

# US endorses restart of top level Nato talks with Russia

AFP, Brussels

The United States endorsed yesterday a resumption of top-level Nato talks with Russia, setting the stage for an end to a seven-month freeze sparked by Moscow's war on Georgia.

At a meeting of Nato foreign ministers in Brussels, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that it was "time to move ahead" in ties with Russia, even though Washington remains a strong backer of Georgia.

"It is time to move ahead, not wait in place with the illusion that things will change on their own," she told the ministers, after Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer had recommended that talks resume.

"It is time for realism, as well as hope," she said, as ministers debated whether to return to top-level Nato-Russia Council talks, which were frozen over Russia's war with Georgia last August.

"While some perceive the Nato-Russia Council as a reward or concession to

Russia, it should be viewed as a mechanism for dialogue on issues where we disagree and a platform for cooperation that is in our interests," she said.

The United States has been a strong backer of Georgia's efforts to join Nato, as well as the candidature of Ukraine, and has consistently demanded that Russia change tack before dialogue officially resumes.

Nato and Moscow resumed informal level talks in December.

Alliance diplomats said Wednesday that the first official meeting could take place at the level of ministers after Nato's 60th anniversary summit in early April.

In an effort to ease the concerns of Georgia and Ukraine, both striving to join Nato in the face of Russian objections, the ministers were also set to meet Thursday with Georgian and Ukrainian representatives.

Scheffer said ties with Moscow had shown a marked improvement recently.

"My inclination is a positive one, so let's hope that ministers agree with me,"

he told reporters. When asked when talks in the so-called NATO-Russia Council would resume formally, he said: "I hope sooner rather than later."

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband agreed.

"I think it is important to re-establish the NRC (Nato-Russia Council). That gives us the opportunity to put our concerns directly to the Russians," he said ahead of the meeting also focussed on Nato's troubled mission in Afghanistan.

"It also allows us to engage on issues of mutual concern," he said.

Several nations have wanted to resume formal meetings of the Nato-Russia Council, which meets routinely among ambassadors, but also at ministerial and head of state and government level.

France, Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain maintain that the sanction against the key European energy supplier is counter-productive and have called for a de-freeze for months. Britain joined that position late last year.



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (R), Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vigaudas Usackas (L) and British Foreign Minister David Miliband are pictured yesterday before a Nato foreign ministers meeting at the Nato headquarters in Brussels.

## 6 Russian police killed in Ingushetia blast

7 others killed in gas explosion

AFP, Moscow/Vladivostok

Six members of the Russian security forces were killed yesterday when a bomb went off in a village in Russia's Caucasus region of Ingushetia, the Interfax news agency reported.

The agency said the dead included a high-ranking local interior ministry official and a deputy criminal police chief for the area.

There had been growing unrest over the last weeks in mainly Muslim Ingushetia, which is near Chechnya where Russia fought two wars in the last decades.

Earlier seven people were killed and six others injured yesterday when a gas explosion ripped through a building in a remote village in the Russian Far East, officials said.

"Unfortunately, six could not be saved," a spokeswoman for the local branch of the emergency ministry, Yana Ivanova, told AFP. She added later Thursday that one more person had been found under the rubble.

Six survivors were currently in the hospital and one was in a critical condition, Ivanova added.

The gas explosion hit the two-storey residential building in the village of Vozdvizhenka in the Primorsky region on the Russian Pacific coast at around 01:00 am local time Thursday (1500 GMT).

The four apartments have been fully destroyed but the residents have already returned to their homes after being evacuated earlier, officials said.



A handout photo released March 4, 2009 shows a South African Springbok. More than 25 percent of the world's 91 known antelope species are threatened with extinction, according to an update of the IUCN Red List, an authoritative index of threatened animal life.

## Antelope species face extinction

AFP, Paris

More than 25 percent of the world's 91 known antelope species are threatened with extinction, according to an update of the IUCN Red List, an authoritative index of threatened animal life.

The status of several antelope species has become worse since the last complete assessment, in 1996, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature said.

"Unsustainable harvesting -- whether for food or traditional medicine -- and human encroachment on their habitat are the main threats facing antelopes," said Philippe Chardonnet, director of the International Foundation for the Conservation of Wildlife.

## Israeli raids kill 2 Gaza militants

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli air raids on Hamas-run Gaza killed four militants just hours after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ended her first Middle East trip vowing to breathe life into the peace process.

An air strike in the Maghazi refugee camp in central Gaza on Thursday killed three militants and wounded two others, medics said.

