programs, and on trade in goods that have both civilian and military uses.

The latest resolution refers to the "dual-track approach" adopted by the council. This presents Iran with a choice of incentives to stop enriching uranium and, alternatively, threats of new sanctions if it does not comply.



An Iranian woman and her son walk past Shahab-2 (L) and Shahab-3 missiles on display in front of a large portrait of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a square in south Tehran yesterday. Iran marked "Sacred Defence Week", which commemorates Iran's bloody eight-year war with Iraq.

Syria hunts for bombers

AFP, Damascus

Counter-terrorist officers in Syria on Sunday hunted for those responsible for a car bomb attack that killed 17 people in Damascus, one of the deadliest attacks in the country in more than a decade.

The bombing Saturday near a Shia shrine in the Syrian capital, which left 14 people wounded, drew condemnation from around the world, including from the United States, which has repeatedly accused Syria of fuelling unrest in Iraq.

The car packed with 200 kilograms (440 pounds) of explosives blew up near a security checkpoint on a road to Damascus airport in what Interior Minister General Bassam Abdel Majid described as "a terrorist act."

All the casualties were civilians, he told state television.

"A counter-terrorist unit is trying to track down the perpetrators," he said.

Iraq takes delivery of US spy planes

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq has taken delivery of US-built Beechcraft spy planes to bolster its security forces, Defence Minister Abdel Qader Jassem Mohammed said yesterday, without saying how many were involved.

"The ministry has received in the last few days new American (Beechcraft) King Air surveillance aircraft," Mohammed said in a statement, adding that the aircraft flew over Baghdad for the first time on Sunday.

Mohammed said the planes had been bought with Iraqi money, but he did not say how much was paid.

However, he said local pilots had been trained to fly the US-built twin-engine turbo-prop aircraft and transmit live images to a control centre to help direct ground troops.

Earlier this month Mohammed confirmed that Iraq planned to buy F-16 jets from the US, and media reports said that Baghdad wanted 36 of the advanced fighters.

Such a deal would be expected to reduce Iraqi reliance on US air power and possibly clear the way for a withdrawal of more US troops from the country, where they currently number 144,000.



Mission commander Zhai Zhigang is carried by members of recovery team after getting off from the descent capsule of the Shenzhou VII mission, in Siziwang Banner in northern China's Inner Mongolia region yesterday. Three Chinese astronauts returned safely to Earth after making the country's first spacewalk, with a hero's welcome awaiting the men whose exploits captivated the nation.

US operates anti-missile radar in Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

The United States has recently deployed an anti-missile radar in Israel that is mainly to warn of incoming Iranian ballistic missiles, Israeli state radio reported yesterday.

The radar with a range of more than 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles) is sited in the south of the country, the radio added.

It is operated by a permanent 120-strong US Army staff.

Questioned by AFP a defence ministry spokesman said he did "not know about such a deployment".

A senior Pentagon official had said in late July that US Defence Secretary Robert Gates agreed to explore deploying a powerful missile defence targeting radar in Israel.

"The idea here is to help Israel create a layered missile defence capability to protect it from all sorts of threats in the region, near and far," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Besides the radar, Gates also agreed to explore sharing missile early warning launch data, as well as US funding for two costly Israeli projects designed to counter short-range rockets and mortars, he said.

China astronauts return after 1st spacewalk

AFP, Beijing

Three Chinese astronauts returned safely to Earth yesterday after making the country's first spacewalk, with a hero's welcome awaiting the men whose exploits captivated the nation.

The descent capsule of the Shenzhou VII mission was seen on state television drifting gently down under a giant red and white parachute to an empty plain in northern China's Inner Mongolia region as cheers erupted at mission control.

Mission commander Zhai Zhigang had etched his name in the history books of this country of 1.3 billion people with a 15-minute walk in space Saturday that set another milestone in China's transformation into a global power.

Zhai was watched on television by countless millions around the globe as China joined the United States and the former Soviet Union as the only nations to complete a spacewalk.

"I feel proud for the nation," Zhai told a television crew that arrived at the touchdown site.

During his spacewalk, Zhai had floated outside the module holding the Chinese flag -- a

moment of great drama and symbolism just days before the 50th anniversary of the US space agency NASA on Wednesday, which is also China's National Day.

In a televised chat Saturday with Zhai live from mission control, President Hu Jintao captured the nationalist fervour of China's feat by praising the 41-year-old commander.

"Your spacewalk was a complete success. It's a major breakthrough in the development of our manned space programme," Hu said. "The motherland and the people thank you."

On Sunday, Premier Wen Jiabao watched from Beijing's Aerospace Control Centre, clapping as the capsule landed, ending its 68-hour mission.

Within minutes, technicians reached the module by car and began helping Zhai and fellow crew members Liu Boming and Jing Haipeng extract themselves.

