

IAEA presses Iran, N Korea to come clean on nukes

AFP, Vienna

UN nuclear watchdog chief Mohamed ElBaradei urged Iran yesterday to come clean on its contested atomic drive and North Korea not to resume its own nuclear activities as international disarmament talks founder.

"I urge Iran to implement all the transparency measures... required to build confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme at the earliest possible date," ElBaradei said in his opening address to the International Atomic Energy Agency's general conference here.

"This will be good for Iran, good for the Middle East region and good for the whole world."

Despite six years of intensive investigation, the IAEA has so far been unable to determine whether Iran's nuclear activities are purely peaceful as Tehran claims.

ElBaradei added, "I still hope that conditions can be created for the DPRK (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) to return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty at the earliest possible date."

Last week, North Korea announced it was preparing to restart a nuclear reprocessing plant used to make weapons-grade material, asking the IAEA to remove seals and surveillance equipment and barring agency inspectors from the site.

Under a six-country pact announced in February 2007, North Korea agreed to disable and dismantle key nuclear facilities and allow inspectors to return in return for one million tonnes of fuel aid and its removal from a US list of countries supporting terrorism.

But North Korea announced last month it had halted the process in protest at Washington's refusal to drop it from the blacklist as had been promised.

Speaking on behalf of the European Union, French government spokesman Luc Chatel said the onus was on Iran to shed light on its nuclear programme, "open the doors of its installations, provide access to individuals and documents and reply to all of the inspectors' questions."

Chatel also called on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, as

required by the UN Security Council.

At the same time he urged North Korea to "dismantle its nuclear installations in a verifiable and irreversible manner and to abandon its arms-grade fissile material."

And he said that the EU was "concerned" that Syria had not yet responded to IAEA requests to visit suspect nuclear sites.

The 27-bloc "urges Syria to prove all the access requested and reply to all the agency's questions," Chatel said.

The United States has alleged Syria was building a covert nuclear facility at a remote desert site called Al-Kibar until it was destroyed by Israeli bombs in September 2007.

Damascus allowed a three-member team from the IAEA to visit Al-Kibar in June, but has since refused any follow-up visit.

Official requests to visit other sites allegedly involved in clandestine nuclear activities have so far gone unanswered.

The IAEA's 145 member countries were gathered in Vienna for the 52nd general conference, an

annual week-long meeting to draw up general policies on a range of issues, from non-proliferation and nuclear terrorism to medical applications of nuclear technology.

This year, however, a key issue could be the possible candidature of either Syria or Iran for a seat on the IAEA's 35-member board following the expiry of Pakistan's one-year term.

The seat is to be allocated to another country within the so-called Middle East and South Asia (MESA) group. Diplomats close to the IAEA have told AFP there are four possible candidates: Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and Kazakhstan. MESA has until the end of the general conference to decide on a single candidate and the choice is normally adopted by consensus.

With both Iran and Syria currently in the dock over their purported clandestine nuclear work, the nomination of either by MESA would almost certainly run into resistance, diplomats said.

That could mean that a vote would have to be called at the conference, unprecedented in the IAEA's history.

India extends defence coop pact with Russia

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India will buy 347 T-90 tanks from Russia and manufacture another 1,000 tanks under transfer of technology as the two countries yesterday gave a major boost to bilateral defence cooperation by extending the tenure of the Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation by 10 more years on the expiry of its present term in 2010.

After signing the protocol on the cooperation here yesterday with his Russian counterpart, Indian Defence Minister AK Antony, at a joint press conference, said an apex committee will be formed to iron out problems on a fast-track basis on different issues related to ongoing and proposed projects for acquisition, joint development and production, joint defence R&D and interaction between the defence forces of the two countries.

He said the apex committee, jointly headed by Defence Secretaries of the two countries, would meet at least once in six months and its first meeting will be held in Moscow before the visit of the Russian prime minister in December this year.



PHOTO: AFP

In this Ministry of Defence handout picture Indian Defence Minister AK Antony (R) shakes hands with his Russian counterpart Anatoly Serdyukov (L) prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. The Russian defence minister is on a three-day official visit to India to participate in the 8th Indo-Russian Inter-Governmental Commission on Military Technical Cooperation.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Army soldiers patrol on their tanks during a military operation against militants in Darra Adam Khel yesterday. The Pakistani military launched a major offensive in early August against Islamic extremist fighters in tribal areas and have won the support of militias comprising local tribesmen.