An army spokesman said the raid targeted a group who had fired an anti-tank shell at an army unit on the Israeli side of the border.

Late Wednesday, an Israeli air raid killed a senior Islamic Jihad military commander as he drove through the Jabaliya refugee camp near Gaza City.

The radical Palestinian group vowed to avenge his death and on Thursday said its militants fired three rockets into Israel. None caused casualties.

It was the latest blow to the tenuous ceasefire Hamas and Israel declared on January 18 to end Israel's 22-day devastating war on the tiny coastal strip. Egypt has been brokering talks to turn the ceasefires into a durable truce but has so far failed to clinch any agreement.

## US lawmakers push trade as terrorism antidote

AFP, Washington

With President Barack Obama's backing, US lawmakers on Wednesday unveiled legislation aimed at using trade-spurred jobs growth as an antidote to Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The bill would give goods from certain restive parts of those countries duty-free access to the US market in a bid to promote legitimate economic activity where poverty fuels terrorist recruitment and the illegal drug trade.

"Military force alone will not solve the problem" of quenching Islamist extremist forces along the strife-torn countries' common border, said Democratic Representative Chris Van Hollen, a leading backer.

Obama has "fully embraced" the measure, which has been introduced in the Senate and

will soon be in the House of Representatives, said Van Hollen, who was born to a US diplomat in Karachi, Pakistan.

At the same press conference, Ambassadors Husain Haqqani of Pakistan and Said Jawad of Afghanistan said the bill, which would create "Reconstruction Opportunity Zones," would create jobs for young people who might otherwise join Islamist extremists.

"The young people of Afghanistan and Pakistan's tribal areas need to be given a choice other than employment by the Taliban," said Haqqani, who estimated the zones would create some 30,000 jobs in Pakistan within the first three years, chiefly thanks to textile exports to the United States.

"Fighting terrorism and extremism is not just (using military force), it's providing hope, jobs," Jawad told reporters.

## China ready to talk to Taiwan, end hostility

AP, Beijing

China's Premier Wen Jiabao said yesterday that Beijing is ready to hold talks with Taiwan on political and military issues in the pursuit of ending hostility between the longtime rivals.

In a report to the annual legislative session's opening ceremony, Wen cheered a significant improvement in ties and a major reduction in tensions over the past year between Beijing and the self-governing island it claims as Chinese territory.

"Positive changes occurred in the situation in Taiwan, and major breakthroughs were made in cross-strait relations," Wen said.

Beijing was ready to hold talks to "create conditions for ending the state of hostility and concluding a peace agreement" between the sides, he said.

Wen's remarks to the National People's Congress were a near word-for-word reiteration of offers made by president and Communist Party leader Hu Jintao in a Dec. 31 address.

Wen gave no additional details on the content of a peace agreement or what the talks on political and military issues would include. However, the tone of his remarks were far more conciliatory than the typically hawkish references to Taiwan contained in previous addresses to the congress.

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council had no immediate comment on Wen's remarks.

Taiwan and China split amid civil war in 1949 and Beijing says it is intent on eventual unification, by persuasion if possible but by force if considered necessary.

Relations have improved dramatically since Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou took office in May with a mandate to reduce tensions and strengthen economic ties between the sides.

Taiwan's 23 million people overwhelmingly favour maintaining their de facto independence and its hard-won democratic freedoms, and Ma has insisted that discussions on Taiwan's final status won't happen during his presidency.

## Beshir warrant widens international divide on war crime justice

AFP, Cairo

The arrest warrant issued Wednesday by the International Criminal Court against Sudan's President Omar al-Beshir's opened up a global divide on how war crimes justice is administered.

While western nations called for Sudan to cooperate with the court's investigation into hundreds of thousands of deaths and rapes in Darfur, Russia called the warrant a "dangerous precedent".

The head of the African Union said it could threaten peace in Sudan and many experts were left wondering how the warrant could be enforced.

The ICC sought the arrest of Beshir for war crimes and crimes against humanity over a five year long crackdown in Darfur. It is the first ever warrant issued against a sitting head of state, though the court decided he would not face genocide charges.

The United States said that those who have "committed atrocities should be brought to justice". And Darfur rebel chief Abdel Wahid Mohammed Nur hailed the decision as a "great victory".



Sudanese President Omar al-Beshir (C) waves to supporters during a mass demonstration in Khartoum yesterday protesting the international arrest warrant issued against him for alleged war crimes in Darfur.