China was mired in political chaos, poverty and isolation when the Americans and Soviets made the first spacewalks, back in the 1960s heyday of their space race, and Zhai's feat stirred deep emotions among Chinese.

Iraq, US close to deal on future of US troops

AFP, New York

The United States and Iraq are close to an agreement on the presence of US troops in the country beyond 2008, the foreign ministers from the two countries said Saturday.

"Well, we are very close. I've said many times, really, that I think it is in the final stages. And this will need the support of all the political leaders to have this agreement," said Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari.

He was speaking at the start of talks in a New York hotel with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on the sidelines of the UN Assembly General.

"We are working on the SOFA. We're making good progress. This is an important agreement," agreed Rice.

She was referring to the accord dubbed the Status of Forces Agreement which is to put in place

a deal for the future status of US troops after the UN Security Council mandate for the multinational force expires on December 31.

But differences still remain, notably on granting immunity to US soldiers for acts committed in Iraq, whether Washington has the right to detain Iraqi prisoners and on the future command of military operations on the ground.

"It is also not easy when you are working with a sovereign government, and we intend to fully respect the sovereignty of Iraq," Rice said.

"We need certain protections for our forces so that we can continue the gains that we've been making."

"But we also are working in the context of a long-term strategic framework that will make us allies and friends for a long, long time to come."

Russia blasts US dominant role in world affairs

AP, United Nations

Russia called Saturday for a revival of the global anti-terrorism coalition that formed after Sept. 11, 2001 but started to unravel with what it called the subsequent domination by a single power a veiled reference to the United States.

"The solidarity of the international community fostered on the wave of struggle against terrorism turned out to be somehow 'privatised'," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the UN General Assembly's annual ministerial meeting.

Lavrov cited the US invasion of Iraq "under the false pretext of fight on terror and nuclear arms proliferation" and questions of excessive use of force against civilians in counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.

And he said the recent crisis over Georgia's breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia proved again that "it is impossible or even disastrous to try to resolve the existing problems in the blindfolds of the unipolar world."

Today, it is necessary to analyse the crisis in the Caucasus from the viewpoint of its impact on the region

and the international community on the whole," Lavrov said.

"It has become crystal clear that the solidarity expressed by all of us after 9/11 should be revived (with-out double standards) when we fight against any infringements upon the international law," he said.

Lavrov called for a new "solidarity" of the international community and a strengthened United Nations, saying only in the post-Soviet era "the organisation 'fully realise its potential' as a global centre 'for open and frank debate and coordination of the world policies on a just and equitable basis free from double standards'."

"This is an essential requirement, if the world is to regain its equilibrium," he said.

Lavrov also lashed out at Georgia's "aggression" and bombing of South Ossetia's sleeping capital of Tskhinvali on Aug. 8 and defended Russia's intervention "to repel aggression" and fulfil its peacekeeping commitments.

Georgia disputes this, claiming that the Russian side initiated the conflict. The United States and the European Union have backed

Georgia, contending that the Russian response was disproportionate.

But Lavrov made clear that Moscow would not brook any challenge to its recognition of the unilateral declarations of independence of the two breakaway provinces.

"This problem is closed now. The future of the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has been reliably secured by the treaties between Moscow (and their governments)," he said. "The situation around the two republics is finally going to be stabilised."

Declaring that Europe's security architecture "did not pass the strength test" in Georgia, Lavrov reiterated Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal in June for a new Treaty on European Security.

It would strengthen peace and stability and participants would reaffirm the non-use of force, peaceful settlement of disputes, sovereignty, territorial integrity and noninterference in another country's affairs, he said. Finally, he added, it would promote "an integrated and manageable development across the vast Euro-Atlantic region."

Obama to move campaign to Midwest as rows with McCain flare

AFP, Washington

Barack Obama was to move his campaign to the industrial Midwest Sunday as the Democratic nominee and his Republican rival, John McCain, tore into one another over the reeling US economy.

Obama was to speak at a rally in Detroit one day after the US Senate approved 25 billion dollars in loan guarantees for the financially strapped US auto industry.

The bill, which passed the House of Representatives on Wednesday, contains the first loan guarantees for US carmakers since Congress approved a similar 675 million dollar measure for Chrysler in 1980.

On Saturday, Obama went after Republican nominee McCain at a rally in North Carolina, saying he had come across in the first of three debate clashes Friday as out of touch on the economic and national security perils facing America.

McCain spent most of the day Saturday huddled in his campaign office and apartment outside Washington making a flurry of calls designed to help seal a 700 billion

dollar finance industry bailout before markets open on Monday.

But he fired off an acerbic critique of Obama's debate performance, ripping his rival over his economic policy and attitude to the war in Iraq, in a speech by satellite to the Sportsmen's Alliance, a hunting and shooting lobby group.