Security on Afghan border is a job for Pakistan, not US

Says Zardari

AFP, Washington

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari said in an interview broadcast Sunday that Islamabad's military is capable of quelling militant elements on its border with Afghanistan, and again urged the US military against launching incursions into its territory.

"Let us do the job, we can do a better job than anybody else can. It's partly and mainly our war. We fight it. Let us do it," Zardari said in an interview with CNN.

His comments came after Pakistani and US troops last week exchanged fire along the Pakistani-Afghan border last week, after Washington said two US military

helicopters came under fire.

Zardari said only flares were fired last week toward the US helicopters to "warn that they have crossed over" into Pakistani territory.

The Pakistani leader, downplaying the confrontation, said it resulted from a misunderstanding.

"It's a murky border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Half the hill is here, half the hill is in Afghanistan," he told CNN.

The Pentagon last week also called Thursday's events involving the US helicopters "an unfortunate misunderstanding."

"They are confident that they were in Afghan air space the whole time," said Bryan Whitman, a Pentagon spokesman.

Pakistan, India close to conclude a pact on Sir Creek: Kasuri

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan and India are close to concluding an agreement on the Sir Creek maritime boundary dispute, which has been hanging fire for decades, with all issues having been resolved, former Foreign Minister Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri has said.

"On Sir Creek, President (Asif Ali) Zardari and (Prime Minister) Manmohan Singh could sign an agreement tomorrow as a lot of work has been done," Kasuri told Geo News in an interview.

The joint map and joint survey has been done and there are no more issues to be resolved between the countries, he said.

Kasuri's remarks assume significance as President Asif Ali Zardari in his address to the National Assembly had stated that Islamabad and New Delhi could resolve issues like Sir Creek and Siachen at the earliest.

5 Lebanese soldiers killed in bomb blast

AFP, Tripoli

Five Lebanese soldiers were killed yesterday in a car bomb blast targeting an army bus on the outskirts of the restive northern city of Tripoli, security and military officials said.

A security official told AFP that another 24 people, 18 of them soldiers, were wounded in the explosion, the second deadly bombing targeting the Lebanese army in two months.

"Once again a treacherous hand has reached out to strike at the military establishment in a terrorist attack clearly aimed at undermining efforts at peace and stability," a statement by the army command said.

The bomb, placed under a parked car at the southern entrance to the city, was packed with nuts and bolts and police suspect the device was detonated by remote control.

It blew up as the bus headed towards the capital Beirut during morning rush-hour. There were about 24 soldiers on board, most of

them from the village of Akroum, located about 50km north of Tripoli near the Syrian border.

The owner of the booby-trapped vehicle was detained for questioning, a security official said.

Police and the army cordoned off the area as forensic experts began gathering evidence while residents rushed to the scene or to nearby hospitals to look for their loved ones.

One man in his 50s wept and appealed for news about his son who he said was on board the bus.

Ali Al-Khatib said his 37-year-old cousin Anwar Jasim Al-Khatib, a father of two, was among the soldiers killed.

"He spent the weekend with his wife and children buying clothes for the Muslim Eid and was supposed to come back for the holiday tonight," Al-Khatib said, as he stood outside Tripoli's Nini hospital.

The force of the blast shattered windows and damaged cars nearby. The Renault vehicle under which the bomb was placed was left a burned-out pile of twisted metal.

US 'war on terror' failed to weaken al-Qaeda

Reveals global poll

AFP, London

Most people across the world believe the US-led "war on terror" has failed to weaken al-Qaeda and many think the group has actually grown stronger, a BBC World Service poll revealed yesterday.

Seven years after the United States launched its campaign following the September 11 attacks, even Americans appear unsure about its success.

On average only 22 percent of people polled across 23 countries thought US action had weakened Osama bin Laden's network, while 29 percent thought it had no effect and 30 percent believed it had actually made al-Qaeda stronger.

Just 34 percent of Americans questioned believed al-Qaeda had been weakened, while 26 percent thought the "war on terror" had no effect, and 33 percent said they thought the campaign had made the group stronger.

"Despite its overwhelming military power, America's war against al-Qaeda is widely seen as

having achieved nothing better than a stalemate and many believe that it has even strengthened al-Qaeda," said Steven Kull, director of the US-based Programme on International Policy and Attitudes.

The survey of 24,000 people, carried out between July 8 and September 12, also revealed that the predominant view in 15 nations polled is that neither the United States nor al-Qaeda is winning the conflict.