## Bomb blast kills 10 in Iraqi cattle market

AP, Baghdad

A car bomb exploded yesterday in a crowded cattle market south of Baghdad, killing at least 10 people and injuring 60 others, Iraqi police and medical officials said.

The parked car exploded at the height of the morning buying and selling at the market on the outskirts of Hillah, 95km south of Baghdad, said Iraqi police Maj. Muthana Khalid. The blast scattered bodies and animal carcasses throughout the market, a witness said.

While violence has declined dramatically in Iraq during the past 18 months, there are growing concerns about a possible upward trend in bloodshed after a series of

high-profile attacks on civilians and US and Iraqi security forces in recent weeks.

All the dead and injured in Thursday's bombing were civilians, Khalid said. Dr. Hussam al-Janabi, a medical official in Hillah, confirmed the casualty figures. The US military in a statement put the casualty toll at 10 dead and 56 wounded.

Markets, mosques and religious shrines have been a favourite target of insurgents in Iraq because of the possibility of high casualty counts.

Dozens of cattle merchants, farmers, butchers and buyers were at the market in Hamza al-Gharbi, a mostly Shia community a short distance from Hillah, when the bomb exploded.

## US consults Nato, EU allies on Afghan strategy

AFP, Brussels

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton consulted Nato and European allies late Wednesday on Washington's new strategy to combat the insurgency in Afghanistan.

At an evening "transatlantic dinner" in Brussels and in talks with her Nato counterparts Thursday, Hillary Clinton was to outline progress and gather feedback with the review set for completion late this month.

Her talks here will also focus on Russia and the likely unfreezing of high-level relations with Nato, sparked by Moscow's decision to send troops into Georgia last August.

"I am looking to demonstrate that the United States intend to be an active partner within Nato and with our Nato partners," she told reporters travelling with her to Brussels, ahead of the closed-door dinner talks.

"I will certainly be raising issues that are important to the United States such as our plan going forward for Afghanistan and Pakistan,

the Nato-Russia relationship, some of the old problems and new threats together".

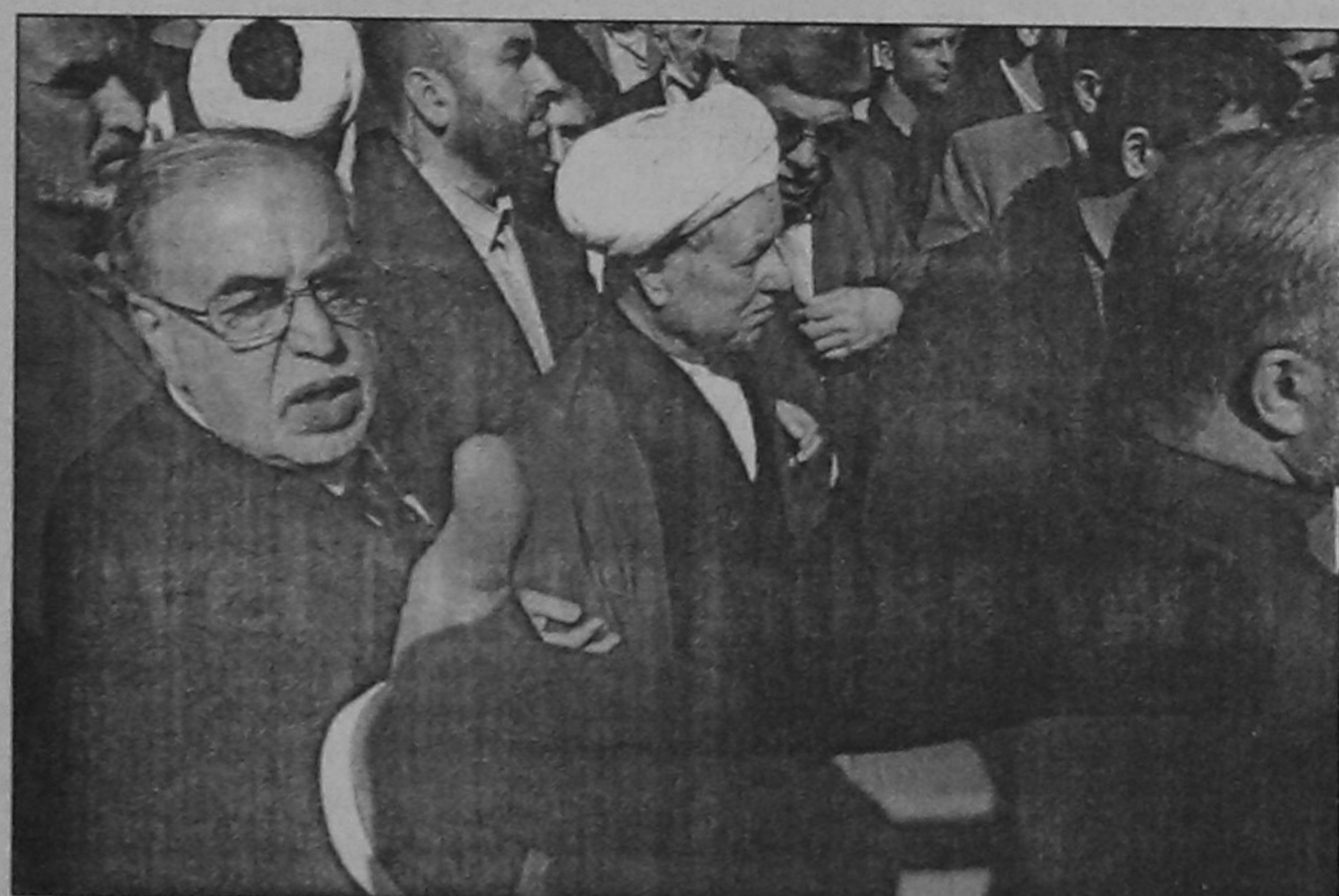
The United States and its Nato allies are battling to halt a Taliban-led insurgency that has severely dented their efforts to spread democracy and foster reconstruction throughout Afghanistan.

