



A picture obtained from the Fars News Agency shows Iranian cleric Mohammad Ali Abtahi (front 2nd-R), a member of the Assembly of Combatant Clerics, sitting in a courtroom with other defendants in Tehran yesterday during the first hearing of the trial of 100 people accused of rioting after the disputed re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad won polls after clean voting

Top Iranian reformist tells court during trial

AFP, Tehran

A top Iranian reformist, accused of taking part in deadly riots after the June election, reportedly testified before a Tehran court yesterday that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's victory came after a clean vote.

In a blow to the opposition movement which claims that his re-election as president was because of massive vote rigging, Mohammad Ali Abtahi said there had been no fraud in the June 12 poll, the Fars news agency reported.

Abtahi, a close aide of reformist ex-president Mohammad Khatami, said the reformists and opposition leaders had also betrayed Iran's all-powerful supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the agency said.

"The 10th (presidential) election was different and it took two or three years to work on it. I think reformists took action to sort of restrict the (supreme) leader," Abtahi told a revolutionary court in which he and around 100 people face charges of rioting after the disputed poll.

"I say to all my friends and all friends who hear us, that the issue of fraud in Iran was a lie and was brought up to create riots so Iran becomes like Afghanistan and Iraq and suffers damage and hardship... and if this happened, there would be no name and trace of the revolution left."

Abtahi said opposition leader Mir Hossein

Mousavi, Khatami and powerful cleric and former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had taken an "oath" not to abandon each other.

"Mousavi probably did not know the country, but Khatami, with all due respect... knew all the issues. He was aware of the capability and power of the leader, but he joined Mousavi and this was a betrayal," the cleric said, adding that Rafsanjani sought to avenge his 2005 presidential defeat to Ahmadinejad.

"It was wrong of me to take part in the rallies, but Karroubi told me that we cannot call the people onto the streets with such a meagre number of votes, so we had better go to the streets ourselves to demonstrate our protest," he was quoted as saying.

Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist ex-parliament speaker, won just 333,635 votes or 0.85 percent in the presidential ballot. Abtahi was one of his advisers before the election.

Mousavi and Karroubi are spearheading a massive anti-Ahmadinejad campaign in which their supporters have staged street protests over the hardliner's win.

Around 30 people were killed and hundreds wounded in the post-poll violence, the most serious political crisis in the Islamic republic's 30-year existence.

After the election up to 2,000 protesters, political activists, reformists and journalists were arrested as hundreds of thousands of people publicly challenged the results.

Venezuela orders closure of 34 radio stations

AFP, Caracas

The Venezuelan government has ordered the closure of 34 radio stations, the head of national telecommunications regulator Conatel said Friday, in the latest bid to rein in the country's media.

"They will have to cease transmission once they have received the order from Conatel," said Diosdado Cabello, who is also minister of public works in President Hugo Chavez's leftist government.

Cabello said the closures were due to the stations' failures to meet legal operating requirements, and warned that more closures may follow.

"These are the first 34 decisions that we have taken," he said.

The stations broadcast in Caracas and various cities in the country's interior.

Among the best known is CNB, which airs in Caracas and nearby Valencia, and is part of national network that has been critical of the Venezuelan president.

Other stations had virtually ceased broadcasting.

Iran detains 3 US tourists near Iraqi border

AFP, Washington

Iran, a longstanding adversary of Washington, detained three US tourists on Friday after they crossed into the country from Iraqi Kurdistan, CNN reported.

A senior US administration official said the embassy in Baghdad was aware of the reports and was investigating, while an official at the Pentagon insisted that the incident did not involve any US military personnel.

The US network said the three had been visiting Ahmed Awa, a popular tourist destination in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region, which lacks clearly marked borders with Iran, when they were taken into custody.

A fourth member of the

Senior soldiers behind Iraq bank heist

AFP, Baghdad

group, who took ill and stayed behind at a hotel, spoke by telephone to the group who said they had been surrounded by the Iranian military, CNN reported.