On average just ten percent of respondents thought al-Qaeda was winning, 22 percent thought the United States was winning and 47 percent said neither.

Kenya, Egypt, Nigeria and Turkey were most positive about the impact of the "war on terror" and US success, while one fifth of Pakistanis questioned believed al-Qaeda was winning -- although 24 percent believed neither was.

A majority of those polled had a negative opinion of al-Qaeda, except in two countries seen as on the frontline of the conflict -- Egypt and Pakistan.

Nepali Maoist govt, not priests, select 'living goddess'

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's new Maoist government has taken over the task of selecting a girl to be a "living goddess," ousting royal priests from a role they fulfilled for centuries.

The strictly atheist Maoists gained power in the Himalayan country after the end of the civil war in 2006 and landmark polls earlier this year that brought down the world's last Hindu monarchy.

"Just because we are now a republic and no longer have a king or royal priest, does not mean we should end our traditions," said Keshab Bahadur Shrestha, a member of the government panel that selected the girl known as a Kumari.

The girl selected, Shreeya Bajracharya, is from Bhaktapur town, 30 kilometres (19 miles) west of Kathmandu. She is the six-year-old daughter of a farmer.

She met 32 strict criteria, including having "eyelashes like a cow" and a "voice as soft and clear as a duck," said Shrestha.

Egypt desert hostages freed after 10-day ordeal

AFP, Cairo

A group of European tourists and their Egyptian guides who were kidnapped by armed bandits in a remote desert 10 days ago have been freed unharmed, officials said yesterday.

"The hostages have been freed and are in good health. They are being brought to Cairo airport," Egyptian state television quoted an official as saying.

The hostages -- five Germans, five Italians, a Romanian and eight Egyptian drivers and tour guides -- were snatched while on a safari in a lawless area of Egypt's southwestern desert on September 19.

The kidnappers -- whose identities remain unknown -- had demanded a ransom but it was not known if any money was paid to secure the release of the 19.

Security officials said they were being flown back to Al-Maza military airport, which is next to Cairo's international airport, aboard a military aircraft.

"They'll be here within two hours," tourism ministry spokeswoman Omayma el-Huseini told AFP.

Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini confirmed the release, telling Sky Italia that "Our compatriots are free, and they are with Egyptian forces."

Their release came after an Egyptian security official said kidnappers had agreed to let their captives go in return for a ransom, in a deal hammered out before Sudanese troops killed six hostage-takers in a shootout on Sunday.

"The problem was solved. They had agreed to the ransom. It was merely a matter of receiving the hostages, but then this surprise happened," the official told AFP, referring to the shooting.

Sudanese forces killed six of the bandits and arrested two in a shootout after spotting them in the Sudan-Egypt-Libya border area. A Sudanese official told AFP the bandits had moved the hostages to a hideout in Chad.

The kidnappers had demanded that Germany take charge of payment of a six-million-euro (8.8-million-dollar) ransom to be handed over to the German wife of the tour organiser, one of those snatched.

France and India vow to boost civil nuclear cooperation

AFP, Marseille

Indian and French leaders vowed yesterday to boost nuclear energy cooperation at an annual summit on EU-India ties dominated by trade, global warming and the world financial crisis.

"France, which has great trust in India and its prime minister, has worked hard so that India can have access to civilian nuclear energy," said French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency.

He made the comment at a press conference with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who arrived in France from the US, where he took India a major step closer to rejoining global nuclear commerce after 30 years in the cold.

Singh was to meet Tuesday in Paris with French political leaders

and nuclear energy executives and was expected to sign a major nuclear trade pact.

If the deal goes through, French nuclear giant Areva said Monday it hoped to negotiate the delivery to India of two third-generation European Pressurized Reactors (EPRs), as well as nuclear fuel.

The US House of Representatives on Saturday passed a major atomic energy pact with New Delhi, which if it gets Senate approval will allow India access to Western technology and cheap atomic energy, provided it allows UN inspections of some of its nuclear facilities.

India was banned from nuclear trade three decades ago after it carried out its first nuclear test and refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but the Vienna-based Nuclear Suppliers Group lifted the ban earlier this month after hard lobbying by Washington.



PHOTO: AFP

French President Nicolas Sarkozy (R) whose country holds the rotating presidency of the European Union and India's Prime minister Manmohan Singh (L) address a joint press conference at the end of the EU/India summit yesterday in Marseille, southern France.

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