President Barack Obama has demanded a strategy review focused on fighting extremism in the strife-torn country, where he is deploying 17,000 extra troops, and in neighbouring Pakistan as he winds down US involvement in Iraq.

"This will be an important opportunity for an exchange of views," Nato spokesman James Appathurai told reporters a few hours before Hillary Clinton touched down in Brussels.

He said Hillary Clinton "will update allies on the US review, where it is, and where it is going."

The previous administration under president George W. Bush had a strained relationship with some European allies caused by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.



Iran's former president and cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is surrounded by officials following his meeting with the Grand Ayatollah Sistani in the southern Shia Muslim city of Najaf, 160km from Baghdad yesterday.

## India offers hand to US on climate change

AFP, Washington

With a landmark nuclear deal removing an "albatross" in relations, India says it is seeking new forms of cooperation with the United States -- and sees climate change as a prime area.

Ambassador Ronen Sen, who is leaving his post after four and a half years in Washington, said that the world's two largest democracies have finally turned the page on decades of mistrust.

The relationship "still has to reach a certain critical mass," Sen said Wednesday. "But today I don't see any major area where you have a difference in terms of long-term objectives -- none."

India reached an agreement with former US president George W. Bush giving New Delhi access to civilian nuclear technology for the first time in decades despite its refusal to sign

the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"We got rid of this albatross across our necks. It's freed us in a way. You can't overestimate the importance of that," Sen told a luncheon with business leaders.

Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh hailed the nuclear pact as a sign of an emerging alliance between their countries, which had uneasy ties during the Cold War.

But there were misgivings from some lawmakers from new President Barack Obama's Democratic Party and several US allies which said the pact set a bad example to nations such as Iran seen as pursuing nuclear weapons.

Sen said India was looking for areas to cooperate with the Obama administration and identified climate change as an area where "we have a vested interest in working as partners."

"I would like to say that you will find us cooperative in this joint endeavour," he said.

## Social spending boom in China amid unrest fears

AFP, Beijing

China vowed a massive boost yesterday to social programmes even as the global crisis placed a severe strain on government budgets, reflecting growing worries about the potential for unrest.

In a speech to lawmakers laden with warnings about the threats to social stability in the world's most populous country, Premier Wen Jiabao heralded steep spending increases, including nearly 40 percent more for health care.

"Maintaining a certain growth rate for the economy is essential for expanding employment for both urban and rural residents, increasing people's incomes and ensuring social stability," Wen told parliament.

"Improving people's lives is always the starting and end point of our economic work," he said in his much-anticipated address, which opened the nine-day annual full session of the legislature.

Among the big-ticket items mentioned by Wen was a rise in spending on social security of 17.6 percent to 293 billion yuan (43 billion dollars), and a whopping 38.2 percent increase in health care spending to 118.1 billion yuan.



Chinese ethnic minority delegates leave the Great Hall of the People after the opening of the National People's Congress (NPC) in Beijing yesterday.