"It was clear that Senator Obama still sees the financial crisis in America as a national problem to be exploited first and solved later," he said.

"This is a moment of great testing, when the future of our economy is on the line."

McCain's comments served as a riposte to Obama's own assessment of the debate, just five weeks before election day on November 4.

"From taxes to health care to the war in Iraq -- you heard John McCain make the case for more of the same policies that got us into this mess," Obama told a rally in North Carolina.

"But just as important as what we heard from John McCain was what we didn't hear," Obama said at a rally in Greensboro, North Carolina.



US Democratic presidential candidate Illinois Senator Barack Obama listens to running mate Joe Biden during a rally at the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia on Saturday.

Taliban kill Afghanistan's most high-profile policewoman

AFP, Kandahar

Taliban gunmen shot dead the most high-profile female police officer in Afghanistan on Sunday as she left her home to go to work yesterday, officials and the militia said.

The attackers were waiting outside the home of Malalai Kakar, head of the city of Kandahar's department of crimes against women, and opened fire on her car, Kandahar government spokesman Zalmay Ayoubi told AFP.

"Today between 7 am and 8 am when she was (in her car) outside her house and going to her job, some gunmen attacked," Ayoubi said. "Malalai Kakar died in front of her house. Her son was wounded."

A doctor in the city's main hospital said Kakar, in her late 30s, had been shot in the head.

"She died on the spot and her son was badly injured and is in a coma," said the doctor, who declined to let his name be used.

A spokesman for the extremist Taliban movement, which targets government officials as part of an growing insurgency, said that the assassins were from his group.



Syrians clear the debris from inside their home following a deadly bomb blast in Damascus yesterday. A car bomb exploded near a Shia shrine in south Damascus Saturday, killing 17 people and wounding 14 in one of the deadliest attacks to hit Syria in more than a decade.

5 killed during school trip to Thai waterfall

AP, Bangkok

Two Australians and three Thais were struck by lightning and killed during a school trip to a waterfall in northeastern Thailand, authorities said Sunday.

The victims were part of a group of Australian and Thai secondary school students and teachers who were visiting the waterfall Saturday as part of a cultural exchange program, said police Capt. Boonsri Dejchai.

A lightning storm started after the group reached the waterfall in Mukdahan province, 330 miles northeast of Bangkok, and they sought refuge in a covered area under a large tree, Boonsri said.

A bolt of lightning struck the tree, instantly killing a 41-year-old Australian male teacher who was leading the group from Winthrop Baptist College, a secondary school in Perth, Australia, and two Thai students, Boonsri said.

NEWS ANALYSIS Battle of Bajaur a crucial test for Pakistan

AFP, Tang Khata

A massive battle with Islamist militants in an obscure Pakistani tribal region is proving to be pivotal to the country's fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, officials say.

The six-week army operation in the remote region of Bajaur on the Afghan border is suspected to have sparked furious extremists into bombing the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad just over a week ago, they say.

While Waziristan has captured most of the headlines about Pakistan's tribal belt in recent years, the military says Bajaur is where it faces the stiffest resistance since joining the US-led "war on terror" in 2001.

Troops backed by helicopter gunships and fighter jets have

struggled to push forward in the face of bunkers, tunnel networks and organised defences constructed by extremists.

Several blown-up Pakistani tanks littered the roads during a recent trip for journalists arranged by the military. US-built Cobra gunships could be seen pounding insurgent positions with cannon.

"This is at the centre," said Major General Tariq Khan, head of the paramilitary Frontier Corps force, which is leading the fighting.

The operation should be completed in another month and a half, Khan told reporters, but added: "If we do not take any action it will become an independent agency spreading out terror in all directions."

The nuclear-armed nation's new civilian government launched

the Bajaur offensive in August, largely in response to US pressure to stop militants attacking foreign troops in Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military says that since then 1,000 extremists have been killed, including al-Qaeda's operational commander in Bajaur, Egyptian Abu Saeed Al-Masri. At least 27 troops have also died.

Pakistani security officials say it is the first time they have gone "full steam" since then-President Pervez Musharraf pushed troops into South Waziristan, the most southerly of the seven semi-autonomous tribal zones, in 2003 to tackle militants who fled the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

Operations there and in North Waziristan ended in controversial peace deals with militants that

angered Washington and allowed the rebels to regroup, increasingly in Bajaur.

There, followers of Osama bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who escaped an air strike in Bajaur in 2006, joined forces with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan group of South Waziristan-based Baqtullah Mehsud, officials say.

The former government blamed Mehsud for the December 2007 assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto, wife of current President Asif Ali Zardari.

But the cost has been high in Bajaur.

"Pakistan's army has never faced this level of resistance since it launched operations in the tribal areas (in 2003)," a senior military official told AFP on condition of anonymity.