Hours earlier, an official in Iraq's border guards told AFP that three Westerners of unconfirmed nationality had been arrested Friday by Iranian security forces for crossing the border.

Three Westerners, with their backpacks, crossed the border with Iran at Ahmed Awa before being arrested, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Ahmed Awa lies about 90 kilometers (55 miles) northeast of the autonomous Kurdish region's second-biggest city of Sulaimaniyah.

Spokesman Major General Abdul Karim Khalaf said three people had been arrested and that security forces were hunting other suspects after Tuesday's 4.8-billion-dinar (3.8 million dollar) robbery, one of Iraq's biggest ever.

Those in custody were arrested on Thursday, he said.

"The main man who carried out the crime is a captain in the Iraqi army, in the presidential protection brigade," Khalaf told a Baghdad news conference.

US lawmakers press Saudi king on ME peace

AFP, Washington

More than 200 US lawmakers urged Saudi King Abdullah on Friday to push Middle East peace efforts forward with "a dramatic gesture" towards recognising Israel's legitimacy.

Led by Democratic Representative Brad Sherman and Republican Representative Ed Royce, the lawmakers wrote in a letter that they were "disappointed" that the kingdom had not undertaken more public outreach towards Israel.

The US representatives cited Egypt then-president Anwar Sadat's historic 1977 visit to Jerusalem and the opening of direct Jordan-

Israel ties by the late King Hussein as Arab-world actions that aided the cause of peace.

"We urge you to assert a strong leadership role and help lead the Middle East to a new era of peace and reconciliation by stepping forward with a dramatic gesture toward Israel akin to the steps taken earlier by the leaders of Egypt and Jordan," they said.

The lawmakers pointed to US President Barack Obama's June speech to the Muslim world in Cairo, underlining his appeal for Arab states to recognise Israel's legitimacy.

"We have been disappointed thus far to see the public reaction of your government to President Obama's request," they wrote.



Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal (L) and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton speak to the press at the State Department on Friday in Washington.

Russia signs deal to open 2nd base in Kyrgyzstan

AP, Cholpon-ata

Russia clinched a tentative deal Saturday allowing it to establish a second military base in Kyrgyzstan, where the United States also has an important air base.

Under the terms of a joint memorandum, Russia could significantly boost the number of troops it has deployed in the Central Asian nation for a period of up to 49 years. Russian forces will be charged with "protecting Kyrgyz sovereignty" and repelling attacks by international terrorist groups, it said.

A definitive agreement detailing the status of the proposed base and Russia's existing Kant base will be signed by November.



An Afghan policeman stands guard as firemen attempt to extinguish a blazing truck in Jalalabad in Nangarhar province yesterday. Two trucks were attacked by Taliban militants in Jalalabad as Afghans prepare for the second presidential elections on August 20.

Bodies litter streets after unrest in Nigeria

AFP, Maiduguri

Bodies littered the streets here Saturday after Nigerian forces crushed an Islamist sect's uprising and controversially gunned down the movement's leader after his capture.

Dozens of armed soldiers and riot police also guarded strategic points in the northern city of Maiduguri, where troops carried out a brutal assault on the base of the self-styled Taliban earlier this week to crush their uprising.

On Saturday, authorities searched cars and questioned passers-by in the city, where an AFP reporter saw more than 30 decomposing bodies in three different districts.

Security forces this week put down the uprising in four northern states in clashes that killed more than 600 people, according to police and witnesses.

The chief of defence staff, Air Marshal Paul Dike, on a visit to Maiduguri on Friday vowed that "the military will leave no stone unturned in ensuring that no such incidents occur."

"We are up to the task, as we have the capability to crush any breach of Nigerian security," he said after touring Maiduguri, the scene of the worst fighting over the past week.

Security forces' killing of the sect leader, Mohammed Yusuf, has been condemned by human rights groups.

A senior police officer said the leader of the movement, which is also known as Boko Haram, was killed in a shootout as he tried to escape, but another officer said Yusuf had pleaded for mercy before being gunned down.

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